

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 November 2000

Workers clash with police in Seoul

Police in South Korea clashed with demonstrators in Seoul on November 12 as 20,000 workers took to the streets to oppose the government's restructuring plans that will destroy thousands more jobs. Violence erupted when contingents of riot police armed with batons and shields formed a human barricade across a main street to block and disperse the demonstration.

Chanting "No layoffs" and "Down with President Kim Dae Jung," workers used stones, steel pipes and fireworks in repeated attempts to break through the police cordon. At one point three protestors carrying a metre-high gas container rushed toward the cordon and threatened to ignite it in an attempt to stop the police from severely beating a number of workers. The battle raged for several hours and over 100 demonstrators were injured.

The protest was organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, the country's second largest trade union body. Speaking at a rally before the clash took place, union leaders told the crowd they would stage a partial strike on December 4, followed by a four-day general strike, if the government did not end layoffs. Loud cheers greeted the call for a general strike.

Last week KCTU officials boycotted a meeting of the Tripartite Commission, a body comprising government, employer and union officials established by the government to oversee restructuring. For years the unions have sat on the Commission assisting the government to implement its "reforms".

Kim Dae Jung this week confirmed that 50,000 workers will be laid off by the end of the year when the government is scheduled to complete its restructuring of the financial and corporate sector. Major creditor banks have already announced the liquidation of 18 companies and placed 11 others in receivership. Daewoo Motors, the country's second largest carmaker, has been declared bankrupt and will lay off 19,000 workers at its Korean plants over the next eight weeks.

Thai teachers lobby candidates

Fifty teachers, members of the National Teachers Union, staged a protest during the registration of political party candidates in Bangkok on November 15. The teachers attempted to serve copies of a petition on party leaders demanding a review of the government's education decentralisation program.

The petition claimed that most local authorities were not capable of shouldering the responsibility for schools and that education standards and teachers' working conditions would suffer.

Akarapol Truektrong, the leader of the District Primary Education Association of Thailand, said none of the political parties contesting the forthcoming national election had opposed the decentralisation policy.

The teachers marched to the National Education Reform Office and demanded that its new office chairman, Pratchaya Vessarat, answer questions on the government's policy.

Police attack Philippines transit workers

On November 15 about 100 members of the Piglas union stormed onto the Light Rail Transit (LRT) track at the Baclaran station, Pasay City, and prevented morning peak hour trains running by placing concrete blocks on the tracks. Ten of the protestors were injured and 15 were arrested when more than 100 police attempted to break up the protest and remove the barricades. The police have filed sedition and economic sabotage charges against 10 of those detained.

The protestors included former transit employees who were sacked in July after a week-long strike over the government's plan to privatise the LRT and sack 900 employees. They were demanding the reinstatement of the strikers, wage increases for all LRT workers and no privatisation.

Gas explosion kills 15 Chinese miners

On November 12 two gas explosions ripped through a privately-owned coal mine in southern Guangxi province, killing 15 miners and injuring 10 others. The first blast occurred as eight miners were transporting coal to the surface, hurling them toward the mouth of the 100-metre deep shaft. A second explosion followed minutes later. The authorities said the mine's owner had ignored safety regulations.

In the face of a mounting death toll in the country's mines, including major disasters over the last two months, the central government has been forced to enact new safety regulations, due to commence on December 1. However, local government authorities, many of them involved in the operation of mines themselves, regularly refuse to enforce the existing regulations and accept payment to allow unlicensed mines to operate. In the large state-owned mines, safety regulations are flouted to meet production targets, resulting in multiple deaths and injuries.

Nepal hotel workers strike postponed

A strike by hotel workers in Nepal scheduled to begin on November 19 was postponed to December 11 following talks between union leaders and government officials. The strike threat emerged on November 11 after representatives of the Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) refused to discuss a demand by workers for a 10 percent service charge. HAN threatened to close hotels and lock out staff if the workers did not withdraw their demand. A union spokesman warned that if the workers' demand were not met within the next month, the strike would go ahead, halting all service at hotels.

Pakistan doctors strike to reinstate their colleagues

Doctors at the Civil Hospital Quetta (CHQ) in Balochistan province went on strike on November 12 to demand that 255 of their colleagues suspended at the end of October be reinstated and made permanent.

The doctors were suspended after their three-year contract period came to an end. They were instructed to appear for an exam at the Balochistan Public Service Commission to obtain further employment.

The strike, called by the Pakistan Medical Association, has closed services in all departments at the hospital except casualty. In addition, five doctors began a hunger strike, leading to two of them being admitted to hospital in a critical condition.

The provincial government sent a heavy contingent of police to the hospital in an attempt to intimidate the striking doctors but the strikers say they will continue the action until their demands are met.

Indian bank workers in national strike against privatisation

The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), an umbrella body of nine unions, held a one-day nationwide strike on November 15 against the central government's plans to privatise banks. The strikers were joined by thousands of workers from the state-owned Life Insurance Corporation and General Insurance Corporation, who walked out for two hours.

In Mumbai, over 5,000 employees protested outside the local headquarters of the State Bank. Similar demonstrations involving thousands of workers were staged at head offices and bank branches throughout the country.

The strike action was provoked by the government's decision to introduce a bill in the winter session of parliament to reduce its equity in state-run banks from 51 percent to 33 percent, paving the way for an eventual sell off. The UFBU has announced a mass rally and march on parliament for November 28.

Indian oil unions call off campaign

Unions covering workers in the Indian Oil Corporation called off a long-running wages dispute before a two-day strike due to begin on November 16. Union leaders scotched the strike after the company's management agreed to recommence negotiations on wages and related issues. The oil workers had been engaged in a work to rule campaign since the beginning of this month, affecting petroleum supplies to the north and east of the country.

STP workers strike over entitlements

Sixty workers at the steel manufacturing company, Steel Tank and Pipe (STP), at Newcastle, Australia, went on strike on November 10 and began picketing the factory gate after learning that the company had been put into receivership. A picket has also been established outside a Merewether Beach mansion owned by one of the employers.

The Newcastle workers, together with 90 employees in other states, face losing \$3.3 million in entitlements, including holiday pay and long service leave payments. When STP went into receivership on November 3 it was discovered that 150 out of 240 workers in four states, including the Newcastle workforce, were employed by five separate shelf companies that had no assets.

STP owners Stephen and Brad Weeks bought the company from their mother in 1989 following the death of their father. The mother is owed \$1 million and is a secured creditor. Other secured creditors include the National Australia Bank that is owed \$10 million and a Malaysian company believed to be owned by the Weeks brothers themselves.

Price Waterhouse Coopers, the appointed receiver, said it had begun an investigation into the "extremely complex corporate structure" of the company to find out why shelf companies were set up as the workers' employers.

Despite promises by the unions last year to launch a campaign to secure workers' entitlements, nothing has been done. Over the last three years an increasing number of companies have folded, owing

millions of dollars to their employees. The list includes the Oakdale coal mine, Cobar mining, Fresh Meats at Scone and National Textiles at Rutherford.

Company closes after locking out workers

In the wake of a lockout of 100 workers at the Qenos refinery in Altona, Melbourne, last month, the management served notice this week that it intends to shut the plant at the cost of 120 jobs. The workers were locked out for taking action over the lack of safety and under-staffing at the plant.

A Qenos spokesperson claimed that the lockout of members of the National Workers Union (NUW) had "merely brought forward the decision to close" due to growing international competition.

NUW secretary Charles Donnelly said Qenos had "conned" its workforce by forcing them to accept an enterprise bargaining agreement prior to announcing the job losses. Qenos, a joint venture between Orica and Exxon, produces rubber and low-density polyethylene.

PNG workers protest privatisation

On November 13 workers in some provinces of Papua New Guinea began staging protest rallies opposing the government's plans to privatise state-owned industries. The protests are being organised by the PNG Trade Union Council and affiliated unions. In Lae protestors forced the closure of businesses and some shops were damaged. Workers in Port Moresby, unable to get a police permit to march on Parliament House, are holding daily rallies at the Sir John Guise Stadium.

New Zealand firefighters ban overtime

Resolutions by firefighters to ban overtime have spread around New Zealand during the past week following a call from Christchurch members of the Professional Firefighters Union. The action is in response to an e-mail from Christchurch district chief fire officer Steve Barclay to Fire Service human resources manager Vince Arbuckle. Barclay proposed to slash firefighters' overtime in an effort to force them to find better paying employment.

Barclay wrote that professional firefighters were motivated by greed. He claimed that a policy of filling roster gaps with new recruits had the union "running scared". So far, fire fighters in Dunedin, Invercargill, Hawkes Bay and Palmerston North have held stopwork meetings and endorsed the overtime ban call.

The union's Christchurch secretary, Denis FitzMaurice, said his fax "had run red hot" with letters of support from fire stations around the country. Christchurch union members also passed a vote of no confidence in Barclay and said they would not participate on working groups or committees.

A pay dispute between firefighters and the Fire Services Commission has been running for five and a half years leading to a series of bitter conflicts between firefighters and their employing authority. Recently the Labour-Alliance Government entered the dispute to try to force a settlement but has so far failed to do so.



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