

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 November 2002

Indonesian workers attempt to stop employers leaving country

Police were mobilised on November 23 against 80 construction workers laid-off by PT Sindo Bintan Precast on the island of Bintan. The workers, who had blockaded the company offices for 42 hours, were attempting to prevent their Singapore-based employers fleeing the country without paying adequate severance pay.

Two employees—Kah Sag, 28, and Rah Ray, 30—were arrested and have been charged with “restricting peoples’ freedom” and the “illegal possession of sharp weapons”.

There have been several incidents in Indonesia over the last months of workers trying to stop employers fleeing without paying wages and entitlements. The media have denounced the actions, branding workers as “boss-nappers”.

South Korean bank workers fight sell-off

Workers at the Chonung Bank in South Korea will go on strike indefinitely on December 4 in opposition to government plans to sell off its controlling interest in the majority state-owned bank. Staff fear the move will lead to the job losses and reduced benefits.

The strike will involve 5,400 unionised workers out of the bank’s 6,500 strong workforce. About 350 employees at the bank’s information systems department will walk off the job in support, closing down computer systems that will take weeks to restore.

A Finance Ministry official said this week that the government was considering disciplinary action against strikers and any managerial staff who opposed the sale.

Indian government workers protest against privatisation

Workers at the State Road Transport Corporation and the State Electricity Board in the southern Indian state of Kerala went on strike for 24 hours from midnight November 25. They were protesting against the state government’s move to dismantle and privatise the two public utilities. The strikers marched and rallied outside the state government secretariat building in the capital Thiruvananthapuram.

Sacked mill workers in Pakistan demand entitlements

Sacked workers from Fateh Apparel and Fateh Weaving Mills are continuing their campaign to demand the payment of outstanding wages and entitlements. About a dozen employees and their families staged a sit-in protest outside the Hyderabad press club on November 22. One week before workers and their supporters marched through city.

A spokesman for the Mazdoor [Workers] Action Committee, Shafiquddin Shaikh, said more than 400 employees had been made jobless over nine years between 1989 and 1998 as the company systematically downsized the two plants. All were denied their legal entitlements. He alleged that capital from the closures had been transferred to Dubai and Moscow and at least one director had fled abroad.

Workers have threatened that unless they are paid all outstanding entitlements they will stage daily protests outside one of the factory owner’s residence.

Pakistani sanitary workers fight for unpaid wages

About 400 sanitary workers employed by the Taluka Council in

Khairpur went on strike on November 22 demanding payment of salaries owing for October. The strikers staged a sit-down demonstration on Katchery Road, one of the city’s main highways. The demonstration was joined by other council staff, including clerks. Garbage and sewage remained uncollected in most city areas.

On the same day sanitary workers employed by the Taluka Council in Thari Meerwah went on strike and demonstrated outside local council offices demanding their salaries for October and November.

Pakistani powerloom workers protest

Powerloom workers demonstrated at Chowk Kutchery on November 22 against a 100 percent increase in power tariff and income tax and sales tax levies. The taxes and higher tariffs have led to the closure of 50 percent of powerlooms (cloth weaving units) in Pakistan.

Workers want the power tariff reduced and sales and income tax waived. A powerloom worker appeared with the garland of electricity bills to protest against the escalating utility charges. The demonstrators chanted slogans calling for the cottage industry to be tax exempt and other demands including, “Down with Pervez Musharraf” and “Let the poor live”.

Sindhu Secretary General of Powerlooms Association Abdul Khaliq Qandeel said 150,000 Pakistani power loom operators were exporting goods worth \$2 billion per annum but government taxes and power cuts made them uncompetitive against China, Bangladesh, India and Thailand. He denounced the Musharraf government for “implementing the IMF and World Bank programme” said the regime had “no interest in the poor people.”

Sri Lankan hospital campaign for salary increments

Clerical workers employed at government hospitals in Sri Lanka took sick leave on November 25 and 26 as part of a campaign for a 10-point log of claims, including the introduction of salary increments. The sick leave protest follows a five-day overtime ban.

The ongoing campaign has disrupted administrative functions across hospitals nationally, including salary payments for other hospital staff.

Textile mill workers demand compensation

Some 2,000 workers laid off earlier this year from the Veytex Textile Mills in Veyangoda, about 50 kilometres from Colombo, demonstrated on November 23 to demand the government find them jobs or provide compensation. They marched through the town centre and held a rally near a busy railway crossing.

Although the workers continued to receive their basic wages for several months after being laid off, they have not been paid for the last five months. During the last general elections in December 2001, leaders of the United National Front promised that if elected they would arrange compensation for the sacked workers.

Australian Sanitarium workers support sacked union delegate

Workers employed by food manufacturer Sanitarium stopped work for one day across Australia on November 22 in protest against the dismissal of a senior union delegate at one of the company’s New South Wales Central Coast factories. The action included employees at company plants

in Queensland, NSW and Victoria. A delegation of Central Coast workers traveled to Sydney to demonstrate outside Sanitarium's head office.

Workers believe the delegate was dismissed because of his union position. The sacking came just one week after Central Coast employees voted down a non-union enterprise work agreement put together by the company.

Power station workers strike over contract breaches

More than 80 maintenance workers at Tarong Power Station in southeast Queensland went on strike for 24 hours on November 22. The strike was called to oppose the company, Torong Energy, breaching the current enterprise work agreement on the use of contract labour. Work bans have been imposed on overtime and maintenance on one of the power station's generators.

Victorian freight workers strike for wage increase

Workers at the Bax Global freight forwarding company in Tullamarine, Melbourne, walked off the job on November 26, after negotiations broke down between management and the union over a new workplace agreement.

The strike by 10 members of the furniture trades division of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union threatened production at the Ford motor factory in Broadmeadows. Bax Global has an exclusive contract to deliver auto glass to Ford.

The union ended strike action after reaching an agreement with the company in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for workers to receive a small wage increase and an improved redundancy agreement.

ABC workers vote to strike next week

Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC) staff voted overwhelmingly for strike action on Monday and Tuesday next week at stop-work meetings across the country on November 27. The industrial action, which will involve about 800 workers, will halt program broadcasting.

The two-hour meetings, which were called to discuss stalled negotiations for a new work agreement, disrupted ABC radio, television and online services.

A Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance spokesman claimed that ABC management and the union were "not that far apart" over the amount of a pay increase, "but most staff were angry about performance appraisal provisions".

Prison nurses stage statewide pickets

Prison nurses across Western Australia have begun statewide picketing this week in support of a pay increase. The 90 nurses, who are employed in the state's prisons and detention centres, want pay parity with their colleagues in the public hospital system.

The state Labor government offered a pay increase back paid to June this year, but nurses are demanding back pay to June 2001, the date that public hospital nurses received their wage adjustment.

The government has attempted to overcome staff shortages caused by low pay and dangerous working conditions by increased use of agency nurses throughout the WA prison system. At one institution, 75 percent of the nursing staff is supplied by agencies.

This week angry nurses condemned a statement by the Justice Minister accusing them of "acting unconscionably". One nurse told the media: "We have been more than patient, waiting some 18 months for parity with hospital nurses."

Baggage handlers ban collection of unaccompanied luggage

Baggage handlers for the Qantas terminal at Sydney airport met on November 26 and voted to ban the removal of unaccompanied luggage from plane holds on all domestic flights. The handlers have also raised concerns about the non-screening of checked-in baggage on domestic and some international flights.

A spokesman for the workers said that Qantas had offered bag handlers free movie tickets if they found unaccompanied bags. The men have not been trained to identify suspect or potentially dangerous baggage.

The handlers believe that unaccompanied baggage should be dealt with by the federal police or appropriately trained security personnel. Baggage handlers at domestic carrier Virgin Blue are considering imposing a similar ban.

New Zealand radiographers' dispute in arbitration

The union covering radiographers called off strike action planned for November 28 and sent the long-running dispute with the Auckland District Health Board (DHB) into arbitration. The DHB agreed to a demand by the Association of Professional and Executive Employees for arbitration after receiving advice from clinicians at four hospitals that patients should not be "endangered" by more strikes.

Some 90 radiographers in four major hospitals were threatening a 48-hour strike and another two-day walkout on December 2 in support of a 10.3 percent pay increase. The DHB had improved an earlier pay offer to three percent for one year and two percent for the next. The strike would have been the third by radiographers in the past few weeks.

The deficit-ridden board claims the latest offer is the best it can make because of a government directive to cap cost increases at two percent. It claims the offer is equivalent to a deal accepted last week by radiographers at the Counties-Manukau District Health Board. Under that agreement radiographers moved from a 35-hour working week to 40 hours in exchange for six percent pay increase over 30 months and a 50 percent increase in call-out allowance.

Auckland steel workers mourn workmate

Workers at the Pacific Steel mill in Auckland stopped work last week following the death of union delegate Danny Campbell. Campbell, a 47 year-old father of four, died on November 19 from injuries he sustained in a work accident on November 4.

Campbell was seriously injured when he fell from a four-metre high platform and hit his head on the side of a container while disposing of waste steel. Reports indicate that safety rails designed to prevent falls from the platform had been removed. The Labour Department is investigating the death, the second fatal incident at the mill this year and the fifth in five years.

Air New Zealand cabin crews strike

Air New Zealand's long-haul cabin crews walked off the job from midnight November 29 to 2pm the next day in a second round of strikes over inadequate rest breaks between flights. The first 14-hour strike from midnight on Tuesday November 26 forced the airline to cancel three flights and delayed nine others from Auckland to Australia, Asia and the Pacific.

The 1,000 flight attendants are demanding a "clear day" rest between long-haul routes such as the 13-hour leg on the Los Angeles run. Cabin crews on the route currently get as little as a 16 hours break. Mediation between the company and the Flight Attendants' Union is due to resume next week.

Fiji customs officers strike over pay

More than 600 Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority staff went on strike on November 27 because of the lack of progress in salary negotiations. The officers are demanding a 30 percent pay increase. A spokesman for the workers said that management, while delaying a staff pay rise, had awarded themselves a 66 percent salary hike.

A management representative said the company considered the walkout illegal and would not negotiate while staff remain on strike.



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