

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 January 2008

## Strikes hit foreign-owned manufacturers in Vietnam

Over 6,000 workers at six different foreign-owned manufacturing companies in Vietnam walked off the job in the first week of 2008 to protest low wages. The industrial unrest was sparked by a 12 percent increase in consumer prices over the last 12 months and a new government-imposed minimum wage that came into force this year.

On January 3, over 2,000 workers at CCH Top, a Taiwan-owned textile plant in Ho Chi Minh City, struck for two days claiming the new monthly basic wage of 1,010 million dong (\$US63) was too low. On January 2, 1,480 textile workers at South Korean-owned Sh Vina Company in Long An province struck demanding higher wages. They returned to work after the company agreed to increase monthly salaries to 1.4 million dong.

About 500 workers at the Japanese-owned Mitsuba M-Tech struck on January 2 demanding a monthly travel and accommodation allowance. They returned to work the following day after the company granted an allowance of 140,000 dong.

At the Taiwan-Vietnam Duc Thanh II footwear plant in Dong Nai 1,200 workers struck on January 2 returning to work two days later after the company raised monthly wages by 150,000 dong. Also on the same day, hundreds of workers at Tung Kuang Company, an aluminium products manufacturer, and the Anjin footwear company in Dong Nai, struck over wages and allowances.

## Chinese migrant workers protest for pay

About 15 migrant construction workers held a protest in freezing conditions in Zhenzgzhou, Henan in the first week of January demanding 122,000 yuan (\$US16,844) in unpaid wages. The workers, recruited by a sub-contractor to work for a firm in Henan, surrounded the Audi model car of the property developer and used chains and locks to immobilise the 1.6 million yuan vehicle.

Every year, tens of thousands of workers are recruited by agents and subcontractors to work outside the districts where they normally live. They are brutally exploited and suffer harsh employment conditions.

## Indian oil workers on strike

An indefinite strike by 674 skilled and semi-skilled contract workers at Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) in the

Krishna-Godavari basin in Andhra Pradesh entered its sixth day on January 4. The workers, many of whom have worked at ONGC for more than two decades, are demanding permanent employment.

Those on strike are contracted to ONGC to work in gas collection centres, installation points, drilling sites, oil refineries and stores in the Narsapur area in West Godavari district, as well as workshops in Dhavaleswaram and the East Godavari districts.

Oil refining has dropped by around 50 percent since December 30 due to the strike. Normally the company, which has refineries in Tatipaka and Nagaram in East Godavari districts, refines around 2,000 barrels a day.

## Contract workers protest

On January 7, employees from communications provider Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd demonstrated outside the general manager's office in Tuticorin in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu.

The protest was for a 13-point charter of demands for contract workers to have parity wages and conditions with permanent employees. The demands include, equal hourly pay rates, provident fund benefits and pensions, provision of company-funded housing and an equal compensation scheme to cover workplace-related death and injury.

## Indian construction workers call for relief fund

Construction workers from the Ganjam district in the eastern state of Orissa demonstrated outside District Collector's office in Berhampur on January 4. They demanded establishment of a special emergency relief fund to assist workers injured in workplace accidents. They also called for injured workers who could not return to construction to be provided with alternate employment in new industrial projects in the district.

## Indian hostel workers demand minimum wage

Around 25 representatives of daily-wage workers employed in government hostels in the southern state of Karnataka held a sit-down protest in Raichur on January 2. They are demanding pay rates based on the state's Minimum Wages Act and equal benefits with permanent government employees.

The protestors, mainly women, submitted a memorandum to Chief Executive Officer Anees Siraj containing allegations that daily-wage workers are being forced to work after hours and that salaries were not being paid on time.

### **Sri Lankan municipal workers strike over overtime cut**

Colombo municipality workers walked out on January 5 over a reduction in allowable overtime to 76 hours a month beginning this year. The cutback will impact on take-home pay causing considerable hardship to workers and their families.

Reduced overtime will also lead to heavier daily workloads. While over 12,000 workers are needed to cover the various duties, the municipality only employs 7,649.

The strike is already impacting on garbage collections in Colombo. Around 600 tonnes of refuse is produced in the city daily. Forty percent of this is normally collected by regular municipality staff with the remainder handled by private contractors. According to sources within the municipal administration, overtime was cut because around 30 percent was slashed from funding for garbage collections.

In a separate dispute, volunteer teachers from various districts across Sri Lanka demonstrated on January 9 outside the Education Department in Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, to demand permanent employment. The teachers claim that the government promised them permanent appointments but failed to do so. Most of the volunteer teachers work in rural schools and for a meagre allowance.

### **Qantas engineers delay industrial action**

The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA), representing 1,700 Qantas aircraft engineers, have postponed overtime bans due to come into force on January 9 after agreeing to new negotiations that will continue until at least February 1. The engineers are required to inspect and sign out aircraft each day, as well as approve all maintenance work.

The bans are for a 5 percent pay increase. The company is offering just 3 percent annually as part of a three-year work contract. The union claims there is also disagreement on other key issues, including rostering, casualisation and job classification.

ALAEA national secretary Steve Purvinas claimed this week that "both parties have agreed to lay down their arms until at least February 1." While Qantas agreed to reinstate leave for engineers that it had cancelled to offset the overtime bans, nothing has been said about other company plans to counter industrial action.

In late December Qantas confirmed in a staff memo that it had commissioned an Australian-based company to recruit engineering staff as a strike breaking force. Postponement of the bans allows the company even more time to put its contingency measures into place.

### **New Zealand caregivers vote to strike**

Health care workers at Brackenridge Estate, a New Zealand South Island healthcare facility housing 85 people with intellectual disabilities, have voted to strike for 48 hours from January 11. The members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Nurses Organisation are seeking a 20 percent pay rise and overtime rates. The unions and management failed to reach an agreement in contract

negotiations that began in September last year.

A union spokesperson said most of the caregivers were paid less than \$14.50 an hour. Many work additional shifts to compensate for staff shortages, even though Brackenridge does not pay penalty rates for overtime and evening work. Many of the 150 staff are required to work 50-hours a week. They also have to deal with assaults and other behavioural problems of residents. Conditions will only worsen following the recent decision by the Ministry of Health announcement to freeze funding for people with physical and mental disabilities.

The unions have made several attempts to resolve the dispute, including arranging mediation immediately following the vote for industrial action. Mediation resulted in Brackenridge offering a further 1 percent increase on top of a previous 4 percent increase over nine months. The offer, however, was contingent on workers accepting cuts to job training, maintenance and weekend outings for residents.

### **Fiji Teachers Union files pay dispute**

The Fiji Teachers Union has filed a notice of dispute claiming that the interim finance minister and Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry failed to abide by an agreement to review last year's 5 percent pay cut. The agreement was reached between the state sector unions and the Fijian military regime and was central to the unions' calling off widespread public sector strikes against the pay cuts.

The government imposed a 5 percent pay cut for all civil servants last May. One fifth of the cuts were due to be restored before Christmas last year with the remainder to be considered in the 2008 budget. Union president Bal Ram said an agreement had been made with Chaudhry that the union would be consulted on the wage restoration prior to the 2008 budget. The dispute will now go to a tribunal.

### **Papua New Guinea aviation workers vote to strike**

Papua New Guinea aviation workers, members of the Air Traffic Controllers Association, Airport Rescue and Fire Fighters Association and Civil Aviation National Technical Staff, have unanimously voted for strike action.

The unions claim that their employers have failed to comply with provisions in an enterprise agreement covering working conditions. The Civil Aviation Authority has said that any strike action would be illegal, claiming that proper procedures were not followed. It has threatened to seek a court injunction to stop any future industrial action.



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