

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 February 2008

Vietnam toy factory hit by mass strike

On January 30, 10,000 workers at Hong Kong-owned toy factory Kayhinge Industrial Company in Da Nang City walked off the job demanding higher bonuses and longer leave for the Tet festival. Tet is an important festival and workers traditionally return to their home regions to celebrate with their families. One worker complained: “With this low bonus and short holiday we can’t even go home for Tet.”

On the same day, thousands of labourers downed tools at the Hyundai-Vinashin shipbuilding plant in southern Khanh Hoa province while others went on strike at a seafood plant in Hau Giang province. Both disputes are over low wages.

On January 1 the government raised the minimum wage for labourers to 540,000 dong (\$US34) a month and to 800,000 dong for workers employed in foreign-investment enterprises. Since then, strikes and protests have erupted across the country with workers complaining that these increases do not compensate for the sharp rise in the cost of living over the last twelve months. The government’s General Statistics Office this week estimated that consumer prices increased by over 14 percent to January this year.

Indonesian power workers oppose privatisation

Around 7,000 workers from the state electricity company PT PLN rallied in Jakarta on January 30 in opposition to government plans to divide up and privatise the industry. The protesters arrived in buses and gathered at the National Monument before marching to the State Palace where a delegation met with presidency staff.

In preparation for privatisation PLN is planning to divide the company into five regions, each with its own power authority. The move will allow the government to end the current system whereby profits generated in Java are used to subsidise poorer regions and will result in higher electricity prices for customers in remote and rural areas.

Protest organisers said they did not believe an earlier government statement claiming that it had dropped its plan for PLN. Unions have threatened to keep holding rallies until they are provided with proof. Also participating in the demonstration were members of the Public Services International and its affiliates, FARKET and the Trade Union of Angkasa Pura 1.

Pilots protest arrest of colleague

Pilots from Indonesia’s national airline Garuda protested in Jakarta this week over the arrest of one of their colleagues, Marwoto Komar. Komar was arrested on February 4 and charged with five offences in relation to a crash landing at Yogyakarta airport in March 2007 which resulted in the death of 21 people. Indonesia’s National Transport Safety Committee claims that he had ignored cockpit alarms.

The protesting pilots held placards, including one which one read—“Pilots in doubt to fly”. They object to the case being criminalised and want proceedings overseen by members of their profession. They have also called for the government to establish a civil tribunal to investigate airline safety.

While Indonesia mainly relies on air transport to its many islands, aging aircraft and inadequate investment have given the country one of the worst aviation safety records in the world.

Philippines hospital staff rally over outsourcing

Rank and file staff at the Makati Medical Centre (MMC) in Manila picketed the hospital on February 5 over the sudden dismissal of all 77 dietary department personnel on January 30. The dismissals were part of a management drive to outsource services at the hospital. Just under half of the dietary staff were immediately hired by an agency called Skyline Services.

MMC Employees Association president Willy Pulia said that a referendum would be held within the next few days to determine if the nearly 1,000 nurses, medical technicians, x-ray technicians, aides, clerks and other

health workers will strike. A notice of strike has already been issued to the Department of Labor and Employment.

Pulia said 17 laundry and cleaning personnel were previously sacked under similar circumstances and there could be more dismissals underway. MMC management said the hospital was heavily in debt and that outsourcing dietary, cleaning and laundry departments was designed to cut costs.

Akshara Dasoha workers demand unpaid allowance

Female employees of the Akshara Dasoha scheme in the Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated on February 4 in Belguam to demanding the immediate payment of an honorarium allowance outstanding for the past six months.

The workers want improved benefits and mechanisms established to ensure that allowances are paid on time. Karnataka's Akshara Dasoha scheme was introduced in June 2002 to provide midday meals for children in government primary schools. Around 120,000 people are employed in the scheme as cooks, assistants and helpers.

Punjab teachers' delegates to strike over job threat

Union delegates representing Punjab state government college teachers voted on February 4 to walk-off the job in protest over the government's rationalisation policy. The decision was taken at a Government College Teachers Association conference.

The union claims that if the policy is implemented it will result in the loss of many teaching positions. The teachers plan a series of rallies in the coming days and a one-day strike February 12.

Indian doctors threaten mass resignations to win improvements

Orissa Medical Services Association members decided this week to give the Orissa state government one-month's notice of resignation on February 18. The protest is part of a campaign to win long-outstanding demands. The medical officers want improved workplace security, a reasonable salary rise and reinstatement of doctors suspended without reason.

The doctors have been demanding a decent pay increase since 1998 but have been ignored by the state government. They are also concerned that poor pay is contributing to staff shortages as medical graduates seek better paid jobs in the private sector.

Nepal communications company locks out workers

United Telecom Limited (UTL) employees in Nepal were locked out this week after striking over several demands. The company has announced that it will be closing indefinitely.

The workers want job permanency for casual employees with 240 days service and the provision of medical cover and life and accident insurance. UTL is a Nepal-India joint venture and the first private communications firm to be established in Nepal.

Medical scientists strike over wages

Hundreds of medical scientists throughout the Australian state of Victoria went on strike for 24 hours on February 6 after negotiations for a work agreement broke down. Medical Scientists Association members want a 3.25 percent pay increase in line with a wage agreement made with Victorian nurses last year.

The strike involved dieticians, psychologists, pharmacists, medical physicists, audiologists and other science-based medical professionals. Surgery schedules were disrupted at some of Melbourne's major hospitals, including the Monash Medical centre and St Vincent's Hospital.

Fiji local council workers strike

Workers at Nausori Town Council walked off the job for three hours on February 7. National Union of Municipal Workers secretary Kamal Iyers said that 25 of the 28 union members struck in protest over council demands that they commence work well before the official starting time of 7 a.m. Iyers said employees were also unhappy over delays in the payment of wages during the past three weeks.

Solomon Islands public servants seek wage increase

Public sector workers in the Solomon Islands are demanding a 33 percent salary increase. The Solomon Islands Public Sector Unions said that their claim was based on cost of living adjustment increases from 2006 to 2008. Workers say they can no longer cope with the escalating price of food and other goods.

The claim was presented to the government in October last year but to date there has been no progress towards a resolution of the dispute. A union negotiating committee has been established to seek talks with permanent secretaries of ministries who are responsible for considering pay increases.



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