

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 October 2001

Police break factory occupation in Sri Lanka

A five-day factory occupation by 650 workers at Ocean Lanka, a cloth plant in the Biyagama Export Processing Zone, was broken by police on October 6. Biyagama, about 15 kilometres from Colombo, is the second largest free trade zone in Sri Lanka.

The workers occupied the plant on October 1 after months of stalled negotiations over a pay rise. Ocean Lanka management demanded a 60 percent increase in production last year as a precondition for talks. Although the workers met the target, management refused to honour its promise.

On October 4 the company sent letters to workers charging them with striking without a just cause, holding an illegal meeting and disrupting production. The management then cut off water and food supplies and called in police to force the workers from the plant.

In negotiations with unions this week, Ocean Lanka has ruled out any pay rise, claiming the company has lost markets due to the domestic and international economic downturn. The monthly wage of Ocean Lanka workers is just 3,760 rupees (\$US44). They work strenuous 12-hour shifts in unsafe conditions. Many suffer from hernias and back pain. The lack of adequate ventilation in the plant has triggered asthma among the workforce.

Hospital staff stop work

Hospital staff at eight government hospitals in the Trincomalee district of eastern Sri Lanka, including doctors, nurses and auxiliary and administration, stopped work on October 8, demanding the immediate transfer of the district medical officer (DMO) of the Kantale Base Hospital. Kantale is a rural town in the district. All services at the hospitals, except for emergency services, came to standstill because of the strike.

The workers allege that the official, backed by the provincial secretary of the Health Ministry and politicians of the ruling Peoples Alliance, oversees a system of intimidation that includes verbal abuse, forced transfers and pay penalties.

According to a spokesperson for the Joint Council of State Sector Health Services Unions, the health ministry conducted an investigation two months ago into the abusive actions of two DMO officials but nothing was done. "If the health authorities failed to take action against them in a week we will extend our campaign to the entire North-East province," he said.

Union ends health workers strike

Union leaders called off a strike on October 6 by 2,000 members of the Professions Supplementary to Medicine, including pharmacists, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, medical laboratory technologists and radiographers. The health workers struck on October 3 to press for a log of 14 claims, including the removal of salary anomalies, improved training and increased on-call allowances.

While the union accepted a Health Ministry assurance that the government would "provide immediate solutions to the demands," many rank and file unionists are sceptical. One physiotherapist working at the National Hospital of Sri Lanka said: "We have been deceived by the government several times."

South Korean teachers rally

About 25,000 members of the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union participated in protests this week to oppose the government's education policies.

Rallies in 16 cities and regions called on the government to improve conditions for public teachers and withdraw plans to boost funding to private high schools. One teacher told the press: "Private high schools only benefit a few selected students and neglect the majority of students, which violates equal rights to education." The teachers endorsed a motion to stage a mass leave of absence later this month if the Education Ministry rejects their demands.

A government official warned that action might be taken against teachers who took part in the protest. "It still is early to talk about any penalties against those who participated, but punishments such as warnings or dismissals are possible," he said.

Doosan workers strike

Over 1,700 workers at Doosan Heavy Industries, South Korea's largest manufacturer of power generating equipment, struck on October 10. Previously the state-owned Hanjung corporation, the company was sold in January to the Doosan Group, which is now restructuring its operations, including the sale of divisions such as the paint department.

Workers fear large-scale job losses. A spokesman said: "We will be striking through this week as the management ignored its earlier promise not to spin off supporting divisions." Doosan Heavy Industries has a workforce of 6,350 but only 4,000 are members of the company union.

Protests by Indonesian transport workers

About 60 striking employees from PT Terang Anugerah Andalas Transportasi in Banten province protested on October 5 against the management's use of thugs to prevent them from entering the firm's compound. The workers began industrial action two weeks ago for a transportation and meal allowance and improved overtime pay.

Sacked Filipino workers denied entitlements

Over 330 workers laid off by shoemaker Filcon Manufacturing in the Philippines have begun a protest campaign to fight for severance pay entitlements. The company, one of the largest in Marikina City, went into liquidation on September 5. The entire workforce was sacked one month later.

Under the collective bargaining agreement, workers should receive the standard separation pay, plus 30 days pay for each year of service.

The company is only offering 13 days pay for each year of service, plus a sack of rice and a “Christmas pack”.

Hong Kong rally against privatisation

Over 1,000 workers and youth rallied on October 6 in central Hong Kong to protest against the privatisation of government departments and enterprises that has resulted in large job losses. The demonstrators presented a petition to government officials, signed by over 10,000 people, opposing the job-cutting and demanding stable employment. A spokesman for the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions said: “We want the government to increase public spending and create 20,000 jobs this year.”

Pakistan sugar mill workers threaten strike action

The Seri Sugar Mill Workers Union has announced its members will strike on October 17 if the mill management rejects their demand to make the workforce permanent. Union leaders announced the decision at a press conference in Hyderabad on October 8.

According to the union, only 103 out of a workforce of 1,200 have been made permanent. All other workers are hired on a daily basis, allowing the management to avoid providing conditions stipulated by labour laws. A union spokesman said: “All the labour laws have been violated by the mill management. Workers have not even got basic facilities while the mill has been getting good production and earning big profits for the last six years.”

Australian building workers rally outside inquiry

Over 7,000 construction workers rallied in Melbourne on October 9 at the opening of the federal government’s royal commission into alleged corruption within building industry companies and unions. Workers marched on the Telstra building in Collins Street, the site of the inquiry, arriving shortly after 10.30am. Mounted police patrolled the streets, while dozens more police officers cordoned off the entrance to the venue.

The workers carried banners denouncing the inquiry as an election stunt by the Howard Liberal government. Other banners proclaimed: “We built this city”. An inflatable kangaroo carried the message “kangaroo court”. The protest ended when union officials directed workers to return to work for the remainder of the day.

The Howard government, which has called an election for November 10, announced the inquiry earlier this year. It claims there is widespread union violence and corruption in the industry, but has provided no concrete evidence.

The pretext for the inquiry was provided by the national leadership of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, in the course of an intra-union dispute with union officials in Western Australia. The national office alleged there had been incidents of violence by members of the state branch and called for an investigation by the National Crime Authority.

Queensland council workers continue work bans

Council workers in Sarina, Queensland, voted this week to continue a campaign of work bans for a pay rise and the introduction of new conditions governing the use of contract and casual workers. The workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase above the basic award level, plus regular cost of living “safety net” adjustments.

Sarina Council has offered an 8 percent increase with a \$40 once-off “safety net” payment, which workers rejected as inadequate at a meeting on October 11.

Nurses vote for strike

Nurses at the St George, Sutherland and Garrawarra public hospitals in Sydney held meetings over the past six days and overwhelmingly voted to join a nine-hour statewide nurses’ strike on

October 18. The nurses will rally at Sydney Town Hall to protest poor working conditions and the refusal of the state Labor government to address staff shortages.

Nurses at Sutherland stopped work on October 5 to stage a two-hour rally in support of the campaign. Nurses spoke of bed shortages that resulted in sick patients being left on trolleys in corridors for extended periods. One nurse told the rally that her section did not have any senior staff to train her. “I can’t maintain safety if there is no-one to teach me,” she said.

New Zealand teachers begin industrial campaign

New Zealand’s 14,000 secondary teachers took strike action on October 11 as part of a long-running dispute with the Labour-Alliance government over pay and conditions. Rallies and marches involving hundreds of teachers were held in many of the country’s main cities and provincial centres.

The campaign of industrial action was overwhelmingly approved at a series of recent stopwork meetings. From next week, teachers will begin a series of rolling stoppages and work restrictions on the implementation of a new national qualifications system.

Teachers are demanding a pay increase of \$2,500 per year for the next three years, plus time for lesson preparation and marking to be included in a new employment contract. The Labour-led government, which has opposed these demands, wants secondary teachers to accept the same 2 percent pay rise agreed to by the primary teachers’ union. Education Minister Trevor Mallard denounced the strike, claiming it was “deliberately timed” to affect students preparing for final examinations.

Sacked PNG poultry workers petition for entitlements

About 150 former employees of Ilimo Poultry Products are petitioning the Investment Corporation Fund of Papua New Guinea (ICFPNG) to demand the bankrupt company pay their severance entitlements.

The company was officially closed on October 4. The ICFPNG is the sole owner, but claims that it is only a shareholder and therefore not liable for the company’s debts. The company liquidator is insisting that both the ICFPNG and the major creditor, the PNG Banking Corporation, assist in settling the claim.



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