

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 September 2002

Indonesian contract workers protest Caltex layoffs

Nearly 4,000 workers from labour-hire company PT Tripatra in Indonesia demonstrated outside the PT Caltex offices in Pekanbaru and Duri on September 17. The protest blocked all access to the buildings.

Tripatra workers, who are hired on contract to Caltex, were protesting against company plans to cut the casual construction workforce by 3,700. They also want PT Tripatra to improve its severance pay offer. Tripatra has offered to pay 27 million rupiah (\$US3,000) to each employee but workers claim that other Caltex contractors pay displaced employees 100 million rupiah each (\$US11,000).

Workers oppose government bill

The Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU), representing 900,000 government workers, announced this week that it will begin industrial action against legislation creating an alternate organisation to cover public servants. The new organisation will have the right to conduct limited collective bargaining but will be barred from calling strikes and other forms of industrial action.

The KGEU has imposed a series of work bans against the government's move, including refusing to work overtime. It is also threatening a general strike of its members when the National Assembly begins debating the bill. The South Korean government has refused to recognise the KGEU when it was established in March this year.

Thai luggage workers win reinstatement

Luggage manufacturer Light House Industry agreed at a Thailand Labor Relations Department hearing on September 13 to reinstate the last 29 of 600 workers it illegally sacked in October 2001. The company, a sub-contractor to giant US luggage giant Samsonite, also gave assurances that it would not "interfere with trade union activities" or "obstruct any activities conducted in accordance with the law".

The reinstatement came after sustained protests by the Light House workforce and their supporters, including demonstrations outside the plant and a letter of protest to the Thai parliament.

Airport workers in the Philippines face job losses

Twenty labour unions representing 12,000 workers employed by the Philippine International Air Terminal jointly petitioned the Supreme Court this week to change an employment contract governing an upgrade of Ninoy Aquino International Airport.

The Arroyo government has signed a \$US400 million contract with Piatco, a consortium involving Fraport AG of Germany, to

manage a new terminal presently under construction. When completed in November, the two existing terminals will be closed down. The contract gives Piatco exclusive right to operate the new facility and it is not bound to hire any of the workers who will be displaced.

Indian power engineers fight privatisation

Power engineers from the Uttar Pradesh State Electricity Board (SEB) in India went on strike on September 16 to protest the state government's decision to split the SEB into four separate distribution companies. The companies, created on the advice of the World Bank, are due to be registered within a week.

Unions representing power employees claim that the move to break up the SEB is another step towards the privatisation of the power industry. They suspect private companies will purchase the separate divisions at bargain basement prices and implement sweeping restructuring and job cuts.

Bangladeshi teachers fight for 11 demands

Teachers at the Jahangirnagar University in Bangladesh began a weeklong no-cooperation campaign on September 16 in support of an 11-point log of claims. The teachers' demands include improved working conditions, permanency for 25 casual teachers, the introduction of measures to prevent sexual harassment and the withdrawal of police from the campus.

As part of the campaign, the teachers will not attend any staff programs organised by the university authorities. They will also strike for 24 hours on September 23 and hold one-hour work stoppages each day from September 24 to 28. This will be followed by an indefinite strike from September 29 if the demands are not met. The campaign is being organised by the Jahangirnagar University Teachers Association.

Sri Lankan estate workers protest over retiree's death

About 850 workers employed at the Bogawanthalawa plantation in Sri Lanka's Nuwareliya district walked off the job on September 14 to protest the death of a retired worker.

The workers claim that the man, Sivapakkiyam Palaniyandi, died because there was no ambulance at the plantation to take him to hospital. They are demanding that the management transfer the officer who refused to arrange transport for the sick man and provide an ambulance for the estate to be used in future emergencies.

Australian zoo workers strike for improved wages

More than 100 zookeepers and horticultural staff from Victoria's main three zoos—Parkville, Werribee and Healesville—went on strike on September 16 in support of a wage increase. The striking

workers held protest rallies outside the zoos. They have also imposed a series of bans, including refusing to conduct special animal displays, carry out administrative duties or participate in the zoos' visitor interaction program.

The workers, who are members of the Australian Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, want a 15 percent wage increase over 18 months. Management has offered 14 percent over two years.

The strike is part of a long-running campaign by zoo staff to gain wage parity with their counterparts in other Australian states, who are paid 29.5 percent more. The highly qualified workers are paid the minimum weekly rate of \$440 or \$11.50 per hour.

Australian taxation office workers take industrial action

Permanent and contract Australian Taxation Office (ATO) staff refused to report for work until 10.30am on September 18, in protest against proposed conditions in their 2002 work contract.

The ATO is proposing rosters that would have employees working any time between 8am and 6pm each weekday. While management claims the rosters will be voluntary, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) believes it will become compulsory and could be extended to 7am and 11pm daily, along with the introduction of weekend work. The proposed rosters would also reduce the ability of employees to accrue flexi-time and work overtime.

The workers are also demanding increased job security and for permanent job vacancies to be offered to casual staff before they are advertised externally.

Demolition worker killed

On September 19, 33-year-old Greg Rees was killed when a five-storey structure collapsed at the now-defunct BHP steel mill in Newcastle, New South Wales.

The men were working inside the building, making final arrangements to bring it down, when it collapsed. Two workers emerged unscathed, but another two were taken to hospital with severe injuries. Rees, who was operating a piece of equipment outside, was crushed to death when it toppled over on him.

A railway worker who witnessed the incident said that he "heard a roar and saw the tower lurch sideways". Police and ambulance rescue units said that the collapsed building is still unstable. They also fear the rubble contained asbestos and other hazardous substances. Another building collapsed suddenly at the same site 11 months ago during demolition.

Healthcare workers demand company negotiate pay increase

Aged-care workers at the Moran Health Group's Armadale Nursing Home and Greenmount Gardens Nursing Centre in NSW walked off the job for four hours this week. The stoppage is part of a national campaign for a new work contract, including a \$1 per hour pay increase.

Toni Williamson, a union delegate at Armadale Nursing Home, told the media: "I just want our community to understand what goes on in their local nursing home, how hard we work and how much we care for the residents. It's important for the community to understand that we, as nursing home workers, get paid so little for a very important job."

The company has since agreed to meet with a union delegation.

New Zealand unions begin negotiations over timber mill

layoffs

Negotiation began on September 16 between timber workers' unions and Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) over the company's plan to layoff nearly half the workforce at its Kinleith pulp and paper mill in the central North Island.

CHH, which is owned by American company International Paper, intends to slash 400 jobs and replace its maintenance workers with personnel supplied by international contracting company ABB. The latest discussions follow an Employment Court order directing the company to negotiate over two weeks with the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and other unions involved.

The EPMU, which represents the bulk of workers at the mill, has consistently suppressed industrial action to defend jobs, while taking legal action to enforce its right to be consulted over the sackings. The unions are offering to negotiate workplace changes to generate cost savings demanded by the company.

North Island nurses discuss strike action over work contract

Nurses in New Zealand's upper North Island have begun holding stop-work meetings to vote on industrial action after negotiations on a new employment contract reached a stalemate. The nurses have been attempting to negotiate a multi-employer collective agreement for better pay and conditions. At issue is whether there should be separate employment agreements covering senior nurse managers.

Talks have broken down because five district health boards—Northland, Waikato, Tairāwhiti, Lakes and Bay of Plenty—are refusing to include about 200 nurse managers in the agreement. An advocate for the nurses said the District Health Boards were trying to impose an exclusive contract on senior nurses even though most were saying that they wanted to be part of a unified pay and career structure.

If the 5,000 nurses involved vote for industrial action, services at nine hospitals could be disrupted. Nurses working in the community, such as public health and district health nurses, would also be involved in the action.

New Zealand doctors seek improved after-hours payments

Association of Salaried Medical Specialists announced this week that it would take a dispute about after-hours call payments for senior doctors to arbitration. Senior medical staff are paid, on average, nine percent on top of their base salary when on call. They are seeking a substantial increase. The association asked for arbitration a month ago, after its offer to halve the doctors' original demand was rejected by the Southland District Health Board.



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