

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 November 2000

South Korean strikes and rallies continue

An estimated 30,000 members of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) held a march on November 19 in Yoido to protest against the government's restructuring program, which recently saw carmaker Daewoo declared bankrupt. The previous week, armed police violently attacked a march by 20,000 workers.

The Yoido rally endorsed a resolution demanding the government legislate to protect the conditions of day labourers, reduce working hours without wage cuts, and guarantee the livelihoods of workers in bankrupt businesses. Workers from the Korea Electric Power Company and National Railroad stopped work on November 22 to attend rallies against restructuring. Construction workers will strike on November 29, metal workers on November 30 and financial sector clerical staff on December 4.

The FKTU, the country's largest peak union body, is set to vote on Monday on a general strike in early December. FKTU leaders agreed to meet government officials and business leaders over the weekend, however, in an attempt reach a settlement.

Indian university teachers demand improved conditions

University teachers in India have been involved in protests over the promotions system and for improved working conditions. On November 22 members of the Delhi University Teachers Association, supported by three other national teachers' organisations, staged a rally and one-day hunger strike outside the University Grants Commission.

They demanded greater access to promotion, payment of unpaid wages and wage parity with other university staff. They are also seeking increased education funding and a halt to government bodies determining university promotion criteria.

The previous day, the Indira Gandhi National Open University Officers Association went on "mass leave" to protest against the promotion system and also threatened a hunger strike.

Sri Lankan volunteer teachers campaign for permanent jobs

Volunteer teachers in the war-torn Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka are continuing a hunger strike they began on November 7 in front of the provincial educational office in Trincomalee. The teachers are demanding job permanency.

Last month 400 casual teachers were made permanent as a result of an earlier protest campaign. However, 1,100 volunteer teachers, with years of service, are still being denied permanent positions, depriving them of basic benefits received by other teaching staff.

UniLever workers demand permanency

More than 400 casual workers at UniLever in Sri Lanka staged a lunch-hour demonstration on one of Colombo's main streets on November 21 demanding job permanency.

Although they have worked for the company for 10 years they are still employed as casuals on a daily wage of only 155 rupees (nearly

US\$2). They are not entitled to benefits such as medical and annual leave, nor covered by the Employees Provident Fund and Employees Trust Fund.

Cotton mill workers reject speedup

Workers at the Asian Cotton Mills in the Ratmalana Industrial Zone, 15 km from Colombo, have voted to reject a management program aimed at driving up productivity through increased workloads and speedup. The company produces yarn for the textile industry.

The workers attended a meeting of the Company Workers Union (ICWU) and refused a management demand that they increase the number of machines operated by each worker from two to four, overturning the union's proposal that they comply with the new arrangement. Workers said that for doing the work of two men they should be paid an extra 3,000 rupees (\$US37) but the company refused the demand.

The management is demanding a range of other concessions, including the end of shift allowances on Sundays and the right to allocate holidays in accordance with production requirements.

The meeting endorsed a resolution demanding the union break the existing collective work agreement. The leadership of the ICWU, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), ruled out calling a strike, saying that the action "was not appropriate" because of the present political situation in the country.

The management has retaliated by withdrawing the nine minutes grace period for reporting to work and has threatened to take back a recent 400-rupee (\$5) wage increase.

The factory had 570 workers about two years ago but the workforce has been halved through a forced retirement scheme. Under the scheme workers with five years' service received only 30,000 rupees (\$375). The ICWU leadership collaborated with the management to convince workers to take the package.

Indonesian mini-bus drivers stage protest

Hundreds of public mini-bus drivers staged a demonstration in East Jakarta on November 20 to protest the unlicensed operation of mini-buses and vans on the Tanjung Priok-Pulogadung service route.

The drivers pushed two illegal minivans into a ditch and damaged several others. The two vans belonged to PT Metro Mini, while the others were vehicles owned by individual operators without licenses to carry passengers.

During the protest, the drivers blocked vehicles from entering or leaving Jakarta's busiest inter-city bus terminal and parked 60 buses on the main highway, causing a traffic jam.

They demanded that the city administration ban all unlicensed vehicles carrying passengers to and from Pulogadung terminal and the manufacturing complex of Nusantara Integrated Zone in North Jakarta.

Australian Wattyl employees stage sit-in

Eighty employees at the Wattyl paint manufacturing plant in the western Sydney suburb of Blacktown began a sit-in this week after the company threatened them with a lockout. The action has been supported by sit-ins at Wattyl factories in four other states.

The lockout threat occurred when the Blacktown workforce imposed work bans, in line with a national campaign by members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, for a pay increase in the paint manufacturing industry. Workers responded by refusing to leave the premises. The sit-ins are expected to continue until the end of next week.

The national campaign, involving 700 workers at eight manufacturing sites, was launched after three months of negotiations for an enterprise agreement failed to produce a satisfactory result.

A union spokesman said workers at Wattyl's 28 trade stores would take industrial action before the end of the week, including work bans and limitations. They have begun wearing badges with the logo "Wattyl we do for a pay rise?" Wattyl is the biggest employer of paint manufacturing workers in Australia.

Victorian Labor Premier threatens truck drivers

Around 60 owner-truck drivers ended a two-day blockade of key oil refineries and the docks in Melbourne on November 20 without any resolution of their outstanding claims. Victorian Premier Steve Bracks invoked the Fuel Emergency Act, ordering the owner-drivers to desist from any action to disrupt fuel supplies.

The truck drivers say the current rates and increased fuel costs are forcing drivers to drive longer shifts and skip on maintenance of trucks, placing themselves and other road users at risk. They are demanding a standardised cartage rate and an inflation index to offset rising fuel costs.

At the end of September Bracks intervened to end a truck blockade of the state's oil terminals, promising that he would press the federal government at the November Premiers Conference to cut the fuel excise by 2.5 cents a litre. Prime Minister John Howard ruled out the suggestion, however.

Council workers strike over outsourcing

More than 500 employees from the Moreland City Council in the inner northern region of Melbourne, walked off the job on November 22 over the Council's plan to outsource a number of services.

The workers are concerned about job security, pay and conditions. Bans have been placed on rubbish collection, cleaning and other public health services. The strike and bans affect services of up to 134,000 residents.

Building workers strike over training and safety

About 100 building workers at the St Vincent's Hospital site at Darlinghurst, Sydney voted on November 22 to support a 24-hour strike over training and safety problems in the building industry.

The action is part of a planned campaign of rolling stoppages on state government building sites over the next weeks. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union secretary Andrew Ferguson said the union hoped the stoppages would persuade the NSW Labor government to introduce a training levy to help apprentices in the building industry.

Since the Olympics construction boom ended, scores of apprentices have been laid off. Over the last 10 years there has been a 45 percent reduction in building apprenticeship enrolments.

Building workers are also concerned about government plans to lower minimum qualifications for first aid workers in the construction industry.

Miners stop work over wage rise

Over 250 miners working BHP's Tower, Appin and Cordeaux coal mines on the NSW South Coast struck last week for 12 hours as part of a long running pay dispute. The union is seeking further negotiations with BHP for a 15 percent pay increase over two years after workers last week rejected a revised pay offer from the company of \$12.

A state Industrial Relations Commission hearing into a BHP application to terminate existing work agreements, which would result in an immediate drop in pay, is due to resume in about two weeks.

Last week the company announced plans to close the Cordeaux mine next March claiming it has limited coal reserves and high recovery costs. The closure would eliminate about 50 jobs. A union spokesman said the company had threatened the closure because miners had refused to accept its wages offer. The union has offered to accept 23 layoffs at the Tower mine as part of the new enterprise work agreement.

Bus drivers strike over safety

Bus drivers in Perth, Western Australia, went on strike on November 20 and set up picket lines at some city depots to protest breaches of safety procedures. The 208 drivers are employed by PerthBus, which runs services to all of Perth's universities, hospitals and some high schools in the city's outer suburbs.

Drivers claim that a female driver, who was assaulted by a passenger, was told by her supervisor to finish her shift. The police were not contacted about the incident until the woman's shift was over. The police are usually contacted immediately if a security incident occurs and in most cases they go to the bus and assist the driver. Management has overruled this procedure.

There have been other serious security breaches. Some weeks ago a driver who had just started his shift found a leaking container labelled "bio-hazardous waste" in his bus. The driver immediately reported the waste to his supervisor who removed the leaking bag, allowing it to drip the length of the bus before disposing of it in a rubbish bin. The supervisor instructed the driver to start his shift even though the bus could have been contaminated.

The drivers returned to work on November 21 after the dispute was sent to arbitration.



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