

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 January 2008

## Asia

### Indian milk workers demonstrate

Tamil Nadu Co-operative Milk Producers Federation workers demonstrated at Sathuvachari in Vellore on January 21 for a 14-point charter of demands.

Their demands included the immediate implementation of an order issued by the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam state government in 1998 giving permanency to 100 casual workers and for promotions on a seniority basis to employees with more than 20 years service.

The workers are members of the All Trade Unions Federation of the Vellore and Tiruvannamalai Districts Cooperative Milk Producers Union.

### Indian communication workers protest privatisation plans

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) employees demonstrated outside company offices in Tirunelveli and Tuticorin in the state of Tamil Nadu on January 21.

They were opposing the Indian government's plan to sell 10 percent of its stake in the public sector communication giant, a move workers believe will lead eventually to total privatisation. The workers also demand the company cease using a voluntary retirement scheme to downsize the workforce.

Employees want the central government to help maintain the company's viability by continuing to pay access deficit charges to fund the universal service obligation and by reimbursing license fees to BSNL.

They also have demanded the repeal of a government order requiring BSNL to pay the pensions of employees transferred from the Department of Telecommunications (DoT) to BSNL when it was formed in 2000. They want the government take responsibility for pension payments for the period the transferees were employed by DoT. BSNL workers have threatened to strike indefinitely from February 26

if their demands are not met.

### Nepal food workers oppose layoffs

Himalayan Snacks and Noodles employees in Janagal walked out indefinitely on January 17 after the management laid-off 138 employees, more than half the workforce. Employees protested outside the plant when the sackings occurred on January 10.

The company claimed that the lay-offs were necessary because sections of the plant were out of order. The 138 workers had been employed on a daily-wage basis. The strikers, members of the All Nepal Trade Union Federation, told the media that they planned to blockade the owners' residence. They want reinstatement and better conditions.

### Strikes continue in Vietnam

Workers at the South Korean-owned J Young Company in Ho Chi Min City struck for improved wages and conditions on January 18. A spokesman claimed they were being "worked to exhaustion every month, yet they earned only 1.5 million dong (\$US93.8) a month." Strikers claimed that they do not have specified work contracts and worked without hazard allowances.

On the same day, 18 employees at Taska Vina, a hat manufacturing company, fainted on the job and had to be hospitalised. Doctors said that the workers were suffering from exhaustion and malnutrition—conditions that are shared by thousands of manufacturing workers across the country. In another dispute around 1,200 workers at foreign-owned companies in the Tan Thuan export-processing zone struck over low wages on January 18.

Since early January at least 30 wildcat strikes involving tens of thousands of workers have hit companies in Ho Chi Min City and the Dong Nai Province. The industrial action all involves low wages and working conditions. The government increased the

minimum wage on January 1 but workers claim that the rise does not even cover inflation, which is 12.5 percent.

### **Philippines plantation workers mark anniversary of killings**

Farm workers in Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac picketed the Central Luzon office of the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) on January 21 to mark the anniversary of the killing of 13 rural workers at a rally in Mendiola 21 years ago. The workers were killed when police and soldiers opened fire on the rally; police beat other protestors at the Tarlac station.

The Mendiola protests were over slow implementation of the Agrarian Land Reform Law which forces plantation owners to distribute land to the original native landowners. After relentless agitation by farmers and farm workers, DAR was ordered by a presidential agrarian committee in December 2005 to distribute 6,000 hectares in Hacienda Luisita.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Aged-care workers vote on work bans**

Aged-care workers throughout Tasmania, Australia voted this week to impose industrial bans in a wage dispute with Southern Cross Care.

Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) members along with Health and Community Services Union members voted for the bans after negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining workplace agreement broke down.

While the aged-care workers want a 5 percent wage rise, Southern Cross Care has only offered 3 percent. The workers also claim for all overtime and missed meals. An ANF spokesperson said that the nurses were frustrated over being offered a workplace agreement that would leave them \$5,000 per year worse off than other Tasmanian nurses.

#### **Journalists threatened with lockout**

Management of three central western New South Wales regional newspapers threatened to lock out staff indefinitely if journalists take further industrial action. The threat came after editorial staff at Fairfax-owned newspapers in Orange, Dubbo and Bathurst went on strike on January 21 over pay and working conditions.

A Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) spokesman said that employees planned to walk out again this week. He said that the lockout threat marked “a pretty dramatic escalation of a dispute which is

essentially about getting an extra 2 percent ... for people on an average salary of \$42,000 a year”.

Fairfax has frozen staff leave entitlements, a move that the union claims is “a clear breach of the annual leave provisions of the award and the Long Service Leave Act”. The MEAA has put plans for further industrial action on hold, ahead of a meeting with management on January 29.

#### **Police attack New Caledonia strikers**

On January 20, 400 striking transport workers clashed with New Caledonia police who were attempting to stop them occupying the Carsud bus company headquarters. The workers, who run the company’s bus transport system in the capital Noumea and surrounding areas, went on strike over the dismissal of a colleague for alleged misconduct.

Around 200 police sent to end the occupation attacked workers with tear gas grenades, rubber bullets and batons. Some strikers were beaten up in police vans. Workers responded by throwing stones. They also overturned and burned two police vans as well as the company director’s car.

Clashes continued all night with dozens of workers reporting minor injuries. Up to 63 arrests were made with at least 12 strikers held on charges of assault and criminal damage. The workers are members of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union.

#### **Solomon Islands union issues strike notice**

The Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) has issued a 28-day notice of strike to the management of Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Limited. A SINUW spokesman said that if the company fails to respond there would be strike action.

A SINUW spokesman said that the dispute is centred on the company’s continuous refusal to discuss working conditions, wages, allowances and incentives.



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