

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 November 2000

South Korean medical trainees on strike

Medical trainees in South Korea intensified their campaign this week against a medical reform program after negotiations with the government broke down. Support personnel have now been withdrawn from hospital emergency rooms, intensive care units and delivery rooms.

Nearly 80 percent of the 1,800 interns and residents working in emergency areas at 90 general hospitals joined the strike by 16,000 trainees that began at the end of July. As part of the campaign, 20,000 medical students continue to boycott classes.

The trainees say that the reform program will cut services and jeopardise patient health care. They are demanding the government expand the national health insurance scheme by increasing funding from 26 percent to 50 percent.

More perish in China's mines

Rescue crews have now recovered the bodies of 13 coal miners killed in a gas explosion on November 5 in Jilin province in northeastern China that trapped 33 workers underground. Another 18 miners are still missing and feared dead.

The explosion is the latest in a string of mining disasters. Last week 13 men were killed and 27 injured in a mine fire in Jiangxi province in southern China. In October, 25 miners were killed in an explosion in northwest Gansu province. In September, 160 workers perished when a huge gas explosion ripped apart a state-owned mine in southwest Guizhou province.

Nurses in Sri Lanka strike over back pay

Nurses at the government-owned Vavunia hospital in Sri Lanka went on a strike on November 7 to demand the payment of overtime entitlements for the past five months. Last month hospital authorities agreed to pay two months arrears within two weeks and the rest within a month, but failed to keep the promise. The strike follows a three-hour walkout the previous day. The nurses say

they are determined to continue the campaign until they are paid.

Sri Lankan engineering workers protest suspension of union leader

Workers at Elastomeric Engineering Company in Bokundara, Colombo staged a number of lunch-hour demonstrations in front of the factory last week. They are demanding the immediate reinstatement of the branch secretary of the Inter-company Workers Union (ICWU) who was suspended for organising action against planned increases to workloads.

Other workers have been victimised for opposing management's plans, including Sarath Kumara and Krishantha Jayasinghe, both members of the Socialist Equality Party in Sri Lanka, who were suspended last month. A campaign waged by the SEP forced the company to reinstate Krishantha.

Last year the ICWU, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), shut down a wage struggle and agreed to maintain industrial peace in the plant. The deal has strengthened the hand of management and led to the victimisations.

Indian health care workers begin strike

Thousands of rural health care workers, mainly women, in the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh began a three-day strike on Wednesday. The state president of the Anganwadi Workers Association said the protest had been called over the non-payment of wages and the refusal of health officials to protect workers from sexual harassment. They have presented 11 other demands concerning working conditions.

Some of the workers had not been paid for the last 12 months and many complain that their families are on the brink of starvation. The workers have previously had to take similar action to force the payment of outstanding wages.

Indian bank workers protest against privatisation

Hundreds of bank workers in the Indian city of Kanpur

demonstrated outside the branches of the State Bank of Bikaner and the Bank of Jaipur against proposals to privatise banks and force workers to take voluntary redundancy.

The government plans to introduce a bill into parliament reducing its equity in public sector banks from 51 to 33 percent. It has reduced the retirement age for bank workers from 60 to 58 years in order to cut staff numbers.

Bank workers have threatened to strike indefinitely if the plans are not dropped and the retirement age restored to the previous level.

Indian postal workers to strike

Three major unions representing over 6,000 Indian postal employees have endorsed an indefinite strike from December 5. The decision was made on Monday following the government's refusal to honour an agreement for pay increases and to implement an industrial court's determination on the use of casual labour.

Australian steelworkers take strike action

Over 5,000 workers at BHP's Port Kembla steel plant on the New South Wales South Coast walked off the job for 24 hours on November 9 in protest against the company's plans to outsource maintenance work. It is estimated that the change will cost up to 1,000 jobs. The company has threatened to end further capital investment in the plant if workers continue to oppose outsourcing.

The outsourcing at Port Kembla is part of BHP's overall strategy to shed its steelmaking facilities and to concentrate on investment in the more profitable mineral and petroleum sector. In 1999 the company closed its Newcastle steel plant shedding more than 3,000 jobs and downsized the workforce at its Whyalla plant in South Australia. Earlier this year the company spun off several smaller steel operations, including a stainless steel production unit in Port Kembla.

More than 3,000 workers at a mass meeting endorsed a union resolution to begin a "community, political and industrial campaign" if negotiations with the management fail to resolve the issue. The unions threatened a similar campaign prior to the Newcastle closure but instead oversaw the "orderly shutdown" of the plant.

University workers continue strike action

Staff and workers at Western Sydney University campuses in NSW took further strike action and mounted pickets on November 9. This is the second work stoppage in just over a week and is part of an ongoing campaign against a restructuring plan that staff claim will result in the loss of 250 jobs. Campuses at Blacktown, Bankstown,

Werrington, Kingswood, Campbelltown, Parramatta and Richmond were shut down with many students joining staff on the picket lines.

Security guards end strike action

Security guards in Melbourne ended a seven-day strike on November 4 after the companies involved agreed to renew talks over pay and safety conditions. The workers are concerned about plans to reduce the size of crews manning cash trucks from three to two. The 370 guards walked off the job when protracted negotiations broke down. The guards are employed by Armaguard and Chubb Security to re-cash automatic teller machines.

New Caledonia health workers strike over conditions

Health workers in the French Pacific territory of New Caledonia began indefinite strike action on Wednesday over the state of the facilities in the main hospital in the capital Noumea, which they say are in a rundown, dilapidated condition. The workers warn that bad conditions and staff shortages are having an adverse affect on the health of both patients and staff. The strike involves members of seven different unions, and includes doctors, nurses and ancillary workers.

PNG drivers stop work over police abuse

About 300 PMV (Public Motor Vehicle) operators in Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea stopped work for one hour on Tuesday afternoon and held a meeting with government officials and police.

The drivers complained they are being abused and harassed by police attempting to extort money from them at roadblocks. Police officials attending the meeting claim that if the drivers identify the police involved they would investigate the allegations.

The operators said that they cannot survive on their present income because of increased fuel costs. The Assistant Director of Road Safety promised to consider a submission for a 40 percent fare increase. Drivers say, however, that even if fares are increased it will make little difference as most passengers are unable to pay the current fare.



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