

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 November 2001

Indian transport workers strike over festival bonus

Thousands of workers employed by the State Transport Corporation of Tamil Nadu in south India, walked off the job on November 8 in protest over cuts to their Deepavalee festival bonus. Deepavalee is an annual Hindu religious festival and holiday and workers normally receive a bonus equal to 20 percent of their wage. This year the Tamil Nadu state government declared it would only pay 8.33 percent.

The government and the transport corporation have hired casual workers and private transport companies in an attempt to maintain services and break the strike. Over 11,000 workers have been arrested and more than 5,000 jailed since clashes with the police began last weekend. Hundreds of family members and supporters have joined pickets at bus depots and a mass rally is planned for November 17. At least 350 women and children have been arrested by police in picket-line confrontations.

According to local reports the state government is preparing to privatise the public transport sector. It aims to slash workers' conditions and block further increases in benefits to make the service more attractive to private investors.

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over festival allowance

Some 2,000 workers employed by the Norwood Plantation Group in Hatton went on strike on November 12 to demand a 500-rupee (\$US5.50) increase in their Deepavalee festival advance. The workers have dismissed the current 1,250-rupee advance as inadequate.

Although any advance would eventually be deducted from workers' wages, the management rejected the demand outright. Managers were forced to lock themselves inside the company office when workers surrounded the building during the strike action. The strike was called off after the Minister for Plantations intervened and promised to provide the additional amount as a bank loan.

Hospital workers fight for job permanency in Sri Lanka

Casual workers at the Trincomalee public hospital began industrial action and a hunger strike on November 12 to demand job permanency. Nursing staff have offered to support the campaign. The workers' demand is in line with a government announcement that all public sector casual workers employed for more than 180 days should be made permanent.

The casuals have been employed at the hospital for more than seven years. A spokeswoman for the strikers said: "If the authorities fail to address the issue we will continue our struggle until we win the demand."

Sri Lankan volunteer teachers demand jobs

On November 12, some 300 voluntary teachers in the Samanthurai educational zone in eastern Sri Lanka began a hunger strike to demand permanent positions. Hundreds of youth have worked as voluntary teachers for years in Samanthurai and other areas in Sri Lanka without being granted jobs.

While the education authorities promised to employ the voluntary teachers after an earlier industrial campaign, they have since withdrawn the commitment. The authorities have also blacklisted some of the teachers prominently involved in the campaign, refusing to let them work, even in a voluntary capacity.

Indonesian garment workers arrested

Armed police broke up a factory occupation in Indonesia on November 14 by 250 sacked workers at the PT Koinus Jaya Garment plant in Tangerang. The workers had occupied the factory grounds for three days to demand the company honour severance pay agreements. After firing warning shots, police moved in and arrested eight female employees suspected of organising the action.

The eight have since been charged with vandalism and incitement to violence. Their colleagues have protested outside the police headquarters to demand their release.

PT Koinus Jaya, which produces jackets, shut down the factory on October 13 claiming that sales had declined. Employees were only paid two weeks outstanding pay and management has refused to pay any compensation. One worker said: "We have no more money to buy food. My boarding house has kicked me out because I was not able to pay the rent". One of the arrested workers, 21-year-old Ninda, said she suspected that the company had decided to close the plant because workers had joined a union.

Indonesian entertainment workers protest ban

About 100 billiard centre employees in Bogor protested outside the local town hall this week against the mayor's decision to ban the centre's operation during the Muslim holy period of Ramadhan.

A Bogor council official told the protest that the decision could not be reversed as it had been made at a meeting involving local leaders, the police and the municipal council. Workers rejected this response and marched to the council building. One protestor said the ban and loss of wages would cause hardship for workers and their families.

South Korean workers march in Seoul

Some 20,000 workers and students from across South Korea marched in the capital on November 11, denouncing the World

Trade Organisation (WTO) and demanding shorter working hours and job security. The demonstrators also demanded the release of Dan Byoung-ho, president of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, who was arrested after a national strike in June.

Some of the demonstrators were involved in scuffles with the police and one was injured and hospitalised. The protest involved workers from a number of South Korea's unions, including metal workers and teachers.

Teachers launch campaign in South Korea

Teachers in South Korea began a four-day protest campaign on November 14 to demand the Education Ministry agree to a new contract on working conditions. They also called for an end to government policies that direct increased funds to private schools.

The campaign will include a series of rallies at locations around Seoul. Members of the Korean Teachers and Educational Worker's Union (KTEW) have already held rallies in front of the main opposition Grand National Party (GNP) headquarters in Yeouido and the Central Government Complex in Gwanghwamun, both in downtown Seoul.

The union will conduct a membership poll at the beginning of next week to gauge support for a strike from November 26. A spokesman said that the majority of the union's 90,000 members are expected to support the motion.

Taiwanese workers protest rising unemployment

Around 2,000 workers chanting "strike against unemployment terror" marched through Taipei, the capital of Taiwan last weekend. The protestors came from various labour organisations and were joined by employees laid off from three Chinese-language newspapers.

Unemployment in Taiwan is now at record highs due to downsizing by hi-tech companies and the transfer of production to mainland China, where wages are far lower. The demonstrators demanded that the government nationalise businesses that have closed down and hand them over to the employees to run. They also demanded a government scheme to hire jobless workers, the introduction of unemployment insurance and the withdrawal of legislation allowing employers to cut rent allowances for overseas guest workers.

At the conclusion of the demonstration, a memorial was held for the 100 workers and youth who have committed suicide this year after being unemployed for a protracted period.

Australian train drivers strike over safety

Suburban train drivers working for M-Train in Melbourne called a snap strike on November 13 over declining safety standards. The drivers claim the National Express Group, which operates M-Train, has flouted safety rules by instructing drivers to operate trains with broken windows. The strike was triggered after a female passenger was injured by shattered glass.

The strike is the latest in a series of protests by National Express Group transport service employees over safety and conditions. Last week, three country rail lines were affected by a dispute over the non-replacement of fire extinguishers on trains. On November 9, drivers at the Malvern tram depot called a snap strike over management's refusal to negotiate proposed roster changes.

Carpet company to sue strikers

Feltex Australia, a Melbourne carpet company, announced this

week it would attempt to sue 42 workers and union officials who have been picketing the company's Brooklyn distribution centre for the last 22 days. The company claims the picket by members of the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union is illegally blocking access to the site.

The workers went on strike on October 24, after yearlong negotiations for a new workplace agreement broke down. The 500 workers at the main plant and two other depots are demanding that the company agree to a union backed trust fund to protect entitlements and improve a pay rise offer.

Edgar Fernando, a machine operator at the Feltex plant in Tottenham, said he would lose his home if the company successfully sued. He has been relying on loans from relatives and friends to pay bills since the dispute began.

Court order ends garbage strike

Brisbane garbage collectors were ordered to return to work by the industrial court last week after they walked off the job on November 12. Workers ended strike action on November 14 but face a backlog of 92,000 general waste and 41,500 recycling bins to be emptied.

The latest walkout is the fourth time the garbage collectors have gone on strike this year. The workers are opposing a proposed cut in their wage rate when a new contractor takes over the collection service.

The Brisbane City Council placed tenders at the beginning of this year for the new \$150 million eight-year contract. The tender by SITA Environmental Solutions, formerly Pacific Waste Management, was accepted at a council meeting on November 13. The workers claim the company will cut the wage rate from \$20.00 an hour to \$17.50 and slash up to 30 jobs.

New Zealand health workers strike

Some 1,200 mental health, elderly care and dental nurses employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) went on strike for 26 hours on November 13. Wards at Princess Margaret and Hillmorton Hospitals were closed.

Talks between the Nurses Organisation and the CDHB last week failed to reach an agreement on a contract settlement. The health workers want a pay rise of 6 percent and better conditions but CDHB management has only offered 3 percent. On November 12, the day before the strike, the union called off planned industrial action by 2,000 general nurses after the CDHB made a salary offer.



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