

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 January 2001

Indonesian strikers march on parliament

Hundreds of striking Shangri-La Hotel workers and their supporters marched on the House of Representatives in Jakarta on January 5. Outside parliament, the workers denounced the use of police to break their occupation of the hotel lobby at the end of last month and the subsequent sacking of over 200 strikers on fabricated charges.

The 1,114 union and non-union workers have been on strike since December 22 to demand improved working conditions, including the introduction of a pension program and the equal distribution of the hotel's service charges. Presently the hotel collects service charges amounting to an average of 1.8 billion rupiah a month, but distributes the money on the basis of seniority and service. The present system means that supervisors and management get much more than ordinary staff.

The union confirmed this week that 200 of the 900 union members on strike had received letters of dismissal on the grounds they had vandalised the hotel and took management hostage during the occupation. A spokesman denied the allegations and pointed out that some of those dismissed were on leave at the time of the occupation.

The Independent Workers Union Federation (FSPM) has 6,000 members, many employed in five-star hotels and restaurants, including the Grand Hyatt, Four Seasons Regent, Hyatt Bandung and Holiday-Inn Bandung. Many have similar grievances to those of the Shangri-La workers. But on January 8 a union spokesman ruled out a broader strike, saying "for the time being we suggest our members wear black ribbons on their arms".

Sri Lankan shoe salesmen demand permanency

Salesmen employed by Bata Shoe retail outlets in Sri Lanka have begun an overtime boycott demanding the company employ them on a permanent basis and increase their wages. At present only the shop manager is considered a company employee. All other staff are employed on a contract basis through outside agencies.

Casual workers receive a low wage, together with a small commission based on the number and value of the shoes sold. They are denied a range of rights and entitlements

available to permanent staff. In order to fight for improved conditions the casual workers recently formed a branch of the Inter Company Workers Union across Bata Shoe outlets.

Presently Bata runs about 135 stores throughout Sri Lanka. The company is one of the many large multinational manufacturers which set up operations in Sri Lanka's free trade zones several decades ago to exploit cheap labour, tax breaks and other government concessions.

Indian government workers on national strike

A strike by state government workers in India on Wednesday closed schools, colleges and hospitals across the country. Strikers were protesting against a decision by a number of state governments to reduce wages by adopting a new salary scale. Previously, the wage levels of state government workers were pegged to the higher salary paid to their national government counterparts.

As well as cutting wages, the state governments are looking to shed staff and lower working conditions and entitlements. One union official said the state governments were responding to World Bank demands for the privatisation and contracting out of many services presently carried out by civil servants.

West Australian nurses place work bans

Registered nurses in Western Australia's public hospitals voted this week to close beds as part of a campaign against the shortage of nursing staff and for improved working conditions. The nurses are demanding a 16 percent pay increase over two years, an improved career structure, increased study and long service leave entitlements and limitations on the use of casual and private nursing agency staff.

An Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) spokesman said that because of staff shortages in Perth's public hospitals, nurses were forced to care for five to seven patients each when they should be looking after only four. "Beds will be closed to ensure that safe nurse-to-patient ratios are followed," he said.

Discussions between the ANF and West Australia's Health Minister John Day broke down this week following the announcement by Premier Richard Court that the nurses'

claims would not be considered until after the February 10 state election.

Casual hotel workers take strike action

Over 70 casual kitchen hands, cleaners and maintenance workers at a Blue Mountain luxury hotel, west of Sydney, took strike action January 10 over the company's decision not to employ staff directly and to outsource their jobs to an American-owned catering and cleaning company. The workers, employed by the four-star Peppers Fairmont Hotel, stopped work and occupied the foyer after negotiations with management broke down.

A spokesman said the rights of workers were being thrown out of the door "because the owners of this resort want to increase their profits". He warned unless there was a satisfactory resolution to the dispute by next week there would be further industrial action.

Over the past decade the casual workforce has risen sharply in Australia and now makes up 27 percent of the total. Casuals are not entitled to holiday pay or sick leave, can be laid off easily and have no recourse to unfair dismissal laws.

At the end of last year the Australian Industrial Relations Commission ruled that casual staff with six months service had the right to apply for permanency. It is likely that other businesses will, like the Peppers Fairmont Hotel, lay off staff and use labour hire companies to circumvent the IRC ruling.

Appliance technicians locked out

Forty technicians employed by the appliance hire firm Radio Rental were barred by management from entering the company's workshop this week and ordered to hand over company mobile phones and vehicles.

The management's action is an attempt to force the workers to abandon their demand for a 5 percent increase and accept the company's offer of only 3 percent and 1.5 percent backdated to January 2000. The technicians have not received a pay increase since 1997.

One of the locked-out workers, Wayne Avion, said that even though workforce had become multi-skilled, allowing the company to reduce costs, "the firm's attitude is they are just not going to pay us for it."

The management informed the stood-down workers that they would not be allowed back to work before January 14. Meanwhile, Radio Rentals is covering breakdowns by using private contractors hired through its other firm HomeCo, and in-house technicians not involved in the dispute.

PNG teachers plan mass resignation over unpaid entitlements

Teachers in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea this week threatened to resign en masse or transfer out of the province in protest over unpaid leave entitlements. The

provincial government owes a total of 600,000 kina for the period from 1994 to 1999 and last year's leave entitlements amounting to 105,000 kina.

The teachers presented a petition to provincial administrator Charles Goto on January 2 demanding payment. Since then they have learnt that money originally set aside for their entitlements has been redirected to other government departments.

Over 600,000 kina was transferred to the Electoral Commission to cover expenses incurred during the 1997 election. Another 85,734 of the 105,000 kina set aside to cover last year's entitlements has been used to meet other Education Department costs. A further 600,000 kina, granted to the province by the national government for school subsidies, has "gone missing".

The PNG Teachers Association has threatened legal action against the Electoral Commission if it does not return the 600,000 kina it "borrowed". Last year the union shut down the campaign over entitlements claiming that it had struck a deal with the government guaranteeing payment by the end of the year.

Nurses strike in New Caledonia

Nurses on New Caledonia's Loyalty Islands group started an indefinite strike this week to protest poor working conditions, including the lack of security in medical facilities. A nurses' spokesperson said that the existing conditions were so bad that many trained nurses had simply quit the profession.

Speaking on the security problems, she said that nurses were being abused and physically assaulted on a daily basis while performing their job. "It is not our job to deal with safety issues," she said. The nurses are demanding that regular security patrols be set up at medical dispensaries at night, on weekends and on public holidays. The nurses voted to stay out until their demands are met.

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