

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 October 1999

Hong Kong aircraft workers oppose wage cut

Up to 3,000 engineers at the Hong Kong Aircraft Engineering Company (Haeco) went on strike on Wednesday against attempts by the company to cut wages by 30 percent. Over 90 per cent of the engineering staff downed tools. The workers had served notice on the company earlier this month that they intended to take industrial action unless management abandoned its plan.

Following Wednesday's walkout more than 100 Haeco workers from other departments staged a sit-in at the Chek Lap Kok passenger terminal in support of their striking colleagues. One striker said: "We will not stop our action until the management responds to our demands."

Hong Kong Labour Department officials said they were investigating the dispute, but would not reveal if the Department would intervene.

Haeco employs a total of 4,400 staff and handles 75 percent of the aircraft maintenance work at Chek Lap Kok, including servicing planes for Cathay Pacific Airways.

Indonesian workers occupy offices

Hundreds of workers from five companies in Bandung staged a mass demonstration this week in front of the office of the Governor of West Java in Jalan Diponegoro. The protestors were demanding the Governor intervene to direct the local administration to increase the Regional Minimum Wage and improve workers' welfare allowances.

Several windows and doors were smashed when security guards rushed to block several hundred demonstrators when they attempted to enter the building.

A spokesman for the workers said they had repeatedly met with members of the local House of Representatives to discuss their problem but this had not produced any change. "The protest may result in better conditions for the workers," he said.

Korean union leaders sentenced

Six leaders of the broadcasting unions in South Korea, including union head Hyun Sang-Yoon, received a two and a half-year suspended jail sentence this week when they appeared in the Seoul District Court.

The men were indicted in August on charges of organising an illegal 15-day strike. The strike was called in July to demand legislation making the broadcasting commission fully independent of government control and for stricter

requirements governing the appointment of top management.

The court found the union leaders guilty, alleging that the strike demands went outside legally-permitted labor disputes. Government prosecutors had previously called for the union leaders to be jailed for the maximum four-year term allowed under law.

Indian transport drivers fight fuel price hikes

Thousands of transport drivers across India began a national indefinite strike on Thursday to force the Bharatiya Janata Party-led coalition government to withdraw a 35 percent price increase for diesel fuel. The All India Motor Transport Federation (AIMTF), a peak body representing 32 federations, called the strike after talks with the government broke down on Wednesday.

The industrial action paralysed the movement of goods in most states, including Delhi, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Orissa and Tamil Nadu. In Orissa, the entire road transport system ground to a halt when over 35,000 truck drivers ceased work and joined bus drivers who had been on strike for a week over the same issue. In Rajasthan more than 10,000 drivers went on strike.

Transport services in West Bengal were not affected because the Federation of West Bengal Truck Operators decided to defer strike action until October 26. The AIMTF has exempted truck operators carrying water, milk and newspapers from the national stoppage.

Despite the widespread disruption the government refused to budge on the price hike and ruled out any further discussions with the AIMTF on the issue. Instead it ordered the movement of goods by train to be increased and has offered police protection to truck drivers who ignored the strike.

Truck drivers strike against road toll

Hundreds of truck drivers went on strike for 24 hours at the beginning of this week in Ahmedabad, central India. The drivers were protesting against an excessive state government road toll that cuts into their revenue and causes long delays while delivering goods. Earlier this year the government promised it would address the problem but has done nothing.

The drivers are also angry about harassment by officials of the Regional Transport Office and the police department who force them to pay bribes to allow trucks to carry more than the permitted load. Drivers who refuse to meet the bribes have to

pay the additional tax on any excess weight.

University teachers hold statewide protests

University and college teachers in Maharashtra, India, staged statewide demonstrations this week over the state government's refusal to implement the new pay rates it had promised for higher education professionals.

New rates were agreed to over a year ago. A spokesman for the protestors said teachers would launch an all-out strike on December 8 if the government failed to meet their demands.

Coca Cola Company plans more job cuts in Sri Lanka

The Coca Cola International Company in Sri Lanka is planning to sack 25 workers more from its plant in Biyagama, about 20 km from Colombo. A worker said: "Monthly production has been reduced to 500,000 bottles from 750,000. The overtime has been cut and the factory is being modernised."

Last December the company closed down its factory at Kaduwela and transferred the 350 workers employed there to Biyagama. Later the management sacked 376 workers from the Biyagama plant, including 83 staff members. In response the 900-strong workforce went on strike for 85 days. The union demanded the workers call off the dispute because the strike "would discourage the foreign investors". The union's actions have opened the way for the new job losses.

New Zealand bus drivers reject union agreement

More than 300 Stagecoach bus drivers in Auckland walked off the job again this week to attend stopwork meetings to discuss a dispute over the conditions in a new employment contract.

Over one-third of the company's 900 drivers refused to accept the agreement at meetings earlier this month. The agreement was the result of protracted negotiations between the transport union and Stagecoach management that began in September last year.

The industrial dispute boiled over this month with the 300 drivers walking off the job four times, causing significant delays in bus services. Some of the strikers set up picket lines outside bus depots and the management called in the police to remove them.

Lingerie manufacturer cuts jobs

The National Distribution Union has not made any proposal to fight job cuts at the Brendon lingerie company in New Zealand. Management announced this week that it would shed up to 400 jobs from its three plants in Te Aroha, Te Rapa and East Tamaki and relocate its headquarters to Australia.

A union spokesman confirmed that 122 jobs would go at the end of November. He said a further 278 jobs were earmarked for destruction by the end of March next year unless the company could sell the Te Rapa plant as a going concern.

Australian building workers strike

Over 10,000 construction workers in Victoria stopped work for 24 hours this week and attended a membership meeting to discuss a log of claims. The workers are seeking a 24 percent

pay rise, a 36-hour week and wage protection against the inflationary effects of the federal government's new consumption tax. Other demands include a \$10-a-week boost to superannuation, increased redundancy payments, the employment of more apprentices and the protection of public holidays.

The meeting involved all building unions. The joint wage claim is in contradiction to federal workplace laws that outlaw pattern bargaining (the presentation of identical claims across industries).

However, the unions have already signaled that are ready to compromise on the demands. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union secretary Martin Bingham said: "If the employers negotiate on granting more leisure time, we will negotiate the 24 percent wage claim down."

The construction companies have dismissed the wage claim, saying they expect wages in the industry to rise by only 3 to 4 per cent over the next two years. Yet substantial profits are being made. About \$9.2 billion worth of property, industrial and resource projects will be completed this year in Victoria, compared with \$3.5 billion worth in 2000.

Nurses act against staff shortages

Nurses at the Royal Melbourne Hospital and the Monash Medical Centre in Melbourne voted this week to impose work bans that will close a total of 47 beds. The industrial action is aimed at pressing the new state Labor government to increase nursing staff across the state.

The nurses maintain that they can no longer guarantee the safety of patients given the nurse-patient ratios in many hospitals. At least 20 beds were recently closed at the Austin Hospital and the Repatriation Medical Centre because nursing staff levels had fallen.

One nurse said: "If a patient dies as a result of being neglected or because a nurse was not available, it isn't the chief executive or finance manager who's up in the coroner's court, it's the nurse." The bans are expected to spread to other hospitals. Nurses at the Alfred Hospital will meet early next week to vote on the issue.



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