

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 December 2008

Childcare workers in India attacked by police

Six women were seriously injured—one was kicked unconscious and another suffered a fractured hand—when police, using water cannons and wielding batons, attacked hundreds of childcare workers demonstrating outside the Nalgonda District Collectorate in Andhra Pradesh on December 4. The workers were demanding regular payment of salaries, promotion of helpers to supervisors, the filling of all vacant posts and an end to political harassment.

Before ending their four-hour protest, workers submitted a memorandum to district officials. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions, which organised the rally, is planning another protest at the end of the week over the police violence.

Apollo tyre workers in India locked out

Up to 2,700 workers from the Apollo Tyres factory at Kalamassery in Kochi, Kerala, have been locked out of the factory since taking industrial action on December 6 over a previous wage settlement and other issues.

Officials from the Premier Tyres Employees' Union, CITU, the Premier Tyres Workers' Union and the Premier Tyres Workers' Association met with company management and government representatives on December 9 to try and resolve the issues. There have been no further reports on the lockout.

New Delhi court staff strike

District and Sessions Courts Employees' Welfare Association members struck at five district courts in New Delhi on December 5, following the attempted suicide of one of their colleagues. They met at the Karkardooma courts complex demanding criminal charges be brought

against a judicial officer who they allege told a records clerk that if he was unable to sustain the work pressure, he should jump from the court building, which he subsequently did.

Striking staff also alleged that working conditions have worsened since the reorganisation of New Delhi's nine judicial districts with neither the cases nor staff equally distributed.

Association officials met the Chief Justice of Delhi High Court with their demands.

Tamilnadu fishermen strike

Hundreds of Tamilnadu fishermen in Jegadapattinam began indefinite strike action on December 9 to demand government compensation for the families of four fishermen killed at sea recently while searching for missing colleagues. The striking fishermen want a minimum of 500,000 rupees (\$US10,200) for each of the bereaved families.

India's telecom union calls off strike

The United Forum of BSNL Unions has deferred threatened strike action this week, following an agreement reached with the government-owned telecommunications company BSNL. The decision was taken after meetings with management on December 8 and 10. BSNL has agreed to enter negotiations on wages and other outstanding issues on December 15.

Forum unions early in the week had threatened to call strike action over demands that included fixed wages, regularisation of 100,000 casual contract workers and a minimum bonus of 10,000 rupees (\$US 225).

On December 2, National Federation of Telecom Employees rallied at BSNL's offices in Andhra Pradesh demanding an interim pay relief of 5,000 rupees per month, back-dated from January 1, 2007, and for the government to drop plans to privatise BSNL and merge it with Indian Telephone Industries Limited.

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate

Over 1,000 Century Garments employees demonstrated outside the factory in Moghbazar, Dhaka on December 8 to demand payment of their salary and festival allowance before the Eid-ul-Azha holiday. Traffic on the Mogbazar-Mouchak road was disrupted until police arrived several hours later.

Workers dispersed when company management assured them that the salaries and holiday allowances would be paid the following day.

Korean court blocks industrial action by television journalists

On December 8 a Seoul court directed reporters at cable news channel YTN to end industrial action that has prevented Koo Bon-hong, the broadcaster's new government appointed station chief, from entering his office since July.

The journalists fear that Koo, a former aide to South Korean President Lee Myung-bak, will compromise the channel's political neutrality. News channel management fired six unionists and disciplined 27 others for taking industrial action against Koo.

Malaysian fishermen threaten mass strike

Some 45,000 fishermen from Perak, Selangor and Sarawak in Malaysia held rallies in their districts on December 8 and threatened a three-day strike at the end of the week over the high price of diesel.

A spokesman said the fishermen were frustrated that the price of subsidised diesel had not changed despite a dramatic decline in crude oil prices during recent months. They claim that diesel makes up 70 percent of their expenses.

The rally followed a strike the day before by several hundred Kedah fishermen in west Malaysia over the same issue.

Vietnam factory workers strike for pay and conditions

Indefinite strike action on December 1 by 200 workers at Doosan Vina Company, a South Korean-owned crane and tank manufacturer, was escalated three days later when 1,300 employees rallied outside the company office in Vietnam's Dung Quat Economic Zone in central Quang Ngai Province. The protesting workers said that the company had not honoured promises to pay various allowances and pay rises once

employees completed four months' service.

The workers have also complained about the many insults and beatings they have endured at the plant and vowed to continue the strike action. They have rejected management claims that many workers were still being trained and therefore were not entitled to full pay and allowances.

Telstra workers vote for strike action

Thousands of Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members at Telstra, Australia's largest telco, have backed a campaign of rolling industrial action over a non-union pay offer from the company.

According to an Australian Electoral Commission ballot, 90 percent of the nearly 4,400 technicians and linesmen who voted endorsed future industrial action. The action includes options for an unlimited number of four-, 24- or 48-hour strikes and work bans. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members at Telstra have also backed strike action. The CPSU covers administrative and sales staff at the telco.

This year Telstra has repeatedly refused to negotiate new collective agreements with the CEPU, CPSU and APESMA (Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers) but instead offered employees individual non-union agreements.

The first round of action will commence on December 13 and 14, when CEPU members refuse to work overtime or respond to recalls and call-backs. A CEPU official said Telstra services would be affected but striking staff would attend to emergency situations. CPSU national president Louise Persse said her members will hold a four-hour stoppage on the morning of December 16.

Queensland council workers strike over privatisation

Ipswich council workers in Queensland walked off the job for the second time in a week on December 11 over the proposed privatisation of council services. The Queensland Services Union (QSU) says it is concerned about the council's decision to enter a 10-year, \$110 million contract with the outsourcing company Queensland Partnership Group, to oversee customer and property rates services—the first of its kind in Australia. Around 100 of the council's 400 employees will be forced to transfer to the private company.

QSU assistant secretary Jennifer Earl said: "Staff are angry about being moved to the private sector, because it will mean they are on less money and without the job security they have now."

Victorian metro-rail workers end industrial action

Hundreds of train controllers, station staff and ticket inspectors from Melbourne's private rail operator Connex ended a week of industrial action on December 12 that had caused major delays when drivers refused to operate trains with minor faults. The bans were for a promised Christmas bonus.

Connex had agreed in October to pay 3 percent of six months' wages for the smooth introduction of a new timetable. While workers threatened strike action if the issue was not resolved by the end of this week, the Rail, Train and Bus Union (RTBU) leadership played down walkout threats.

On December 12, the RTBU accepted a deal that will deliver each worker a bonus of approximately \$1,000 but includes trade-offs. While Connex and the union have not revealed the details, the company's executive chairman Jonathon Metcalfe told the media that there would be "significant operational and flexibility improvements".

New Zealand Masport workers strike

More than 70 workers at lawnmower manufacturer Masport Foundries at Mt Wellington in Auckland began an indefinite strike on December 4 over a 3 percent pay offer—2 percent below New Zealand's annual inflation rate. Workers are also protesting repeated attempts by Masport to undermine their collective agreement and exclude some of those involved in production, such as technicians, from coverage.

Members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Moulders Union are picketing Masport's Mt Wellington factory.

Auckland call centre workers strike

Call centre employees at Australian-owned SurveyTalk in Auckland walked off the job on December 8 over the employer's continued refusal to improve pay rates, health and safety and provide annual leave.

Auckland SurveyTalk workers earn about \$13 per hour, half what their colleagues in Australia receive. In addition, because they are employed as casual workers they have no job security or paid holidays. Salary payments are irregular and workers are not provided with basic health and safety items such as antiseptic wipes to clean shared workstations, headsets and mouthpieces before use.

The strike is the first in a campaign by the Unite Union to negotiate contracts for 400 call centre research workers at nine of New Zealand's major market research companies.

Garment workers picket Wellington clothing store

Machinists employed at garment manufacturer Rembrandt Suits picketed the Wellington department store of Kirkaldie & Stains on December 6, protesting Rembrandt's latest pay offer of \$12.24 per hour—just 24 cents above the minimum wage.

The workers, skilled and experienced machinists—one of whom said she has worked for the company for 20 years—are currently on the minimum wage and want \$13.50 per hour. Most of the workers require government subsidies just to survive. Almost half the workforce at Rembrandt was recently made redundant.

NZ rest home workers protest cuts

Presbyterian Woburn Home workers in Lower Hutt (near Wellington) picketed the establishment on December 8 after 90 care-givers and staff were told that their shifts would be cut by up to 50 percent. Workers and supporters rallied along Woburn Road during rush hour to voice their anger.

Employees would also be expected to take on more housekeeping and cleaning roles, despite their hours being cut. One employee said she was paid \$13.30 an hour and her hours would be cut from 80 to 43 a fortnight, effectively halving her pay. The cuts take effect immediately.

Mount Hutt workers picket over job cuts

Some 60 workers of baby stroller manufacturer Tritec Manufacturing in Lower Hutt picketed the plant on December 10 over company plans to terminate 25 of the plant's 100-strong workforce. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) is not opposing the cuts but trying to negotiate a redundancy payout.

Tritec management blamed the global financial slump for the cuts and claimed it could not make any promises about payouts because of its financial position.

Workers have no guarantee of a payout as their individual contracts have no redundancy clause. Negotiations between the company and the EPMU ended this week in deadlock.

New Zealand dairy workers settle pay dispute

New Zealand Dairy Workers' Union members at dairy manufacturer Fonterra have accepted a 6.5 percent immediate pay rise on a new three-year contract. The deal covers 4,500 milk factory employees, including 1,200 tanker drivers. Plant workers and drivers had been threatening

industrial action over the pay dispute after seeking an 8 percent pay increase. Fonterra initially offered 5 percent as well as a 2.5 percent lump sum payment.

A spokesman said workers will also receive a 1.5 percent lump sum in the first year and then a pay increase of 1 percent above the consumer price index for each of the next two years.

Wellington retail workers leaflet shoppers

National Distribution Union members leafleted shoppers at the Farmers store in the Cuba Mall, Wellington on December 4, as part of an ongoing pay dispute.

Farmers have offered staff an average 20 cents per hour increase but some receive nothing. Workers at Farmers stores around the country have taken a variety of actions, including wearing "Value Farmers Workers" stickers at work, joining a Skinny Santa parade up Auckland's Queen Street, petitioning Farmers' owners and unscheduled walkouts.

Papua New Guinea electoral officers walk out

Some 100 officials for the Western Highlands provincial seat election recount at the Kapal Haus, Mt Hagen, walked off the job on December 4 protesting that the Electoral Commission had underpaid them.

The officials from Enga, Simbu and Eastern Highlands provinces were supposed to receive 1,680 kina (\$US646) each for their 21-day travelling and counting allowances but would only receive half that amount. They demanded the balance be paid before they continue with the recount.



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