

Indian fireworks workers protest over layoffs, Pakistan water treatment workers walkout; New Caledonia nickel miners extend strike

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 January 2019

### Indian fireworks workers protest over layoffs

Thousands of fireworks industry workers who have been jobless for the past two months held a one-day hunger strike across Virudhunagar district in the south Indian state of Tamil on January 3. It was one of a series of protests held since November when more than 1,000 fireworks production units in Sivakasi town, where over 90 percent of Indian fireworks production occurs, were closed down.

The production normally stops two days before the annual Diwali festival but this year workers were unable to resume manufacturing due to an Indian Supreme Court ruling banning the use of barium salts in fireworks and production of joined firecrackers, known as laris. The court has only authorised the production of green (reduced emissions) crackers.

According to media reports, 2,400 people, including 1,300 women, participated in the hunger strike protest. The workers want the state government to appeal to the Supreme Court. The workers are demanding the Tamil Nadu government provide 10,000 rupees (\$US142) relief money per month to each employee until the units are reopened.

### Pakistan water treatment workers shut down plants to demand outstanding wages

Reverse osmosis water treatment workers in Sindh province's Thar district of Sindh shut down over 580 plants and locked the premises in protest against the Pak Oasis Company's failure to pay wages over the past five months. The workers also held a sit-down demonstration outside the company's offices and blocked a main city road as part of the protest.

A similar shutdown occurred in October as part of the workers' ongoing campaign for the outstanding payments. Government authorities have repeatedly reneged on promises to resolve the issue. The water plants provide vital supplies of water to the poverty-stricken population of Thar, which has been hit by a major drought.

### Pakistan port workers threaten to expand protests

Members of the Port Qasim Workers Union have told the Pakistan government that a 100-day protest outside the Karachi Press Club would be moved to D-Chowk in Islamabad in front of the Parliament House unless workers' demands were met by January 10.

The casual port workers are owed six months' wages and benefits. The Pakistan government has also ignored demands to implement the Regulation of Employment Act of 197 and Dock Workers (Employment) Act which is already operating at the Port of Karachi.

In December, the government ordered police, using batons and water cannons, to attack and disperse a march of port workers to Government House in Karachi. The private operators of berths at Port Qasim, Pakistan's second busiest port, continue to refuse to provide permanent jobs or meet minimum wages for those employed in the dangerous and backbreaking work at the facility.

### Bangladesh bus workers' demonstration called off

About 250 Bangladesh Road Transport Corporation (BRTC) workers at the Joar Sahara bus depot called off a planned two-day strike on Wednesday following an assurance by management that it will pay all arrears. The bus workers have not been paid for over nine months.

When BRTC authorities threatened legal action over any striking action, the workers said they would walk out indefinitely. Joar Sahara Bus Depot drivers staged a protest last July to demand 10 months' back pay.

BRTC is a state-owned transport corporation with 22 depots across the country and employing about 3,000 drivers, technicians, office assistants and security guards. Workers are supposed to receive third- and fourth-class pay rates according to the government's public sector wage scale.

### Sri Lankan reservoir construction workers protest

Around 150 local workers employed by a Chinese construction company building on the Moragahakanda-Kalu Ganga reservoir project protested at the site on January 3.

The workers demanded the company withdraw planned cuts in pay and allowances. The company reduced workers' daily wage by 200 rupees

(\$US1.09) and suspended a 9,000-rupee monthly allowance.

Chanting slogans, the protesters trapped white collar staff from leaving the company office and blocked their vehicles. The Moragahakanda-Kalu Ganga reservoir is one of Sri Lanka's largest hydropower generation reservoir construction projects.

### **Sri Lankan television workers protest over political appointments**

Around 400 workers from the Independent Television Network (ITN), one of the two government-owned television channels, demonstrated last month against the politically biased appointments of two deputy directors to the network. The workers occupied the network premises on December 30.

The television workers accuse administration of spending huge sums of money on the salaries and other bonuses of top level officers and fear that management will impose job cuts to offset the increased costs.

ITN administration ordered security police not to allow 13 employees who led the protests to enter the network premises. Riot police were also deployed to break up the demonstration.

### **Chinese silicosis sufferers protest in Hunan**

Around 70 workers suffering from silicosis, also known as black lung disease, travelled from the city of Hunan to Shenzhen on January 5 to demand recompense from the local government. Silicosis is caused by the inhalation of dust particles contained in materials that have been used in construction, mining and other industries.

On January 7, another group of 40 workers, including silicosis sufferers, attempted to demonstrate outside Shenzhen city's Bureau of Letters and Calls. They demanded information about compensation due to sufferers of the diseases. Hunan authorities have sought to transfer responsibility for the cases to Shenzhen.

The workers were prevented from reaching the Bureau by police armed with riot shields. In response, the workers tied themselves together with ropes to prevent the police from detaining them. During the night, protesters were forced into coaches by police and their whereabouts are unknown.

The incident comes after a November protest in Shenzhen by 200 workers and their family, which was attacked by police. There are currently more than 600 workers from Hunan seeking money for medical care and to support their families.

### **Cambodian garment workers continue protests**

W&D factory workers in Phnom Penh are continuing protest action against the sacking of 1,200 of the company's 1,600 employees. The workers are demanding severance packages and outstanding back payments.

The W&D workers had previously walked out over unpaid seniority and severance payments. Last week employers, with the support of the Municipal Court and the Cambodian Council of National Unions, ordered the workers to return to work within 48 hours or face retrenchment. The garment workers defied the threats.

On January 4, however, W&D management announced it would go ahead with the sackings and the following day named 1,200 employees it would sack. The company had not met any of the demands for back payments.

### **Burma: Sacked union leaders reinstated after strike**

On January 8, workers at the Cixing Knitting Factory in Yangon, Burma's largest city, ended a two-week strike after management reinstated seven sacked local union leaders.

One hundred workers had been protesting at the gate over the sackings since December 24. On January 2, management agreed to 17 demands, including the reinstatements but on January 7, the seven workers were sacked again after the company claimed that non-striking workers were opposed to their reinstatement.

On Tuesday, 350 workers from 15 other factories in the industrial area where Cixing Knitting Factory is located joined the resumed walkout. At a conciliation meeting between the striking workers and management the same day, factory officials again agreed to re-hire the sacked seven.

### **New Caledonia nickel miners extend strike**

Strike action by workers at the SLN nickel company's Thio and Tiebaghi SLN sites in New Caledonia expanded this week when Nepoui plant employees walked out. The miners originally walked out on January 3 in opposition to company attacks on conditions and working hours. According to the CSTNC and USTKE, the two unions involved in the dispute, the company, which is running at a loss, wants to extend the working day to ten-and-a-half hours. This would mean that those on the afternoon shift would not finish work until 2 a.m.

SLN claims that the longer work hours had been agreed last year by five out of seven unions at the company and that the new regime has already been implemented at the company's site in Kouaoua. That site was hit by a blockade last year which interrupted ore supplies to the SLN smelter in Noumea.

Mining is the main industry in the French territory, which holds the world's largest known nickel deposits. The world price of nickel, a strategically important material used in weapons, steel and car production, declined late last year after a 12-month surge. It is currently trading at \$US11,081 per metric tonne, down from \$13,591 last September. Nickel reached its all-time high of \$54,050 per tonne in 2007.



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