

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 December 2014

Striking Shenzhen garment workers forced back to work by police

About 1,000 Artigas Clothing & Leatherwear employees in Shenzhen ended a nine-day strike last week following police intervention. The workers downed tools on December 11 to demand unpaid social insurance, overtime, and compensation for factory relocation. The strike began after the company, a Hong Kong-owned garment maker that supplies G2000, Uniqlo, and Baleno, announced its intention to relocate to another part of Shenzhen but failed to give present workers any detailed timetable.

Workers called for collective bargaining on December 15 but Artigas management refused to negotiate and called in over 100 police who stormed the factory in an attempt to disperse the strikers. Strike leaders were arrested and police assisted management to ship out finished garments. Strikers returned to work under the threat of dismissal.

Laid-off teachers protest in Jiangsu

Around 1,000 laid-off and retired teachers from the eastern Chinese province of Jiangsu demonstrated outside government buildings on December 18 over the government's refusal to grant them civil servant status. Teachers carrying red banners bearing a single character, "Injustice" and others that read "We need to eat," marched to the Jiangsu provincial government headquarters to demand better pensions and health insurance. Around 200 police were mobilised to disperse the protesters. Several were arrested.

Teachers can be hired on civil service or non-civil service contracts in China. Those employed on non-civil service contracts are frequently paid below the minimum living standard or not paid for months. These teachers often do not receive pensions and other benefits when they retire or are laid off.

The protest followed several demonstrations over pay and benefits by teachers and retired teachers in Guangdong province two days earlier. There have been at least 30 strikes and protests by school teachers in China over the last three months, predominately over low pay, social security, pension irregularities and wage arrears. Most of the protests have been in smaller provincial cities and poorer inland areas of China.

India: Foxconn workers oppose factory closure

Two hundred workers at the Taiwan-based Foxconn's Sriperumbudur mobile phone manufacturing facility in Tamil Nadu were taken into police custody on Monday after they tried to enter the premises demanding that the facilities reopen. Workers arrived at the factory that morning to find the gates shut and a notice stating that management had suspended operations because it had no work. A Foxconn India Employees Union representative said that about 1,700 workers were affected, including 100 who live on the premises.

Foxconn lost 70 percent of its business in March after Nokia India closed its Sriperumbudur facility. The union, company management and labour department officials have held three rounds of talks without resolution. Foxconn said it would consider offering a voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) or severance

package.

The union said that although the majority of products manufactured at Foxconn were supplied to Nokia India in the same economic zone, the company is still manufacturing for Nokia Siemens Networks and Sony.

Indian bank workers to resume strike action

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), representing five bank unions covering over one million public and private bank employees, has announced that it will resume strike action next month in a dispute over pay and restructuring. The walkouts, which follows three previous national stoppages by bank workers, will include a one-day strike on January 7. This will be followed by continuous work stoppages from January 21 to 24 and an indefinite strike starting on March 16.

The UFBU wants a 23 percent pay rise—a reduction in the union's 40 percent claim last December—and a revision of pay scales. The Indian Banks Association has offered just 11 percent. Bank employees, who have not received a wage increase for almost six years, were due to receive a rise in November 2012.

The bank workers are also demanding improved pensions, better healthcare benefits, five-day banking and opposing plans to merge several nationalised banks and to allow foreign institutions to compete with the State Bank of India.

Pakistani water and sanitation utility workers protest

On December 19, Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) workers protested in Hyderabad to demand unpaid salaries and allowances and permanency for contract employees. WASA is a subsidiary of the Hyderabad Development Authority (HDA).

Leaders of the HDA Mehran Workers Union announced a plan of action that included shutting down the utility's offices followed by interruptions to the

city's water supply if their demands were not soon met. Workers are also opposed to privatisation of the utility.

WASA is one of 68 public firms the Nawaz Sharif government has earmarked for privatisation in line with International Monetary Fund demands as part of its \$US6.8 billion bailout package to Pakistan.

Lockout of elevator workers in Victoria ends

The two-month lockout of 160 maintenance and construction workers at Otis Elevators in Victoria's capital Melbourne ended on December 17 after the company agreed to increase pay and allowances. Otis locked out the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union members in October following authorised stoppages and work bans over a new enterprise agreement.

Otis wanted to scrap an existing agreement to allow the increased use of casual workers and demanded that current employees be available on any five days out of seven. It also wanted to extend the working week by two hours and reduce the overtime loading rate. The company had offered a pay increase of only 1 percent in the first year of the new agreement.

Workers accepted the company's last offer of a 14 percent pay increase over the three and a half-year agreement, along with an increase in allowances, maintenance of the 36-hour week and income protection insurance. The unions and Otis have not publicly released any details about whether the new agreement includes changes in the use of casual workers.



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