

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 January 2008

Asia

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate against factory closure

On January 2, several thousand garment workers from around 20 factories protested the closure of SQ Sweaters Ltd in Mirpur by barricading the busy Rokeya Sarani in Dhaka. The barricades caused severe traffic congestion in the Mirpur area for most of the day.

SQ Sweaters management closed the factory following a two-day strike by employees enraged over the death of a co-worker. SQ Sweaters workers allege that Salma, a female employee, was forced to work a night shift on December 30 despite being seriously ill. Her condition deteriorated during the shift. She was taken home at around 3 a.m. but died one hour later.

As the circumstances of Salma's death became known, her fellow workers walked out on December 31 and then again on January 1. When they attempted to return to work the next day they found the factory closed.

On January 2, several thousand workers gathered outside the closed factory and then went to other plants in the area chanting slogans. Despite the presence of large numbers of police other factory workers soon joined the protest.

Employees have warned there will be further stoppages and demonstrations unless those responsible for Salma's death are brought to account and her family is properly compensated.

Indian power workers picket company offices

Around 2,500 contractual employees, including linesmen, helpers and revenue collectors at Central Electricity Supply Utility (Cesu) demonstrated outside all 19 company divisional offices in the state of Orissa on January 2 to demand permanency and a pay increase.

While the contract workers, who are mostly graduates, are paid between just 1,500 (\$US42) to 2,400 rupees a month, company executives enjoy large salaries and remunerations. For example, the newly-appointed chief executive officer receives an annual pay packet of over 2 million rupees (\$US57,000), the chief commercial officer 1.5 million rupees and two general managers will each receive over one million rupees.

Many of the casual workers have more than five years service yet Cesu management has ruled out making them permanent. Employees also claim that contractors are not depositing their

share into provident and other funds. The workers are members of the Nikhila Orissa Bidyut Shramik Mahasangha.

Indian medical college teachers seek pay increase

Teachers at 13 government medical colleges across the state of Maharashtra, including Pune's premier institution the B.J. Medical College (BJMC), began a protest campaign on January 2 for a salary revision. They want salaries on par with the higher sum paid to government medical teachers in the neighbouring state of Karnataka.

Maharashtra teachers' salaries are around 20,000 rupees (\$US571) a month while associate professors and professors draw 30,000 and 40,000 rupees respectively. Teachers also want permanent employment for colleagues currently hired on an ad hoc basis, time-bound promotions and optional recourse to private medical practice.

Sri Lankan accounting service workers protest over work titles

Public sector accounting service workers in Sri Lanka protested outside the main Fort Railway Station Colombo on December 27 to demand that their departments accept a constitution governing accounting services formulated by the treasury. The workers claim that the constitution will help rectify long-standing problems in establishing job titles. They have also accused the government of attempting to withdraw some job titles.

They are threatening to begin a picketing campaign in Colombo and across main provincial cities and go on strike if the government fails to address their demand.

Philippines tollway workers demand reinstatement

Some 300 employees of the state-run Skyway Corporation demonstrated outside the company's office in Bicutan, Paranaque on January 2 to demand reinstatement. Skyway was a subsidiary of the Philippines National Construction Commission (PNCC).

PNCC Skyway workers were sacked following the transfer of state-owned Skyway operations to Citra (CMMTC), a private company, on January 1.

Workers began picketing the depot on December 31 and were joined by hundreds of members of the Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) and Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP).

The sacked workers are also concerned about a clause in the takeover agreement which allows CMMTC to increase toll

charges by 150 percent. Citra is also taking over construction of a tollway extension, a move that will add to PNCC costs. Union president Jose Apollo Ado said 800 jobs at Skyway could be lost.

Strikes threatened in Cambodian garment industry

Cambodia's largest garment union, the 300,000-strong Free Trade Union, issued an open letter to the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia in late December threatening strikes if its demand for a 10 percent wage rise and a new minimum monthly wage of \$US55 are not met. The current minimum monthly wage is \$50.

Union president Chea Mony warned that if negotiations fail the union will call factory demonstrations followed by strikes. The threat reflects widespread discontent among garment workers whose last pay rise was in October 2006.

Bangladesh workers in Malaysia protest over abuse

Around 220 Bangladeshi migrant workers are continuing to protest outside the Bangladesh embassy in Kuala Lumpur over employer abuse. The workers have been gathering there since early December. They are sleeping on the footpath and being fed by charity organisations.

Many of the protesters claim that while they paid around 12,000 ringgits (\$US3,428) to agents to find them work in Malaysia and were promised monthly wages of no less than 800 ringgits, they are paid only half that amount. They cannot get alternative work because employers and agents are withholding their passports. Nearly all the workers are employed in the manufacturing or agriculture sectors.

Embassy officials said they had approached employers over workers' complaints but have not made any headway. They did not indicate if they attempted to regain the workers' passports.

Australia and the Pacific

Strikes threatened in power industry over pay

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) covering 4,000 workers at power suppliers Ergon, Energex and Powerlink in the Australian state of Queensland are threatening industrial action unless the companies agree to improve pay offers in negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

One of the companies has only offered a 4.5 percent increase spread over three years. An ETU spokesman said the majority of the workers were tradesmen and were also seeking an increase in skills allowances. The union also wants concessions on other items.

"There is a big possibility that energy workers will be striking in this state," an ETU spokesman said, "if we are not going to get some movement on key items".

Tasmanian bus drivers lift work ban

On December 28, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union covering bus drivers at Metro Tasmania lifted work bans. The workers refused to drive buses that lacked security cameras after 2 p.m. The ban followed the assault of a driver on December 21, the second incident in recent days. Some drivers are also demanding the installation of protective security screens.

The decision to lift the bans came after Metro Tasmania took the dispute to the Tasmanian Industrial Commission claiming that the action was illegal under federal industrial relations legislation introduced by the previous Howard government. These laws are being retained by the new Rudd Labor government.

The company has now agreed to install security cameras in all buses but this will not be completed until August this year. Only new buses will be fitted with security screens as a trial.

Papua New Guinea teachers protest over leave entitlements

Teachers in Papua New Guinea demonstrated over unpaid leave entitlement in two of the country's main cities on December 21. Hundreds of teachers marched on local education offices angry that they had not received fares to return to their home provinces during annual leave. About 200 teachers marched in Port Moresby while an estimated 300 demonstrated in Lae, the Morobe provincial capital.

A teachers' representative said that Morobe-based teachers from East and West Sepik, Morobe, East New Britain, New Ireland and Milne Bay were demanding that provincial authorities respond immediately. While more than 870,000 kina (\$A322,330) has been given to teachers from the Highlands and in some parts of Sepik, a shortfall of about 600,000 kina remains for other teachers.

Solomon Islands brewery workers strike

Brewery workers at SolBrew Company Ltd went on strike on December 17 over the non-payment of allowances, in particular a danger payment. The allowances are part of their collective work agreement.

A Solomon Islands National Union of Workers spokesman said that the issue was brought to the attention of SolBrew management six months ago. While the company claimed that it had paid all the allowances under the agreement this was refuted by the union which checked workers' pay-slips.

After receiving the strike notice SolBrew referred the matter to the Trade Disputes Panel. The strike was called off after meetings between employees and the company and work resumed on December 18.



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