

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 October 1999

Chinese workers perish in fire

Twenty workers suffocated to death and nine others were badly injured on Wednesday as a result of a fire in an unlicensed leather-goods factory in Guangzhou.

Although the fire was not particularly big, the plant's fire doors had been locked preventing people from escaping. Firefighters were able to begin to bring the blaze under control within 15 minutes but many of the workers had already died from inhaling smoke.

The building was known to the authorities to be a fire hazard and its owner had been denied a licence but the business had been illegally operating since last year.

Korean unions threaten stoppages

The Korea Confederation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, South Korea's peak union bodies, announced this week that they will call strikes next month if the government continues with plans to privatise the Korea Electric Power Corp and restructure a number of other state-owned enterprises.

Representatives from the two union bodies will meet on November 5 to discuss the restructuring and a number of other issues, including remuneration for full-time union members and shorter working hours.

A union spokesman said that if an agreement over restructuring were not reached with the government then a campaign of industrial action would start with stop-work and protest rallies on November 21.

In March this year, both union bodies called off strikes against the government's drive to restructure some of the country's major conglomerates and government enterprises. Despite ongoing layoffs and the arrest of union leaders and activists, the unions terminated all industrial action.

Asian workers fight for pay in Libya

Over 300 immigrant workers from Thailand and the Philippines employed by Shilla Co in Libya, went on strike this week to protest the non-payment of wages and bad working conditions. The workers were employed by

Shilla as contract workers to construct a sports stadium and were promised that they would be paid on a three-monthly basis. This never materialised.

One worker Mr. Khiew said: "The living conditions were terrible. Our families back home received no money and we are still heavily in debt." The workers are owed between 100,000 and 150,000 baht each.

Indian transport strike called off

The week-long strike by truck drivers across India against the government's rise in the cost of diesel fuel was called off this week after negotiations between the All Indian Motor Transport Congress and representatives of the Vaipayee government.

Earlier the government had sought a high court order against the strikers, claiming the industrial action was illegal and unconstitutional. The legal measures were taken after the transport system in several major states had ground to a halt as thousands of truck and bus drivers joined the strike. Details of the agreement have not been made available.

Indonesian workers stage protest

About 200 workers from the traditional herbal medicine company Jamu Sido Muncul in Semarang staged a protest outside the plant gates on Monday over a number of demands. The workers are trying to press the company to allow time during the day for them to fulfil religious obligations.

One worker said: "We held a peaceful protest here. We just want to be treated fairly and be given a proper chance to pray and enjoy our normal rights."

During the protest, scores of security personnel were turned out to guard the company's compound. The crowd of protesters dispersed peacefully after a management spokesman promised that the company would "take their demands into consideration".

Hong Kong company cuts wages

Hong Kong-based company Chevalier sacked 41 paging operators this week after they took part in a protest

against the company's attempt to reduce their wages by 40 percent. The dispute erupted earlier this month after the management gave 70 operators seven days to agree to the cut.

The company acted after the 41 workers signed a petition and addressed a press conference on Sunday denouncing the attack on wages. More than 30 new operators have already been recruited to replace the sacked workers.

New Zealand ship staff fight job losses

Engineers and officers at Pacifica Shipping in Wellington, New Zealand, announced this week that they would go on strike from November 24. The strike threat was made after the company revealed that it planned to sack its 40-strong workforce and staff its four ships with personnel drawn from a contract hiring company.

The company decided on the sackings after 13-month long negotiations with the Merchant Service Guild and the Association of Marine, Aviation and Power Engineers—the two unions covering the seaman—broke down.

The negotiations over a new work contract failed to produce the sharp cuts in pay and leave conditions that were being sought by the shipping company.

Nurses strike for wages

Hundreds of nurses employed at four hospitals in Christchurch, New Zealand, staged two-hour rolling strikes on Wednesday to press their demand for a wage increase. The stoppages affected selective surgery and other services in the Lincoln, Lydurst, Rangiora and Christchurch Women's hospitals.

The nurses are demanding a 4 percent pay increase spread over two and a half years in line with the recent pay rise offered to their colleagues at Christchurch hospital. The industrial action was called after extensive negotiations broke down and the hospital authorities refused to extend the offer.

Australian academics strike

Academics at the University of Wollongong went on strike for three days last week over pay conditions and other issues. The academics are seeking a 16.4 percent pay rise over three years with no job losses. This is line with the increase recently gained by staff at the University of Sydney.

However, the Wollongong University administration has refused to budge from its offer of 8.2 percent over three years. The management also wants to change procedures for investigating allegations of misconduct. One striker said the university management was "after the

right to sack first and ask questions later".

Postal workers oppose outsourcing

Postal drivers in Melbourne went on strike this week over plans by Australia Post to privatise Victoria's parcel delivery service. The drivers claim that more than 300 jobs will be affected if the service is outsourced.

On Wednesday some 200 drivers in Melbourne's northeast and southern metropolitan districts defied a direction from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to return to work.

Australia Post is now taking action in the Federal Court to force an end to the strike. Victoria and Tasmania are the last two states in Australia in which parcel delivery has not been privatised.

Firemen seek improved conditions

Part-time rural firefighters announced this week that they will begin campaigning for a 10-fold increase in their annual retainer to boost it from \$476 to \$4,700 a year. They are also seeking a 12 percent rise in the \$17.64 per hour they are paid while working.

A spokesperson for the firemen said the rise was justified because there were now increased training demands and the men are also expected to be permanently on call.

"They are getting paid one dollar a day to be available 24 hours a day. If there is a fire they have got to drop everything and leave their job."

Train controllers threaten strikes

Train controllers at Broadmeadow, near Newcastle, this week threatened to take industrial action over State Rail's refusal to pay an 8 percent pay rise. The Industrial Commission (IRC) had awarded the increase earlier this month.

The rise was part of a work value case prepared over the last nine months. This week State Rail announced that it would challenge the IRC's decision. The controllers are responsible for all passenger and freight rail traffic on the busy Newcastle and central coast lines.



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