Workers Struggles Around the World: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Filipino banana growers sack 2,000 workers

Banana plantation workers, carrying out a go-slow since July to win a 25 pesos per day cost of living increase, have been sacked by the multinational corporation Stantilco at Kapalong, Davao in the Mindanao region.

Workers have pitched tents outside the Kapalong Town Hall, vowing to stay until they are reinstated and paid the increase, which has been ratified by a Supreme Court Order. Stantilco has claimed that since the men took action the company has lost over 100 million Pesos, making the operation unviable.

However Franco Lazarte, president of the Nagkahuiusang Mamumuo sa Collective-National Federation of Labor (NAMACOL), claims that Stantilco is carrying out a union-busting operation, trying to force workers to accept a scheme called 'workers clustering.'

Under the scheme, plantation workers will no longer be paid daily minimum wages but will be forced to work in teams of 13, paid in accordance with their productivity in maintaining, harvesting and packaging bananas.

Stantilco controls the banana plantations through an organization known as Draga, which comprises some 680 growers who operate the 2,348-hectare plantation under contract for Stantilco. Workers are currently receiving 107.50 pesos a day, slightly higher than the 102 pesos given to non-agricultural workers.

Singapore government imposes wage cuts

Singapore Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has accepted the National Wage Council Guidelines that will see workers' pay cut by 5 to 8 percent. This comes on top of a 10 percent cut in employer's monthly pension contributions.

Taken together the cuts will see workers lose 15 percent of their wages, the amount proposed by the Committee on Singapore's Competitiveness. According to government officials, the reduction is being carried out to bring Singapore wages into line with the rest of the region.

The cuts are the outcome of talks undertaken in September by the Tripartite council of employers, union leaders and government, following a wave of wage cuts and retrenchments due to the regional economic crises. In the first nine months of this year more than 20,000 workers were retrenched, compared to 9,784 for the whole of last year.

The unemployment rate jumped 2.2 percent in March to 4.5 percent in September. The NWC Guidelines were endorsed by the National Trade Union Congress, which agreed with employers that the 15 percent reduction in overall wages was realistic and appropriate.

Chinese workers protest over non-payment of wages

Three hundred workers at the Huaxing Machinery factory in China's southwest Sichuan province began protest action in the provincial capital of Chengdu on November 14 over the non-payment of wages. The protest is one of the scores workers' protests over wages, job losses or other grievances in China this year.

The factory workers, who have not been paid since September 1997, have blocked a road in the capital to demand the government ensure the payment of all owed wages as well as the repayment of 400,000 yuan or $48,000 the workers donated to save the factory. The workers, who claim management has misappropriated the funds, have vowed to block the road from 8am to dusk every day until they are repaid.

36 miners drowned in China

Thirty-six miners at Heshan in the southern Chinese province of Guangxi were killed when floodwaters rushed into two coalmines on October 25. First news of the disaster was not reported in the press until November 17. Only one of the bodies was recovered.

The mine, closed for several months during the wet season, had only been operating for 12 days before the disaster. Mine owners reopened the pits before securing approval from government authorities. They are reported to have fled the region following the tragedy.

Safety standards are virtually non-existent in Chinese mines with up to 10,000 workers killed in accidents per year.

PNG unions strike over budget cuts

Papua New Guinea trade unions in key industries were due to began a series of rolling strikes on November 27, in protest at the Skate government's 1999 budget. This includes workers in the mining, airline, power, communication, banking, maritime and public sector industries. The strike comes after a week of protests, including a march on parliament in Port Moresby, against the budget. A majority of the PNG Trade Union Congress's 53 affiliates voted to strike when Prime Minister Bill Skate refused to meet the unions last Tuesday.

The budget axes 7,000 jobs, or more than 10 percent of the country's total public sector workforce; slashes recurrent spending by 325 million kina ($US158 million) or 5 percent of the total budget; and privatises a number of government-owned industries and departments. The government also announced a new Value Added Tax that will dramatically increase the cost of food and other basic items for workers, villagers and the rural poor.

Union officials, fearful of a general strike, are maintaining a tight control with all industrial action to be determined by a TUC strike committee. The TUC has not called for the defence of all public sector jobs. It is demanding the dismissal of economic advisor Pirouz Hamafian-Rad; abolition of VAT and a 1.5 million kina allocation for MPs; and the maintenance of government departments slated for closure. The TUC leadership is opposed to the proposed abolition of the National Tripartite Consultative Council--a committee through which the union leadership collaborated with the government and employers.

Food workers oppose casualisation

Four hundred and fifty workers at the Four and Twenty pie and pastry factory in Kensington, Melbourne have been on strike since last Wednesday, when they set up a 24-hour picket outside the factory.

The strike is over management's plans to increase the use of casual labour, as well as the introduction of a third shift and non-payment of money owed due to the recent gas crisis.

The workers, members of the metal workers union, have expressed concern over the company's unchecked use of the labour hire organisation, Manpower. Over the years more workers have been replaced by contract labour. There are now 143 casual workers at the factory--some have been there for nine years.

The strike is also for a 30 percent loading and a paid half-hour meal break to apply when the company brings on its third shift. At present, workers on the afternoon shift receive a 25 percent loading on their pay.

The dispute was due to go to the Industrial Relations Commission.

Kodak to sack more as orders fall

Kodak Australia has announced plans to sack up to 150 workers from its Coburg factory in Melbourne, bringing to 230 the jobs eliminated year. Kodak, which employs 3,000 workers nationally and 700 at Coburg, has been hit hard by the Asian economic crisis with orders down as much as 40 percent in some markets, including Korea, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Kodak's Coburg factory sells about 80 percent of its products to Asia, accounting for almost half of the $1 billion in sales in 1997.

A Kodak spokesperson, Keith Shipton stated that the entire photographic industry was hurting because of disappointing results in developing countries such as China, Russia and Latin America, where there is a general over-capacity.

The layoffs are part of a global restructuring. Last year Kodak announced plans to slash nearly 20,000 jobs or one-fifth of its workforce, by the end of 1999. The company, locked in a worldwide battle with Fuji, has so far cut 10,000 positions.

Esso workers return to work

Striking Esso workers at the Longford gas and oil plant in Victoria voted to return to work last Friday after accepting a union-endorsed pay offer.

The workers, both permanent Esso workers and contract workers, went on strike two weeks ago in support of an 18 percent wage increase and better conditions.

Under the new agreement, contract maintenance workers, hired to repair the gas refinery after an explosion on September 25 that cut gas to the state for two weeks, voted to accept a $24 hour pay offer. Other workers, including electricians, received wage increases of between 16 and 17 percent, linked to productivity improvements such as changes to shifts.

The two-week strike has cost Esso and its oil partner BHP an estimated $15 million. While gas supplies at the plant had been restored, oil production had not.

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