

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 December 2011

Pakistani power workers continue anti-privatisation protests

Thousands of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) employees struck for 24 hours on Wednesday and held a vehicular procession from the WAPDA office in Islamabad to Parliament House to oppose government plans to privatise power distribution and nine Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO) thermal power stations. The government intends to transfer PEPCO's duties to a new Central Power Purchasing Agency, acting under the ministry of water and power.

Wednesday's strike follows two 24-hour national stoppages over the past month. Workers are covered by the All Pakistan Hydro Electric Workers Union.

India: Orissa contract nurses rally

On Monday, nearly 2,000 contract nurses from government medical colleges and tertiary health institutions protested in front of the Orissa Assembly building in Cuttack to demand regularisation and the removal of pay anomalies. Nurses in regularised positions are paid 25,000 rupees (\$US550) a month, while contract nurses are paid a maximum of 10,000 rupees, and some as little as 8,500 rupees.

An All Orissa Contractual Nurses Association official claimed the government had promised to regularise contracted nurses after six years of service but had never acted on the commitment.

Contract TB workers demonstrate in New Delhi

Members of the All-India TB Control Programme Employees Association rallied in New Delhi on Tuesday to demand dues and regularisation of all 25,000 contract workers. Many workers have not received their full pay for several months and their employment is irregular. Other demands are for the extension of entitlements, such as leave, three months' maternity leave with pay, medical facilities and contributory provident fund, to all TB control workers.

Maharashtra medical teachers strike

Almost 300 medical teachers at government medical colleges in India's central west coast state of Maharashtra struck for 24 hours on Monday to demand the immediate filling of all vacant teaching posts, and improved salary and allowances. From Tuesday, teachers began a chain hunger strike of five teachers at a time. The Maharashtra State Medical Teachers Association planned a march by members to the state administrator's office in Nagpur for this Saturday if their demands were ignored. The doctors' action followed several months of demonstrations, a protest march and the wearing of black badges. The association first raised its demands with the government on October 4.

Cambodian garment workers ordered to end strike

The Phnom Penh Municipal Court on December 17 gave Hung Wah garment factory employees 48 hours to return to work or forfeit their jobs. Workers had walked out three days earlier following an arbitration court ruling that rejected their demand that a \$US3 monthly bonus paid to sewing section workers be paid to all staff. The Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia had argued that the company was violating Article 36 of the Constitution and Article 106 of the Labour Law, which stipulate equal pay for equal work.

Victorian child protection workers ordered to lift bans

For the second time in a month, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has accepted a Fair Work Australia (FWA) ruling that child protection workers in the Victorian Department of Human Services end industrial action in a dispute over staffing levels. CPSU members had planned to reimpose work bans this week following the state Liberal government's announcement last week of a plan to axe 3,600 public sector jobs. The industrial action included capping child abuse caseloads.

FWA had ordered an end to similar action on November 18, after which Community Services Minister Mary Wooldridge threatened to use FWA to force an end to industrial action if the caseload bans were reimposed. The bans limited the number of child abuse cases of experienced staff to 12 and those with less experience to 6.

CPSU state secretary Karen Batt welcomed the latest order to end industrial action, saying it would force the dispute into arbitration. "We're very pleased with the intervention of Fair Work today," she

said, indicating that a sellout is being prepared.

Lockout by Hunter Valley mining equipment manufacturer

International mining equipment manufacturer Schenck Process has locked out 15 employees at its Thornton plant in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney, until January 6, after they took two hours of industrial action on Tuesday. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union are conducting a dispute with the company over wages. The unions want a pay increase to give Thornton workers parity with Schenck pay rates in neighbouring Queensland. The lockout followed strike action earlier this month.

Queensland power workers rally

On Monday, over 100 power distribution workers at state-owned Ergon Energy and Energex rallied in northern Queensland at offices of state politicians in Rockhampton, Mackay, Proserpine, Townsville and Cairns to oppose unsafe work practices proposed in new enterprise agreements. According to the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the power companies plan to reduce labour costs and made an “unacceptable” proposal that employees work alone on power poles and live wires without an assistant trained in CPR and rescue techniques.

Talks on new enterprise agreements were due to resume on Friday. ETU members have rejected the state Labor government’s wage offer of 2.5 percent annual increases with an additional 1 percent for productivity gains. Ergon Energy has proposed “resource optimisation initiatives” that would turn at least five current two-man tasks into single person jobs. In addition, Ergon intends to save \$20 million by increasing its use of contractors.

Lockout ends at New Zealand meat processing plant

The 111 locked-out workers at the Canterbury Meat Packers (CMP) Rangitikei plant will return to work in January after accepting the company’s latest proposal for a new work agreement. Aotearoa Meat Workers Union members were locked out on October 20 after rejecting a new agreement that imposed a 25 percent pay cut, shift changes that required employees to work a 40-hour week instead of 35 hours, and cuts in allowances.

Details of the new offer have not been released to the media, but the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (NZCTU) admitted a pay cut was accepted in return for maintaining existing work conditions. Workers will be paid \$500 when they return to work.

The locked-out workers were pressured to accept the agreement after the company began hiring seasonal workers from the New Zealand government’s Western Samoa employment scheme. The NZCTU refused to mobilise its many affiliated unions in industrial action to support the meat workers.

Port workers continue strike action

After negotiations over a new collective agreement with Ports of Auckland Limited (POAL) stalled on Tuesday, the Maritime Union of New Zealand announced that its 320 members at the port would go ahead with two 48-hour stoppages planned for December 22 and 30. The action follows a series of strikes and lockouts that began on December 1.

The union rejected POAL’s last offer for a 10 percent pay increase in return for “full operational flexibility and productivity increases.” POAL’s original offer was a \$200 payment for back pay and a 2.5 percent increase in hourly rates.

The main concern for workers is the ongoing contracting out of port shuttle work to Conlinxx, a 90-percent owned POAL subsidiary that employs non-union labour. POAL is also attempting to bypass the union by offering workers individual employment agreements at a higher hourly rate than that offered in the collective agreement.

Fire fighters’ industrial action in fifth month

Over 520 members of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union are maintaining work bans imposed on August 5. The bans were imposed after seven months of negotiations with the Fire Service Commission (FSC) for a new work agreement reached deadlock. Bans have been placed on general duties that include paperwork, training, equipment maintenance and installation of smoke alarms. Emergency duties are being maintained.

Fire fighters want a 3.75 percent pay increase for the first six months in their new work agreement, backdated to January 1, and a 5 percent increase for the following 12 months from July 1. The FSC has refused to modify its original offer of 2.5 percent over 12 months with increased flexibility in shift rosters.



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