

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 January 2015

Taiwan-based China Airlines employees protest

About 1,000 China Airlines (CAL) employees and supporters demonstrated outside the company's offices in Taipei on January 22 over a cut in their year-end bonus. The protesters, mostly flight attendants but also including pilots and mechanics, called for union leaders to resign after they accepted an "insultingly low" bonus which failed to reflect the company's annual revenue.

Although China Airlines said the year-end bonuses were finalised in negotiations with the China Airlines Employees' Union, members of the flight attendants division rejected the union's decision and accused its leaders of "selling out."

The demonstrators said that China Airlines plans to give its employees a flat year-end bonus of \$US633 and a pay increase of 2.5 percent. The company claims that employees received \$1,450 each in year-end bonuses but employees said this included funds from their own wages which went to employee benefit committees.

Following the demonstration, CAL suspended four flight attendants, who are union delegates, from flight duty for a month and forced them to attend anger-management classes. Although the suspended flight attendants will still receive wages they will lose up to \$320 in bonuses.

Pakistani water and power utility workers protest against privatisation

Thousands of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers rallied in 12 major Pakistani cities on January 22 to oppose the planned privatisation of the state-owned utility provider, several distribution companies and nine thermal power stations. Workers are concerned that the appointment of executives from the private sector as part of WAPDA restructure will lead to full privatisation.

The All Pakistan WAPDA Hydro Electric Workers Union and the WAPDA Hydro Electric Central Union have conducted a three-year campaign against privatisation in the sector. Union officials, however, have restricted workers' actions to demonstrations and harmless protest strikes. The government insists that it will continue privatising state-run utilities, especially in the energy sector, in line with International Monetary Fund demands.

In 2005, the Karachi Electricity Supply Company (KESC) was privatised, leading to the destruction of 4,500 jobs, after which the company decreased production and relied heavily on temporary worker contracts. Power shortages in Karachi are currently on-going.

India: Sea port workers protest against privatisation

On January 8, over 30,000 dockers at 12 major Indian ports stopped work to protest against the Modi government's planned privatisation of the government sector. The Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party government wants to amend the Major Port Trust Act 1963, supposedly to make the ports autonomous. This will be a step towards privatisation. Union leaders have threatened to "intensify" their protests if the government continues to corporatise India's major ports.

Jharkhand unorganised sector workers demand medical facilities

On January 24, unorganised sector workers in Jamshedpur demonstrated outside the district commissioner's office to demand Employee State Insurance hospital facilities and two dispensaries in Jamshedpur. They have issued a six-point charter of demands. Unorganised sector workers are highly exploited and generally employed in very small unincorporated private companies. According to the Unorganised Workers' Union, there are over 200,000 impoverished workers employed in this sector in Jamshedpur. In 2005, 86 percent of India's out of the 485 million workforce were employed in the unorganised sector.

The regional provident fund office has refused to listen to unorganised sector workers' grievances and told them to register their complaints online. The vast majority of these workers are computer illiterate.

Bangladeshi police attack protesting garment workers

At least ten protesting employees at the Burirbazar garment factory in Ashulia, Dhaka were hospitalised following a vicious attack by baton-wielding Ashulia Industrial Police attempting to end the protest at the factory on January 26.

The workers were demanding the reopening of the plant which management closed on January 21. The factory was shut down after workers demanded a pay increase.

Victorian food flavouring factory workers locked out

Some 26 factory workers have occupied the lunchroom at International Flavours & Fragrances (IFF) in the Melbourne outer suburb of Dandenong since January 27. After five months of failed negotiations over an enterprise agreement, the National Union of Workers (NUW) members had planned to impose overtime and paperwork bans but the company served them with lock out notices. When management began closing the gates on 50 workers at the start of their early morning shift 26 employees managed to rush inside and occupy the lunchroom.

IFF, which makes flavours for Coca-Cola and other companies, is one of the biggest flavouring firms in the world and is listed on the New York Stock Exchange. The company wants to cut conditions, including removal of one of two paid 10-minute breaks a day and removal of a clause in the enterprise agreement paying out unused personal leave when workers resign.

IFF has offered pay increases between 1.5 and 2 percent and a \$50 a day bonus for unused sick days, capped at \$500 per year. Workers said they want a pay rise linked to the Consumer Price Index currently at 2.3 percent and are willing to negotiate over unused leave. The NUW originally demanded a 3 percent pay increase but recently reduced it to 2.75 percent.

Australian seafarers strike and occupy vessel

On January 25, the Australian crew of petrol tanker Hugli Spirit stopped work and occupied the ship in Cairns, northern Queensland. The 36 workers took action after being informed by Teekay Shipping that they were being replaced by a cheaper foreign crew. The ship was due to sail that day for Singapore where the vessel was to be retired and the crew flown back to Australia.

The protesting crew initially said that the ship would not leave Cairns but the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) convinced them to sail the vessel the following day after the union made a deal with Teekay. The MUA told its members it had organised “high level meetings” between the union and Teekay to discuss the possibility of “temporary licence” cargo being carried by the Hugli Spirit or a replacement vessel. No further details have been released about the meeting.

In November, 18 crew members of the Australian-operated petrol tanker Tandara Spirit ended a 20-day strike and occupation in a failed attempt to save their jobs. The 36 crew members began occupying the ship, which remained anchored in Melbourne’s Port Phillip Bay, after Viva Energy ordered the crew to sail to Singapore, where they would be made redundant.

The Tandara Spirit crew ended their protest after they were threatened with individual legal action and were abandoned by the MUA, who told the media that it had no intention of organising any broader industrial action over the dispute.

New Zealand port workers to strike

More than 200 workers at Lyttelton Port of Christchurch (LPC), in Lyttelton on New Zealand’s South Island, have voted to strike for 24 hours on February 11 in a dispute for a new work agreement. The action by Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) members, who make up half of the front-line workers at the port, follows an overtime ban imposed on December 17 after five months of negotiations failed.

According to the RMTU, the main unresolved issues were safety, productivity and equity. The union wants to bring cargo handlers at LPC’s inland port at Woolston into the collective agreement. Woolston workers are currently paid \$6 per hour less than their colleagues at Lyttelton. LPC has only offered a 2 percent pay increase and refused to negotiate on other issues.

Last month the Employment Court rejected the company’s application for an injunction to force a group of strikers to return to work, after they had walked off the job on December 19 to protest inadequate safety during the overtime ban. The overtime ban has forced the closure of the container terminal on weekends due to the lack of maintenance workers.

The company declared that it would remain open during the one-day walkout by using workers on “settled contracts.”

Papua New Guinea hospital staff return to work

Protesting staff members at the Goroka Base Hospital in the Eastern Highlands have returned to work after the health minister announced that a three-man committee would be sent to Goroka to investigate their demands. Workers wanted withdrawal of a restraining order preventing them from holding meetings, reinstatement of sacked officers and removal of the health authority’s CEO and other board members.

More than 400 staff at the hospital resigned and walked off the job on January 19 to protest the dismissal of five senior staff members, including the hospital manager. Essential services were being maintained by a skeleton staff. The sackings by the Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority followed a series of demands by staff for improved facilities and equipment at the Goroka hospital.



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