

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 January 2014

Construction workers riot at Samsung site in Vietnam

Eleven people were injured, five of them seriously, after more than 3,000 construction workers rioted on January 9 at the Yen Binh industrial park where Samsung is building a \$2 billion mobile phone factory. About 10,000 production and construction workers, mostly local residents, have been employed at the site, about 60 kilometres north of Hanoi, since work began in March.

According to local media, the conflict erupted after Hoa Binh Security Service guards refused to allow some construction workers to bring meals onto the site. One of the guards reportedly hit a worker with a club, knocking him unconscious. Three containers, used as guardrooms, and more than 10 motorbikes belonging to the guards, were torched during the riot. Footage posted on YouTube shows black smoke billowing from burning containers and motorbikes, and building workers hurling rocks at riot police.

Thai Nguyen province People's Committee chairman Duong Ngoc Long declared that those responsible "would be dealt with" by the law and vowed to "prevent something similar from happening in the future."

An engineer told the *Thanh Nien* newspaper that he had witnessed at least five clashes between guards and workers in the past two months. The guards, he said, regularly forced workers to return to their homes, rented accommodation some distance from the site, to get ID cards that they had forgotten to bring work.

Samsung, Intel, Nokia and other hi-tech companies—encouraged by cheaper labour and a range of concessions offered by the Vietnamese Stalinist regime—are increasingly moving production from China to Vietnam. Samsung's partially complete Yen Binh complex, the company's largest, comprises two plants, one specialising in cell phones and tablets and the other manufacturing microprocessors and integrated circuits.

Twenty-two KORAIL union leaders in police custody

Sixteen Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU) officials handed themselves into police this week leaving 13 key leaders still in hiding. The union officials had court warrants issued against them on charges of leading an "illegal" 22-day strike. The walkout by over 8,000 KORAIL workers was in protest against privatisation. Police now have 22 union leaders in custody, six of whom have been indicted over the strike.

The KRWU ended the strike on December 30, after a sell-out arrangement between the union, which is affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), and the government. The deal involves establishment of a seven-member committee "to ensure KORAIL is not privatised." The committee has three representatives from

the ruling Saenuri Party and the opposition Democratic Party, with ruling party lawmaker Kang Seok-ho leading the group.

The strike, which began on December 9, was sparked by KORAIL's decision to use a separate operator to run the planned Suseo KTX (bullet train) line linking Seoul with the port city of Busan. Workers accused management of attempting to pave the way for privatisation and fear that it will lead to poor service, fare hikes and layoffs.

Nothing has been resolved by the KRWU-KCTU led walkout. KORAIL has not backed down on its plan to allow a newly-formed subsidiary to run the Suseo KTX line and is filing an estimated 15 billion won (\$US14.2 million) law suit against the union for losses from the strike. Management have also said they will hold a disciplinary committee to determine punishment for about 7,790 union members who participated in the strike.

South Korean retail workers strike

Casual workers at eleven Homeplus supermarkets—in Seoul, Busan, Suncheon and Incheon—staged partial strikes and demonstrations early this month in protest against "0.5 contracts." Under Korean labour laws certain conditions must be provided to workers on eight-hour shifts.

According to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions' service workers division, Homeplus is employing staff in sales, check-out and distribution for 7.5 hours, denying them a one-hour meal break and other entitlements. The union planned strike action on January 9 by 1,000 workers in over 100 stores.

Cambodian union leader held during teachers strike

Cambodian Independent Teachers Association (CITA) president Rong Chhun, was seized by authorities and is now un-contactable following limited strike action by teachers in Phnom Penh and surrounding provinces on January 6. CITA, which has 10,000 members, wants teachers' monthly wage increased from \$US75 to \$250.

Chhun, who is also the president of the Cambodian Confederation of Unions, was summoned to appear at Phnom Penh Municipal Court for questioning about the deadly crackdown by government on striking garment workers on January 2. While the garment workers have ended their walkout, the teachers told media that because of Chhun's arrest it was not clear how long they would remain on strike.

India: Kerala transport workers on strike

Public transport workers at Ernakulum depot walked out on January 3 in a dispute with the Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) over recruitment and working schedules. The KSRTC Employees' Association extended the strike to all depots in the Ernakulum district, the largest metropolitan region in the south-west Indian state, after talks with the government failed on January 5. Only private bus services continued operating.

The KSRTCEA, which is affiliated with the Stalinist controlled Centre of Indian Trade Unions, wants all vacancies filled, the proper rescheduling of working hours and other demands. It has accused the transport authorities of rescheduling services to benefit competing private operators.

Karnataka midday meal workers protest

State mid-day meal workers in the Shomoga and Tumku districts of Karnataka demonstrated on January 5 over several demands. These included an increase in the monthly minimum wage to 5,000 rupees (\$US80), a 3,000-rupee pension, job regularisation and the cancellation of contracts to non-government organisations (NGOs), which workers fear is a step toward privatisation of their services.

More than 100,000 workers are employed in the midday meal scheme in Karnataka public schools. Many are paid as little as 1,000 rupees a month to work up to six hours a day. The protest was organised by the Karnataka State Midday Meal Workers' Federation.

Rajasthan University contract workers demonstrate

On January 5, over 350 non-teaching contract workers at the state-run Rajasthan University in Jaipur held a silent protest outside the vice chancellor's office to demand regularisation of their jobs. The vice chancellor wiped his hands of the issue, telling the media that the workers had been hired by different job agencies, which were "responsible for their job prospectus, not the university."

A Contract Employees' Association official said that the government previously agreed to form a committee headed by the health minister to consider the regularisation of non-teaching contract workers, but this had not happened.

Pakistan power workers continue anti-privatisation protests

Thousands of workers from the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) and its power distribution companies in Sindh, Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces rallied in several cities on January 1 and January 2 to oppose government's moves to privatise the power sector. A union official told rallying workers in Faisalabad that since the Karachi Electric Supply Company had been privatised it had incurred a 10 billion rupees deficit and axed 8,000 jobs. KESC customers experience regular power cuts due to poorly maintained infrastructure and lack of staff.

Under the International Monetary Fund's directive, the newly-elected Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government has made privatisation of public sector utilities a priority. The protests are part of a long-running national campaign against ongoing government attempts to privatise the

sector. The protests were called by the All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union.

Biscuit factory workers in Burma demonstrate

Around 130 workers at the Thazin Biscuit Factory in the Pyigyidagun's industrial zone in Mandalay, central Burma, resumed protests outside the factory this week after management broke a previous agreement on overtime payments.

The workers ended strike action in December after the factory owner, in talks that included the Labour Department, promised to address their demands for better overtime pay and time off during national holidays and on Sundays. The biscuit workers said they plan to file a lawsuit against the factory owner.

South Australian bus drivers vote for strike

Around 600 bus drivers of public transport providers Transfield and SouthLink in South Australia's capital Adelaide have begun voting in a ballot for strike action over a new work agreement. A Transport Workers Union spokesman said members were considering various forms of industrial action, including 24-hour stoppages and not collecting fares. The union official said that drivers want more than the 2.8 percent wage rise allowed in the government's contract with Transfield and SouthLink.

The ballot closes on January 21 and industrial action, which will affect two-thirds of the city's bus network, will begin on January 25.

Fiji police shutdown meeting of sacked public servants

On January 8, police dispersed a meeting of dismissed Public Works Department (PWD) workers at Shirley Park in Lautoka, Fiji's second largest city. The sacked workers had met to discuss their dismissal and to sign a petition to the government. Police claimed the meeting was illegal.

About 90 workers from the Lautoka PWD branch were dismissed in December, following a directive from the Works Ministry permanent secretary Commander Francis Kean. They were all project staff engaged under the ministry's Trade and Manufacturing Accounts.



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