

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 January 2008

Asia

Police attack apparel workers in Bangladesh

At least 25 garment workers were critically injured when police attacked a demonstration on the Mirpur-Agargaon Road at Shewrapara in Dhaka on January 12. The Kimberly Fashion Ltd workers were campaigning for a 12-point log of claims, including the payment of outstanding salaries and overtime and a range of allowances and leave entitlements stipulated under local labour laws. They also demanded that no worker be dismissed without a valid reason.

Police set up barricades to prevent workers gathered outside the factory from marching. When employees tried to break through, police began clubbing them indiscriminately and then pursued them into the factory. A pregnant woman was among those severely injured.

As news of the assault spread, garment workers along the Mirpur-Agargaon Road came out to protest and when Asha Garment employees tried to march they were attacked by the police.

Police also assaulted demonstrations by thousands of MBM apparel workers demanding a pay rise on January 13 and 14. Around 100 were injured in clashes that went late into the night with police using teargas, rubber bullets and batons.

Indian rural bank workers strike

Workers from Grameen Bank branches in India's rural districts went on strike for two days on January 10. They were demanding pensions, promotions, recruitment of new staff and various allowances on par with metropolitan commercial bank staff.

Workers from the North Malabar Grameen Bank (NMGB) in Kerala, the Pragathi Grameen Bank in Andhra Pradesh, and the Cauvery Kalpatharu Grameen Bank in Karnataka joined the strike and demonstrated outside regional head offices. The workers are members of the Joint Forum of Grameen Bank Unions.

Indian state sector workers demonstrate

More than 200 workers from the Tamilnadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) demonstrated outside the company's head office in Angeripalayam on January 11 for a log of claims. The workers were from Tamilnadu's Tirupur district.

Their claims include an eight-hour day, equal wages with other government employees as well as dearness and travel allowances. They also want the company end to its practice of recovering the cost of damaged cartons from workers' sales bonuses and for management to abide by a court directive to reinstate a number of dismissed staff.

Workers from Palladam and Udumalpet also joined the demonstration which was called by the TASMAC Workers Union, an affiliate of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Indian telecom workers demand promotion policy

Workers from communication company Bharat Sanchar Nigam

Limited (BSNL) demonstrated in Tuticorin, Tamilnadu, on January 11 to demand that the government implement a "time-bound promotion policy" to cover non-executive employees before February 29.

Management signed an agreement on December 9 promising to fully implement the policy. Employees, however, claim that management has begun to show a "negative attitude" towards the commitment, citing "the financial liability of the BSNL" for its refusal to act.

The protest was organised by members of the BSNL Employees Union, the Federation of National Telecom Organisations and the Telecom Employees Progressive Union.

Sri Lankan doctors demand allowance increase

Around 9,000 medical doctors struck for one day on January 11 demanding the update of allowances that have remained static for the past 14 years.

The strike caused the cancellation of services at out-door clinics at a range of major hospitals, including the Colombo National Hospital and base hospitals in Gampaha, Galle, Anuradhapura, Chilaw, Matale and Hatton.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA), however, exempted services at Lady Ridgeway Children's Hospital, Castle Street and De Soyza Women's Hospitals, the Army Hospital, Maharagama Cancer Hospital, the Accident Service and all other emergency services.

The doctors want an increase in fuel and distress allowances and higher payments for extra duties and overtime and called for the removal of Health Minister Nimal Siripala de Silva over what they described as "arbitrary decisions". A GMOA spokesman said the association would decide on further action at a general committee meeting to be held following discussions with President Mahinda Rajapakse.

In a separate dispute, 18 security staff at the Angoda fever hospital on the outskirts of Colombo and the nearby medical drugs store, struck on January 10 to demand that their salaries be paid on time and for new salary increments announced in the 2006 and 2007 budgets.

Chinese real estate workers protest over closures

Hundreds of sacked employees and customers from Chuanghui, one of China's largest real estate agencies, protested outside its outlets on January 15, following the closure of all the company's offices in four Pearl River Delta cities. The protesters held signs reading: "Chuanghui, give us back the money we earned with our own blood".

The company has shut 1,000 of its 1,800 outlets since the introduction of tighter government monetary policies in October.

Philippines police arrest union officials at paper workers' picket

Two union officials were arrested on a picket line at the Multi-Pack Manufacturing Corporation in Mandaue City on January 16 after they attempted to prevent a National Labor Relations Commission office

from serving a restraining order on the striking workers.

About 70 Multi-Pack employees went on strike on January 3, accusing the management of terminating 36 union members in an attempt to thwart a ballot for the union to act as their bargaining agent. Workers and company representatives met with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board but two rounds of negotiations resulted in a deadlock.

Indonesian port workers threaten to strike

Workers employed by the state-owned port operator PY Pelindo II have threatened to strike at Tanjung Priok port in North Jakarta if management fails to renew their work agreement within one month. They have been waiting for one year for a new agreement.

Management has agreed to pay increased wages and transport fees but rejects the doubling of workers' "period appreciation package".

Strike action at the port will affect 60 percent of Indonesia's export and import trade with a one day walkout costing the company around \$US800,000.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian power workers strike over privatisation

Around 200 power workers at two electricity generating stations in New South Wales walked off the job on January 16 in protest over state government privatisation plans.

The strikers, mostly maintenance workers and engineers at Delta Electricity's Munmorah and Vales Point power stations near Lake Macquarie, were later joined by administrative staff after management asked them to document plant operations and finances for prospective private sector buyers. They were ordered back to work in the afternoon by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

The state government of Labor Premier Morris Iemma plans to sell the state-owned electricity retailers and is offering the power generators to private operators on a 99-year lease. Power workers have been offered "incentive" payments of up to \$40,000 if they transfer to private operators. Unions NSW assistant secretary Matt Thistlewaite said that unions were concerned that the government was rushing through the plan without any consultation.

Train drivers union suspends industrial action

TransAdelaide train drivers in South Australia held a four-hour stop-work meeting on January 15 to demand an 11.5 percent increase over two years. The latest management offer is for 3.5 percent annually for three years.

Rail Tram and Bus Union officials have ruled out further industrial action for now to allow for further negotiations with TransAdelaide. The union has been involved in negotiations for the past ten months.

Regional journalists to strike over pay

About 96 percent of newspaper journalists at five Fairfax newspapers in regional New South Wales newspapers have voted to begin overtime bans and rolling strikes next week in support an 11 percent pay rise over three years. The increase would give the Fairfax workers wage parity with other journalists in NSW.

The campaign will affect the *Western Advocate* in Bathurst, the *Daily Liberal* in Dubbo, Tamworth's *Northern Daily Leader* and the *Maitland Mercury*, and the *Central Western Daily* in Orange. The journalists are members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance.

New Zealand caregivers end strike

Workers at a Christchurch home for the intellectually disabled returned to work after a 48-hour strike last weekend, but say there could be further industrial action. About 140 caregivers and nurses at Brackenridge Estate stopped work on January 11 over pay and

working conditions. A late pay offer of 4 percent for caregivers and 6 percent for nurses was rejected.

The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) said workers believed they had sent a strong message to Brackenridge management and the Ministry of Health about the need to urgently find extra funding to settle the dispute.

The union has given the company until the end of January to come up with a "significantly improved offer". A nurses' delegate said it was not uncommon for nurses and support workers to work 75 hours a week, including double shifts, and have only one weekend off in six due to inadequate staffing levels.

Brackenridge Estate is a wholly-owned subsidiary company of the Canterbury District Health Board. It claims that its bargaining ability is limited as long as funding from the Ministry of Health remains frozen.

Papua New Guinea teachers threaten to withdraw union membership

Teachers in Lae are threatening mass resignations from the Papua New Guinea Teachers Association (PNGTA) if the union fails to resolve long-standing grievances over pay and conditions. Teachers' anger has been compounded by the failure of the government to resolve unpaid travel allowances for the Christmas holiday period and their exclusion from a 3 percent wage increase awarded to other public servants.

The teachers were excluded from the increase because they are not covered by the Public Services Management Act and work under the Teaching Service Commission award. They want the commission to address the increment issue and leave-ticketing problems that led to protests before Christmas last year.

One hundred teachers gathered outside the regional education office last week declaring that the PNGTA Morobe branch and the union's head office in Port Moresby were failing to address the pressing issues.

One concerned Morobe teacher told the media: "We are warning the PNGTA that we will withdraw our membership with the association this year because they cannot bring our concerns to the proper authorities". Another said that more than 20,000 teachers around the country were contributing dues to the union "but still the association could not address the issues".



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