

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 September 2002

South Korean police raid hospital occupations

In the early hours of September 11, more than 3,000 riot police stormed two hospitals in Seoul to evict health workers who are occupying the facilities. The occupations are part of a long-running strike over pay and working conditions. Although none of the strikers were injured, 326 workers from Kangnam St. Mary's Hospital in southern Seoul were detained, as were 165 from the Kyung Hee University Medical Center in the northern part of the capital.

Workers from Kyung Hee defied authorities and returned to the medical center in numbers later that day resuming the occupation. Hundreds of other unionised workers blocked police from attempting to re-enter the hospital lobby.

A spokesman for the health workers' union has announced it will hold a protest against the police raids. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second largest union association, indicated that it would call for sympathy strikes with the hospital workers in mid-October. Five KCTU officials were among those arrested.

Indonesian workers protest new legislation

Over 700 delegates representing workers in six regencies of North Sumatra rallied at the provincial legislature on September 11, as part of a national campaign against two bills currently before the national House of Representatives. The bills—one on “labour protection” and the other on “industrial dispute settlement”—are aimed at cutting workers' rights and lifting restrictions on lay-offs.

The delegates demanded that the provincial legislative council oppose the bills. A spokesman said that the government's proposals “restricted street rallies, maintained employment based on contract and removed the state's responsibility to provide people with decent jobs”.

Indonesian construction workers rally for job security

Hundreds of employees from the state-owned construction company PD Pembangunan Medan in North Sumatra demonstrated outside the Medan City Council on September 9 to demand job security and the retention of their current working conditions.

The regional administration is planning to transfer the Amplas, Pinang Baris and Teladan branches of the company to the municipal communications office. The change will mean that the workers will be re-classified as casual employees,

costing them their fixed salaries and retirement benefits. A demonstration coordinator warned that unless the issue was resolved “we will mobilise all families of the employees to stage a large-scale protest”.

Indian teachers strike over workloads

Teachers and non-teaching staff at Delhi University launched a week-long strike on September 10 against new workloads that will make 35 percent of staff positions redundant. The non-teaching staff are also demanding that the university management, the University Grants Commission (UGC), end its ban on filling vacant posts.

The Delhi University Teachers Association (DUTA) attacked the UGC actions as an agenda for running down public higher education and benefiting private institutions. “This is being done by increasing workload norms so that fewer teachers can be employed and by making the teaching profession unattractive,” said DUTA president Shaswati Mazumdar.

To mobilise support in the city, the striking teachers organised a series of demonstrations. These included *dharnas* (sit-in protests) at colleges, street marches and a torchlight procession.

Pakistani teachers strike over unpaid wages

Primary and high school teachers working in Pakistan's Dadu district boycotted all classes on September 5 over the non-payment of their salaries for the last two months. The striking teachers, carrying banners and waving placards, demonstrated at the local press club to draw attention to their demands. The Government School Teachers Association organised the action.

Tamil Nadu highway workers fight sacking order

Thousands of workers demonstrated in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu on September 9 to demand the state government withdraw an order issued two days earlier to sack 10,000 highway workers, as part of its austerity measures. Highway workers unions said they were discussing with other unions for demonstrations in all Tamil Nadu district capitals.

Over 20,000 Sri Lankan state bank employees strike against privatisation

Over 20,000 employees attached to four state-owned Sri Lankan banks—Peoples Bank, Bank of Ceylon, National Savings Bank and State Mortgage and Investment Bank—struck at 3.15pm on September 12 in protest against privatisation. As well as banks, the government plans to privatise the Ceylon

Electricity Board, National Water Board, Insurance Corporation and other state-owned enterprises.

Over 5,000 bank employees in the Colombo area assembled at the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) office, which called the action, and marched to the Peoples Bank headquarters. CBEU officials told the WWSWS that union members in private banks also participated in the rally.

The CBEU is planning to hold *sathyagrahas* (sit-in-protests) with other unions, starting from north-central capital Anuradhapura on September 20 and other areas on the island.

Two days before the strike action workers from 20 unions also demonstrated in central Colombo against privatisation.

Sri Lankan Medical officers and nurses strike

About 1,550 assistant medical officers attached to 974 government hospitals in Sri Lanka have been on strike since September 4 in protest against Health Ministry moves to put them on a lower salary bracket. The officers have held demonstrations in front of Health Ministry premises in Colombo. Services have been severely affected, particularly in rural hospitals.

In a separate dispute, 350 medical officers and 400 nurses in the country's Uva province launched a strike on September 3 over the non-payment of overtime by the Provincial Council. The health workers had struck on August 26 over the same issue.

Immigrant workers win compensation case in Thailand

Thirty Karen women (an ethnic group from Burma) won a legal battle a fortnight ago for compensation, after being forced to work in virtual slave labour conditions in a Bang Bon factory in Thailand. The employer exploited the fact that the women did not have visas or other immigration documents to hold them prisoner. They were forced to work from 7am till 9pm and were not allowed holidays. They were fed a meager ration of chicken bone and vegetable soup and were paid 40 baht (95 US cents) a month. The factory gate was locked.

The company was ordered by the Central Labour Court to pay two million baht (about \$US46,000) compensation although the government prosecutor did not proceed with criminal charges. The case is the first time an employer has been found guilty of such an offence and penalised. The name of the company has been withheld.

The Foundation For Women and the Foundation For Child Development took the legal action on behalf of the women, some of who were under 18.

Lockout at Australian window plant ends

About 140 workers at Stegbar, a window and shower screen manufacturer in Melbourne, returned to work on September 11 after being locked out by the company on September 5.

The lockout was imposed after 100 workers demonstrated outside Stegbar's main showroom in protest against company demands that a new workplace agreement increase casual employees by 20 percent. Unions have claimed a "victory" after Stegbar agreed to restrict the number of casuals and to

offer an improved payout to full-time workers made redundant by the changes. The deal includes a 10 percent wage increase over the next 30 months.

Rail union calls off industrial action in NSW

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union called off industrial action planned this week by New South Wales train drivers. The drivers threatened to bypass rail stations in the Sydney Metropolitan area if they were unmanned during the evening and over the weekend, in order to draw attention to severe staff shortages.

The action was scotched after union secretary Nick Lewocki met with the State Labor Transport Minister Carl Scully on September 2. Scully gave no concrete commitment on staff recruitment.

New Zealand health workers begin industrial action

New Zealand health workers employed by MidCentral Health launched a campaign of industrial action this week after pay negotiations broke down. Their current workplace agreement expired on January 1, 2002. The 85 workers decided to "withdraw goodwill", work to rule and withhold statistics. They will also withdraw therapy services from some wards from September 9 to 23.

A Public Service Association spokesman said members had decided that "enough was enough" and had taken the action to highlight the ongoing gaps in service provision due to staffing shortages and high caseloads. Staff involved includes physiotherapists, psychologists, social workers and speech, occupational and neurodevelopment therapists.

The therapists work in both inpatient and outpatient services at Palmerston North Hospital, the Clevely Centre in Feilding, Horowhenua Hospital and at the Dannevirke and Pahiatua community health services.

Otago University staff continue bans

Members of Otago University combined unions have voted to continue withholding exam results until a new pay offer is presented by the university administration. The action follows a one-day strike by staff last week. The university administration had previously responded to a staff pay claim of 8 percent by offering a 1.5 percent increase, less than the rate of inflation. A staff spokesman said that because of a "huge show of support" for the strike action, the university's vice-chancellor has now indicated that he is prepared to negotiate beyond 1.5 percent.



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