Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 December 2010

Protesting Chinese construction workers attacked by hired thugs

At least five migrant workers, one an 80-year-old female, were hospitalised after they were viciously assaulted by thugs with knives and iron pipes on Sunday. The attackers had been hired by a construction firm to remove them and other protesting colleagues from the company's premises in Shanghai. The migrant workers had occupied a third-floor office in the building since December 15 because the owner, Dong Jian, owed them four years' salaries.

The workers have been demanding about 2 million yuan ($US300,548) in outstanding wages. Before the attack, a local court was mediating between the two sides after the workers filed a lawsuit against Dong. One witness told the police he heard one of the hired thugs shout: "Spare no effort. The boss ordered us to hit them dead."

Another police attack on Bangladeshi garment workers

Up to 3,500 apparel workers of Ananata Casual Wear at Targach in Gazipur walked off the job at midday on Tuesday and rallied at the factory's main gate to demand wage increases in accordance with the government's new wage structure. Management called police and several workers were hospitalised when the police officers tried to herd them back into the factory. Workers maintained their protest for over two hours until factory officials agreed to pay the new salary rates.

Since the new wage structure and revised minimum wage for garment workers came into force on November 1, tens of thousands of workers have walked off the job in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone and the Dhaka Export Processing Zone. The workers have been protesting non-payment of the new salary scales or, in many cases, reduced wages when factory owners cut entitlements to compensate for the slightly higher minimum wage.

In July garment unions collaborated with the government and employers to force garment workers to accept a revised minimum monthly wage of just $US43—less than $1.60 for a 13-hour day. The new rate maintains Bangladeshi garment workers as the lowest paid in the global industry. Entry-level monthly garment workers' salaries in Vietnam are $90 and $135 in India. The garment industry accounts for nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh's $15.5 billion a year export income and the government, employers and the unions are determined to keep industry wages "world competitive".

India: Honda motorbike manufacturing workers strike

Production at Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India's Manesar factory in Haryana stopped last Friday and Saturday when assembly line workers walked off the job to protest the bashing of a colleague by a security guard. Strikers returned to work on Sunday after management suspended the guard from duty and promised to investigate the incident.

Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India is the country's largest scooter manufacturer. The Manesar factory employs around 2,800 people who produce 1.6 million two-wheelers per annum.

Tamil Nadu sugar mill workers walk out

Employees of the Vellore Cooperative Sugar Mills (VCSM) in Ammundi are maintaining strike action begun on December 16 over pay and conditions. Up to 200 workers are picketing the mill's main gate. Their demands include equal pay with government employees, promotions, filling of vacancies and regularisation of seasonal workers.

Tamil Nadu printing press workers strike

Up to 30 members of Tirunelveli Cooperative Printing Press Workers' Progressive Union walked off the job and demonstrated in Palayamkottai on December 14 for a wage rise, regularisation of employment and allowances on par with government print workers. The strikers claim they have sought a wage increase and new pay scales for the past 18 years and that many employees with over 25 years' service were still not regularised.

Andhra Pradesh health workers protest

Hundreds of Andhra Pradesh Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union members protested outside the state government office in Khammam on December 16 to demand higher wages and provision of retirement benefits. Anganwadi or child health care workers are employed by the state-operated Integrated Child Development Services, which provides for the health and pre-school education needs of rural children up to six years.

There are over 7,000 anganwadi workers in Andhra Pradesh who are paid an honorarium or nominal amount for individual services in place of a regular wage. They are not paid entitlements or pensions that are available to regular government employees.

On December 20, hundreds of striking Voluntary Health Workers Union

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members demonstrated outside the Andhra Pradesh government office building in Visakhapatnam to demand pay scales in place of honorariums and for dismissed colleagues to be immediately reinstated. The health workers have been on strike since December 13.

Arunachal Pradesh journalists lift work bans

On Tuesday, Arunachal Pradesh journalists ended a three-day "pen down" strike after police acted on their demand that they apprehend an individual who attacked two female journalists while they were reporting an accident on December 12. The protesting journalists held a street demonstration on December 16 and blacked out government advertisements in newspapers. Media organisations also stopped paying government tariffs.

Sri Lankan doctors strike

Medical officers at 275 health facilities in Uva Province struck on December 16 in protest against the autocratic management of the Southern Provincial Council and to demand increased recruitment to fill vacancies. On the following day, Dehiattakandia Base Hospital medical officers walked out to demand service allowances that have not been paid since July.

Pakistani teachers protest dismissals

On December 18, FATA (Federal Administered Tribal Areas) communal teachers rallied outside the FATA Secretariat office in Peshawar to protest the dismissal of 900 teachers throughout the region. The teachers said they will continue their actions until all their colleagues are reinstated.

Japan Airlines cabin crew to strike

The Japan Airlines Cabin Crew Union (CCU) has called for its members to strike for 48 hours on December 24 to oppose forced retirements. JAL plans to dismiss 100 cabin crew members over the age of 52 and another 30 crew members with sick leave records. The CCU alleges that after JAL claimed that it had to cut its workforce by 660 in order to avoid bankruptcy, over 750 cabin attendants had applied for the voluntary retirement. The proposed forced terminations, the union claims, are in excess of JAL's target.

But in a major reconstruction plan submitted to the Tokyo District Court at the end of August, JAL proposed abolishing 45 domestic and international flight routes, slashing its workforce by 16,000, along with a request to write-off 522 billion yen owed to its creditors. The JAL group includes JAL International and JAL Capital, both wholly owned subsidiaries of JAL.

Hong Kong pilots' union suspends industrial action

The Aircrew Officers Association, representing Cathay Pacific's 2,500 pilots, called off proposed work-to-rule after the airline made a pay offer. The pilots planned to begin their industrial action for a 30 percent pay rise during the Christmas season. Cathay's wage offer has not been made public but, according to one media report, it is lower than union members wanted. Union officials said they will recommend pilots' accept the company proposal.

The pilots claim they have only had one salary rise since 2002 and their pay has fallen behind other airlines' rates. Cathay Pacific has announced a $US1.6 billion net profit for 2010.

Queensland bus drivers strike again

For the second time this month, Sunbus drivers in Townsville (mid-north coast) and the Sunshine Coast (south coast) walked off the job for 24 hours on December 22 in a dispute over a new work agreement.

According to the Transport Workers Union (TWU), the Transit Australia Group, which owns and operates Sunbus, wants to force its 200 drivers back onto award pay rates and conditions, which would mean wage cuts of up to $4 an hour and the elimination of allowances won over the last 10 years. The TWU wants a 4 percent pay rise and current entitlements maintained.

Australian Workers Union does deal with Alcoa to cut jobs

At least 75 full-time jobs out of 600 will be lost at Alcoa's Pinjarra Refinery in Western Australia in a new enterprise bargaining agreement deal reached last week with the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

Full details of the deal have not been released but the company claimed in October it had guaranteed work for current employees, a minimum number of overtime shifts and a 17.5 percent pay increase over three years. Alcoa rejected workers' allegations that it plans to contract out work.

Alcoa claimed that in the restructure it would redeploy staff, take advantage of natural attrition and/or offer voluntary early retirement packages. AWU Pinjarra branch president Laurie Preston, who claims that all current employees will have "100 percent employment security", told the media he would recommend acceptance of the union deal with the company at a stewards' meeting on Monday and a mass meeting on Tuesday.

Target office staff in Victoria strike

Up to 60 clerical workers at Target, one of Australia's largest retailers, walked out of the company's headquarters in Melbourne on Tuesday in a dispute over a new collective agreement. Australian Services Union (ASU) members have overwhelmingly rejected a company offer of an $11.50 a week increase every six months during the three-year agreement. Workers want a $38 a week pay rise in the first year and $30 a week for the remaining two years.

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An ASU official claimed the total difference between the workers' claims and Target's offer was $500,000 over three years.

Victorian meat processing workers in third week of lockout

At least 140 employees at the Swift Australia meat processing plant in Brooklyn, Melbourne have been locked out since December 3, after striking for a new work agreement. The company, which has a total of 1,100 workers, has recruited temporary contract labour to maintain production.

National Union of Workers members rejected Swift's offer of a 2 percent annual pay increase for two years in exchange for company demands that they work 12-hour shifts on Saturdays on reduced penalties. Workers are dismantling their picket at the factory over Christmas and will restart on January 4. The union has not mounted a campaign to gain support among members at other Swift sites.

Swift is Australia's largest meat exporter and has processing plants and feedlots in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

New Zealand manufacturing workers strike

On December 17, 40 employees of machine manufacturer Scott Technology's Appliance Systems in Christchurch walked off the job to demand a new work contract. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members returned to work on Monday and implemented overtime bans. EPMU members at the company's Dunedin site have also imposed overtime bans.

The union wants a 3.5 percent pay increase over one year, back-dated to December 6. The company has offered three increases of 2 percent between now and April 2012, but not backdated. The company has announced a ten-fold increase in profits over the last financial year, which the EPMU claimed was due to a cost-cutting exercise, agreed to by the union, in which 20 jobs were cut from its 185 workforce.

Scott Technology Limited is a New Zealand-owned, publicly held engineering company that specialises in the design and manufacture of automated production and process machinery.

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