

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 November 2001

Three Indonesian garment workers still in custody

Three workers arrested on November 14 when police broke a factory occupation at PT Koinus Jaya Garments in Tangerang are still being held in custody. Sri Hayati, 26, Siti Suryani, 23, and Luciana, 26, have been charged with inciting workers to commit acts of vandalism. Workers occupied the factory in protest over the dismissal of 250 of the company's 500-strong workforce.

The sackings are part of the escalating number of lay-offs in Tangerang where more than 1,640 workers have lost their jobs in the last two months. One worker said that PT Koinus Jaya Garments gave her 180,000 rupiah (\$US18) for two weeks outstanding pay but no compensation. According to a report in the *Jakarta Post*, some laid-off workers are "in conditions of near starvation".

Indonesian workers protest low severance pay

Workers laid off by bag manufacturer PT Tassa Zenis Indonesia in Tangerang protested outside the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration building on November 19, in opposition to the low severance payments offered by the company.

According to a workers' spokesperson, the company is only offering 900 million rupiah (\$US90,000) for the 660 employees dismissed on November 8 or an average of 1.36 million rupiah (\$US136) for each worker. The workers began staging protests last week after negotiations with the company broke down.

Protest against fraudulent charges in Indonesia

About 150 delegates of the Karya Utama Labor Federation (FSKU) in Tangerang demonstrated in front of the District Court on November 20 over the arrest and trial of 25-year-old Hamdani Hamdani. Hamdani, a worker in a local shoe factory, was arrested and charged with stealing a pair of sample sandals.

According to the court prosecutor, Hamdani took the sandals without the management's permission and wore them while performing ritual ablutions. A FSKU spokesman said: "The court must stop the trial because the prosecutor's claims are inaccurate and fabricated". According to the union, the sandals were not samples, but rejects that were going to be dumped.

More deaths in China coal mine explosion

Fourteen workers are dead and at least 26 remain trapped in the latest round of disasters in Chinese coal mines. On November 18, a gas explosion ripped through a village-run coal mine near Jincheng, in the northern Shanxi province.

The same weekend, 14 miners were trapped by an explosion in another Shanxi coal mine, near Datong, and 12 men were trapped when a state-run mine, employing around 2,000 workers, flooded in the eastern province of Shandong. The latest incidents follow the death of 37 Shanxi miners in explosions the previous week.

More than 5,300 deaths were reported in China's coalmines last

year. Despite the closure of more than 11,000 small mines over the last 12 months, the death toll has fallen by only 7.24 percent.

Teachers union drops strike action

The Korean Teachers and Educational Worker's Union (KTEW) has called off a national strike planned for November 26 and resumed negotiations with the government over changes to working conditions. The union dropped the strike threat after the government made a minor concession and allowed unionised teachers to perform union activities during school hours and to attend rallies.

The strike threat emerged out a series of walkouts called by the union in early October to demand the Education Ministry agree to a new contract and withdraw changes to education policy. The government's policy changes include a law that favours funding to private schools, the introduction of new school curricula and adverse employment arrangements for secondary school teachers.

In a separate action, 10,000 South Korean workers held a protest rally in Seoul on November 18 for a shorter working week without any loss of wages. The rally was called by the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), South Korea's largest union body. After hearing a series of speakers, the workers marched through the district where the National Assembly is located. Unlike early marches, there were no reported clashes with the police.

Union calls off Japanese airline strike

The union representing pilots at Japan Air Systems (JAS), the country's third-biggest carrier, called off a 24-hour strike planned for November 21 after all-night negotiations with the company. The strike was to demand an increase in the pilot's twice-yearly bonuses, normally paid in the summer and winter.

Officials from the 672-member JAS pilots' union said that the management had agreed to larger bonuses but refused to disclose the amount. Pilots will now vote on the offer.

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over lost work

Workers at the Norwood Plantations-owned New Valley tea estate struck on November 19 to demand the company stop planting turpentine plants. The company has already planted 20 hectares of turpentine plants and is planning to sow another 40 hectares due to falling tea sales.

The plantings have reduced the number of tea bushes and cut work for tea pickers. Workers claim they are only being given four days work a week and that 60 youth on the estate are unemployed. The strikers want the company to hire more labour and guarantee 26 days work each month.

The slump in the Sri Lankan tea industry is affecting other companies. This week, the Lipton Tea Factory, a subsidiary of Unilever Ceylon, closed down and laid off 750 workers. Management claimed that profit losses had caused the shutdown but, according to

the union, the work has been outsourced to cut costs. The factory produced black and flavored tea for domestic and foreign markets and was one of the oldest in Sri Lanka.

Australian steel workers vote for rolling stoppages

Over 4,000 workers at BHP Billiton's (BHP) Port Kembla steel plant on the New South Wales south coast struck for 24 hours on November 19 over proposed changes to working conditions.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) signalled this week that it was prepared to drop a demand for a 15 percent pay increase and accept a company offer of 8 percent over two years. However, a mass meeting of 2,500 workers rejected BHP's demand to allow compulsory redundancies and overwhelmingly voted for rolling strikes across the company's operations.

The current Steel Industry Agreement only allows the company to institute "voluntary redundancies" and for displaced workers to be given retraining and priority for alternative positions. While a BHP Billiton spokesman claimed this week that there were no immediate plans to lay off workers, the company is preparing to spin off its steel operations as an independent company, named BHP Steel, by June 30, 2002. Workers are expecting layoffs to accompany the move.

Sugar mill union calls off industrial campaign

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) has called off a dispute over increased shift allowances at 25 sugar mills in northern Queensland. The abandonment of industrial action followed a direction from the Industrial Relations Commission last week that the union begin negotiations with the Australian Sugar Milling Association (ASMA).

Workers began a series of strikes and stoppages earlier this month after the ASMA appealed against an industrial court ruling that granted mill workers shift allowances on par with employees in other industries. AWU organiser Rod Stockham announced this week that there would be no further action during this year's harvesting and crushing season.

Australian union calls token strike at Qantas

Over 2,500 maintenance workers at Qantas, Australia's largest airline, went on strike for 48 hours on November 21 over the company's demand for an 18-month pay freeze.

The strike was little more than a token protest by the union and had little effect on the company's flight schedules. The Australian Services Union (ASU), which covers check-in and booking staff at Qantas, had threatened to strike this week but called off the action after the company offered some minor concessions in return for the pay freeze. Negotiations between the company and the union are continuing but the ASU is expected to accept the deal. Most other unions at Qantas have already agreed to accept the freeze.

The maintenance strike was called before the company revealed that it planned to shed 2,000 jobs before Christmas. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron told the media that the strike was not over job cuts but the union's claim for a 6 percent pay increase. Maintenance workers earn between \$30,000 and \$35,000 a year and, according to the AMWU, are among the lowest-paid skilled workers it represents.

Building workers strike for contract

Building workers employed by Pindan Constructions on a site in East Perth struck on November 21 over the company's refusal to negotiate a new enterprise work agreement, its increasing use of non-union subcontractors and its refusal to allow union officials onto the site.

Workers picketed the site and scuffles broke out between picketers and non-union workers. Three union officials, including CFMEU

assistant secretary Joe MacDonald, were arrested on charges of resisting arrest and trespassing. The union called off the strike when the company agreed to negotiations.

New Zealand radiation therapists vote to strike

Ninety radiation therapists in Auckland, Hamilton and Palmerston North hospitals have voted to strike for a 25 percent pay rise. The Radiation Therapists Union has issued notices for a 48-hour stoppage from December 3.

The pay rises are being sought to take a newly qualified therapist's pay from \$NZ32,000 to \$40,000. The union claims that the increase is needed to stem the flow of therapists taking jobs overseas. Staff shortages have resulted in cancer patients facing delays of up to 20 weeks for radiation therapy or being sent to Australia for treatment. Hospitals have offered a pay increase of just 3 percent.

New Zealand nurses' dispute escalates

An protracted industrial dispute at the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) is set to escalate. Over 3,000 health workers served notice that they will strike for 48 hours from December 2. The workers are demanding a 6.5 per cent pay increase and improved allowances and holidays. The CDHB has only offered a 3 percent pay rise.

General nursing staff will also strike on December 2 in support of their claim for a 13 percent pay increase. The 2,000 nurses were due to strike last week but the Nurses' Organisation called off the action when the CDHB made a pay offer. Nurses rejected the offer.

Fiji Institute of Technology staff strike for pay rise

Police and security guards broke up a student demonstration at the Fiji Institute of Technology staged in support strike action by the Institute's lecturers and staff. The Minister for Labour threatened that unless students returned to class to sit exams they would be forced to repeat their course units in 2002.

About 90 percent of the Institute's staff began a lightning strike on November 19 and pledged not to return to work until their demands are met. They are seeking a 20 percent pay rise, which includes a 7 percent increase to cover the rising cost of living. Staff have been attempting to negotiate a pay increase since 1999. The Institute Board has only offered one percent, plus a three percent cost of living adjustment.

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