

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 November 2002

Indonesian police fire shots during workers' demonstration

Police in Tangerang fired warning shots on November 19 during a demonstration of about 2,500 former workers of PT Doson Indonesia, a subcontractor for the US footwear giant Nike. The workers were marching to demand outstanding severance pay, still owing after the company sacked its 6,890-strong workforce and closed operations in September.

The workers rallied at the Tangerang District Court and marched to the major Serpong tollway when 150 police intervened to disperse the protest. Several shots were fired over workers' heads.

A workers' spokesman said that PT Doson was in breach of Minister of Manpower and Transmigration instructions allowing the company to dismiss its workforce if it paid severance and all outstanding wages and established a fund to help workers meet their housing costs.

Philippines teachers demand cost-of-living payment

Public school teachers in Bacolod are campaigning against delays in Emergency Cost Of Living Allowance (ECOLA) payments. Teachers were granted a monthly 700-pesos (\$US13.46) ECOLA disbursement in 1999, to be paid from special education funds. The Bacolod city government has refused to comply and Mayor Luzviminda Valdez has filed a motion to quash the court order. He is also attempting to cause further delays, claiming to be seeking court permission for the release of funds from non-education budget allocations.

The campaign for the release of ECOLA payments began last week when more than 500 teachers demonstrated outside Bacolod city hall. On November 26 they plan to inundate the government with phone calls and faxes demanding immediate payment.

Korean bank workers postpone anti-privatisation strike

On November 19, staff at the state-owned Chohung Bank called off a scheduled two-week strike after the South Korean government postponed selecting a buyer for the bank when it is sold in December.

The bank's 5,400 union members oppose the privatisation plan, fearing that it will result in layoffs and cuts in working conditions. The bank has over 7,000 employees.

The strike was due to begin on the day the Public Fund Oversight Committee, which oversees privatisations, made its decision on potential buyers. Four bidders are believed to be considering purchasing the bank. They have asked the government for one more week to finalise their bids, alleging that the bank union has prevented them from examining certain financial records.

Non-union workers demand eight-hour day in India

More than 1,000 non-unionised workers demonstrated in Bangalore on November 18 to demand an eight-hour working day, an increase in daily wages and social securities on par with their unionised counterparts. Construction work in the city was paralysed as building

workers joined agricultural, quarry and hotel workers at the rally.

Indian mill workers protest

Workers at the Shri Bharathi Mills in Modeliarpet, Pondicherry, staged a sit-down protest at the manager's office on November 15 over the company's refusal to pay a holiday allowance in advance of the "Deepavali" Hindu religious festival, which began on November 4. The tradition of advancing holiday allowances, which allows workers to prepare for festivals, is being abandoned by a growing number of companies across India.

Pakistani workers protest over non-payment of salaries

Sanitary workers at the Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) in Multan took protest action on November 8 over continuous delays in the payment of a salary increase. A 50-rupee (\$US0.85) medical allowance has not been added to the workers' pay. Workers plan to strike and shut down the sewerage system if the allowance is not paid over the next several weeks.

On November 14, local government workers in Mirpurkhas also walked off the job over salary payment delays. According to a union spokesman, payment is late every month. Municipal authorities are attempting to avoid responsibility by claiming that the district government is supposed to provide funds for staff salaries. The strike ended after city authorities assured workers that their salaries would be paid on time in the future.

Sacked Pakistani garment workers march

About a dozen workers sacked seven years ago by Fateh Apparel and Fateh Weaving marched in Hyderabad on November 15 to draw attention to the fact they have never been paid their entitlements. The two factories were shifted to Dubai without providing any severance pay to the 400 employees.

Speaking at a news conference after the march, president of the workers' action committee said that workers had tried to get government help to secure their entitlements but officials, including those in the labour department, appeared to be "powerless" before the owners.

One worker won a claim in the Labour Court compensating him 100,000 rupees (\$US1,700) for the loss of entitlements but he died four years ago without receiving anything. Another employee won a legal case for payment of 42,000 rupees but the company ignored the ruling.

Sri Lankan estate workers protested against non-payment the wages

Nearly 5,000 workers from 11 estates in the Matale district in Sri Lanka's central province protested on November 12 against delays and non-payment of wages. The plantations included Pitakanda, Elkaduwa, Millavana, Pansalathana, Bandarapola, Selagama, Unnasgiriya, Nalanda and Appugasipitiya.

Police were deployed to disperse workers who had gathered outside plantation offices. The protest is the latest in an ongoing campaign by plantation workers. The action is likely to spread to other estates.

Australian wine workers defend working conditions

Workers at Yaldara Winery in South Australia's Barossa Valley went on strike and traveled to Sydney on November 20 to protest outside the Annual General Meeting of the vineyard's owners, McGuigan Simeon Wines.

Since taking over Yaldara, McGuigan Simeon has been attempting to undermine working conditions by revoking its current enterprise work agreement.

The industrial court granted a company application to cancel the agreement, which was not due for renegotiation until next year, from midnight November 22. The move means that a series of working conditions, including redundancy arrangements, will revert back to the minimum award. This will make it less expensive for the company to slash its workforce.

The workers, some with nearly 30 years service, fear that jobs could be on the line. The strike was the first in the 53-year history of the Yaldara Winery.

Court orders end to construction picket in Victoria

On November 20, the Australian Federal Court ordered workers at the \$100 million Patricia Baleen Gas Processing Centre at Newmerella to end their picket of the site. The picket has stopped construction of the gas-processing plant for seven weeks. The dispute erupted after Upstream Petroleum, operations contractor at the site, attempted to sign up some construction workers to non-union work contracts.

Project managers have petitioned the courts to enforce previous directives by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission that the strikers return to work. The federal court has instructed the Australian Workers' Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union to order their members to comply.

Aged-care workers petition for greater government funding

Aged-care nurses from more than 250 nursing homes across Australia began a petitioning campaign on November 21 to collect thousands of signatures calling on the federal government to increase funding to aged care.

The nurses, who are reluctant to take strike action because of the nature of the work, will draw attention to their campaign by wearing pink as they go about their duties. Other workers have been asked to wear buttons and display banners in support.

A spokesman for the workers said that since the federal Liberal government was elected in 1996, it has slashed \$500 million from the aged-care budget. He said that while "small amounts have been put back into the budget for aged care" it was quite clear "there is insufficient funds to ensure a decent level of care".

NSW court reporters strike

About 300 workers employed by the New South Wales Attorney General's Department walked off the job for 24 hours on November 21 over pay, working conditions and job security. The strike action disrupted court cases at District and Supreme Courts across the state.

The workers, who are members of the Public Service Association and include court reporters, rallied outside local courts with the largest demonstrations outside the NSW Supreme Court and the Downing Centre District Court. PSA officials said many reporters were on "abysmal" salaries.

Union members have threatened future walkouts unless wages are

increased. They also want the state Labor government to stop using private contractors in the court system.

Air New Zealand flight staff to strike

About 1,000 Air New Zealand international long-haul flight attendants are planning to strike for 14 hours on November 27 in support of a claim for longer rest breaks. The action will affect flights from Auckland to Australia and Asia.

While the flight attendants, who are members of the Flight Attendants and Related Services Association, will attend a stop-work meeting during the strike, they have already approved further strike action if a settlement is not reached.

Their main concern is with the Auckland to Los Angeles route, the longest non-stop service flown by New Zealand-based crews. Flight attendants are demanding a full-day rest period before working the return leg.

Auckland radiographers continue strike action

Auckland radiographers who struck for two days from November 14 have threatened further stoppages before the end of the month if the Auckland District Health Board (DHB) continues to reject their pay demands. The 80 radiographers are demanding a 10.3 percent pay increase but the DHB has refused to improve its offer of two percent annually for the next two years.

Last week's strike forced the board to cancel hundreds of operations at the region's four major hospitals, Auckland, National Womens', Starship and Green Lane. Thousands of operations were also cancelled last month when the radiographers walked out for four days.

According to Auckland DHB management, the Labor government imposed the two percent salary funding, claiming the hospital was operating over budget.

New Zealand lecturers settle pay disputes

Staff at Victoria University in Wellington this week voted to accept a pay deal negotiated between the university, the Association of University Staff (AUS) and the Public Service Association. The settlement covers four collective agreements and will give nearly 700 academic, general and research staff a 3.5 per cent salary increase. An AUS representative claimed it was the "best deal" the unions could get "under the circumstances".

Meanwhile, lecturers at Wellington College of Education accepted a 2.5 percent pay increase after the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) took the dispute to mediation. The lecturers, who were seeking a 3.25 percent increase, had been withholding grades and were threatening rolling strikes while their dispute remained unsettled. They were suspended for two days last week by the college principal, provoking a walkout and demonstration in their support by many of the 1,200 trainee teachers at the college.



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