

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 October 2001

Police forced to release arrested Chinese workers

Over 1,000 workers laid-off by the bankrupt Liaoyang City Ferro-Alloy Factory in China's northern Liaoning province blockaded a major highway on October 19 to force the release of five representatives arrested by police the day before. According to reports by a Hong Kong human rights group, the five were organising petitions, to be presented to the city, provincial and central governments denouncing the closure of the 52-year-old factory.

In an attempt to ease tensions, police released the five. The workers' grievances remain, however. A total of 4,000 former employees of the factory are owed large amounts in outstanding wages. One told the Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights and Democracy: "We have only been paid intermittently since 1994 and the wages they owe us amount to tens of millions of yuan. The managers also pocketed our contributions to medical and unemployment insurance."

The workers claim that hundreds of police officers and paramilitary were deployed to "supervise" the vote over whether the factory should be closed last year. Under these conditions the majority had voted in favour. A workers' spokesman said: "It was white terror and it violated the legal procedures to wind up a factory." Unemployment in Liaoyang province is over 25 percent due to the closure of thousands of state-owned companies.

South Korean teachers hold second rally

Teachers in South Korea will hold a protest rally on October 27 against government plans to introduce performance-based bonus schemes, contract employment and a new curriculum. The teachers are also demanding the government drop a proposal to increase funding to private high schools.

The teachers' union said it expected about 20,000 teachers to attend a mass rally in Yeouido Park in Seoul. It will be the second time this month that teachers have taken national industrial action.

Deputy Prime Minister for Education Han Wan-sang condemned the teachers' actions as "irresponsible" and "unlawful". A spokesman for the Korean Teachers and Educational Worker's Union assured the minister that the union had instructed its members to reschedule their Saturday classes. "We will not be disturbing any schoolwork," he said.

Indian bus workers continue their strike

A strike by 130,000 transport workers from the state-owned Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation has entered its second week, keeping 19,000 buses off the road. The strike over a wage claim erupted on October 15. Members of the Centre for

Indian Trade Unions (CITU) rallied in the state's capital Hyderabad on October 21 in support of the striking bus workers.

Even though the Joint Action Committee of RTC workers has scaled down the wage demand, the government has rejected any compromise and has recruited 1,800 casual transport employees in an attempt to break the strike. Police have baton charged workers' picket lines preventing scab buses leaving depots. Hundreds of workers have been injured and at least 274 strikers and their supporters arrested.

Sri Lankan bus workers strike against thug attack

Employees at the part government-owned Matugama bus depot, 70 kilometres south of Colombo, struck on October 23 over a thug attack on two workers.

According to witnesses, a gang of men, accompanied by a member of the Matugama local council, came to the depot and attacked a bus conductor and driver. Both workers were severely beaten and had to be hospitalised. The attackers claimed the workers had been involved in a traffic incident with a council bus the day before.

The strikers are demanding legal action against the thugs. "If not, then we will continue our strike and spread it to other bus depots," a spokesman said.

Australian steel workers strike over new wage agreement

Up to 6,000 workers at BHP's Port Kembla steelworks on the NSW south coast walked off the job for 24 hours on October 23 for 24 hours, after negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement broke down. A union spokesman said that mass meetings around the country had rejected the company's latest wage offer of a 6-percent increase over two years as "totally inadequate and an insult".

The meetings gave delegates a mandate to call national industrial action if the wages issue is not resolved within 10 days and if BHP "attempts to roll back existing conditions", such as cutting a quarterly and annual bonus system.

Aged-care nurses fight for staff increase

Aged-care nurses voted last week to ban new admissions to Victoria's 300 private and non-profit aged-care nursing homes. They will refuse to work unpaid overtime or perform non-nursing tasks, such as washing linen and cooking.

The nurses are demanding an increase in trained staff. The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) estimated that only 15 percent of homes met appropriate staffing criteria and that many nurses were working 16-hour shifts. They are also demanding the Federal government provide extra funding to close the 20 percent

wage gap between private and public aged-care nurses.

This week the ANF released the results of a phone survey which found 85 percent of families and aged-care staff were concerned about inadequate staffing levels and 67 percent identified a decline in care standards.

Building workers oppose investigation

Over 8,000 building workers in Victoria attended a stopwork meeting at Melbourne's Rod Laver arena on October 24 to hear a report on the government's royal commission into alleged union violence and corruption in the construction industry. The Howard Liberal government announced the inquiry earlier this year.

The meeting unanimously condemned the commission as a "politically-motivated witchhunt" and rejected any union cooperation with the investigation. The meeting also voted to raise a \$3 million "fighting fund". Union officials made clear, however, that the fund would not be used to cover fines imposed on workers for industrial action or to cover their legal expenses.

Feltex workers take strike action

Carpet workers at Feltex Industries in Tottenham, Victoria, struck on October 24, after year-long negotiations with the company over an enterprise agreement broke down. Workers at the main plant and two storage depots have called on Feltex to introduce a union-backed trust fund to cover entitlements in the event of a company collapse. Many workers have between 20 to 30 years service with tens of thousands of dollars in accrued long-service leave and holiday pay.

The company, a merger of New Zealand-based Feltex and US-owned Shaw Industries, has offered a pay rise of only 4 percent over two and a half years and will not agree to the trust fund.

Previous enterprise agreements have cut the workforce from 900 in 1993 to just 500 today. Productivity at the plant has increased five-fold during the same period. This speedup has led to an increase in work injuries. Textile work is extremely poorly paid, with most Feltex workers earning only \$400 a week.

Building workers continue strike over health risk

Building workers are continuing strike action at the former Fairfield Infectious Diseases Hospital building site in Melbourne. The strike began in September, after vials contaminated with contagious material were found in a building the workers were demolishing.

The first vial was found last November. Tests have revealed that it contained E-coli, as well as listeria monocytogenes, which can cause meningitis and encephalitis. Listeria monocytogenes is the bacteria responsible for listeriosis, which produces fever, bacteremia, malaise and lethargy, and can be fatal.

A union spokesman said that up to 100 workers may have been infected through direct contact with the bacteria or by inhalation of contaminated dust. Only 30 to 40 workers have been tested because they have to pay for the procedure out of their own pocket.

Council workers continue bans

Council workers in Sarina, near Mackay in northern Queensland, held a stop-work meeting on October 25. They are campaigning for a 10 percent pay increase, regular cost of living adjustments and new conditions regulating the use of contract and casual labour. The workers invited local residents to attend the meeting.

The Sarina Council has refused to increase its offer of an 8 percent pay increase with a \$40 one-off payment. Workers have already rejected this as "inadequate" and are maintaining a series of industrial bans they imposed earlier this month.

New Zealand university staff reject pay offer

Academic staff at the Victoria University in Wellington are poised to strike after rejecting a 1.8 percent wage offer. A spokesman for the staff said last week that the offer, similar to pay increases in other universities, was well below the current inflation rate of 2.4 percent and was "simply pathetic".

The vice-chancellor claims that reductions in government funding prevents the university offering more. Government funding has dropped by \$2,500 per student in the past 10 years, or a total of \$30 million annually. This year, the university was forced to accept a 2.8 percent funding increase in return for freezing student fees at last year's levels.

The Association of University Staff says academics want an 8 percent pay rise per annum for the next three years. Staff at Lincoln University have rejected a 1.5 percent offer. Talks are currently underway at Massey, Auckland, Canterbury, Waikato and Otago universities.

New Zealand school boards defy minister

New Zealand's 14,000 secondary teachers have begun a campaign of rolling stoppages, including refusing to teach certain class levels each day. Teachers have voted to continue the action until the end of the school term, in protest over the Labour government's refusal to agree to a new contract covering pay rates and workloads.

The Wellington College Board, which is made up of elected parent trustees, said last week that it would defy the demands of the minister and keep paying staff, even when involved in industrial action. He said the board shared "the concerns that teachers have about issues affecting the teaching profession". About 100 out of 450 secondary school boards across the country have voted to take the same action.



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