

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 October 2003

## **Government workers protest in the Philippines**

Over 150,000 government employees attended rallies in various cities across the Philippines on October 23 to protest against the alleged mismanagement of the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS). The workers are demanding the sacking of the agency's president Winston Garcia. The rally comes just a week after hundreds of government workers stormed GSI offices over the same issue.

Rally organisers claim that GSIS officials have used workers' premiums to finance excessively high executive salaries, allowances and other perks. They allege that the executive handouts and bad investments have caused a shortage of funds, resulting in workers being placed on long waiting lists to obtain loans from the service.

Last week, GSIS announced the availability of 10,000 peso (\$US182) emergency loans but workers vowed to continue action until Garcia is dismissed.

## **Vietnamese clothing workers demand health insurance**

On October 17, more than 1,100 workers at the Korean-owned Konam Apparel Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City went on strike after learning that the company had not been paying for their social and health insurance. Management has been collecting insurance payments from the workforce each month.

The strikers went back to work the next day after the company promised to provide social and health coverage and compensate those workers who had been forced to pay the full cost of medical treatment due to the lack of insurance.

Industrial disputes over poor pay and working conditions are on the increase in Vietnam as numbers of overseas sub-contractors set up operations to exploit the country's large pool of cheap labour.

## **Taiwanese bus drivers strike to defend wages**

Public transport drivers from Taichung Bus in Taiwan held a one-day strike on October 16 against the company's plans to abandon the current work agreement under which workers' wages are raised in line with increases in the company's monthly revenue. Revenues increased by

\$NT700,000 in August and \$NT800,000 in September. The management is insisting that the drivers accept a fixed monthly salary instead.

## **Sri Lankan public sector workers strike over wages**

More than 50,000 public sector workers went on strike on October 21 to demand a salary increase in line with increases in the cost-of-living. The strike involved education, health, telecommunication, local government, electricity, petroleum, government press, excise, customs and audits and university staff.

The public sector workers also demanded the government end its privatisation program and the punishment of workers by forced transfers.

## **Sri Lankan water supply workers demand pay increase**

Thousands of workers at the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB) throughout Sri Lanka went on strike for one day on October 15. Their main demand was for a new wage system to increase the minimum salary to 4,000 rupees (approximately \$US40) per month. They are also seeking the withdrawal of the Water Supply Act, which is part of a move to privatise NWSDB.

Striking workers picketed in front of their offices in Ratmalana and Kandy, as well as other provincial offices in Kurunegala, Gampaha, Rajagiriya, Matara and Hambantota.

## **Australian building workers rally over job death**

Building workers in New South Wales will stop work and rally on October 27 to protest the death of 16-year-old Joel Exner, who was killed on a construction site in Sydney on October 16. The teenage worker fell 15 metres from the roof at the Australand site in Eastern Creek. He was employed by Gary Denson Metal Roofing and had been on the job for only three days. He was not wearing a safety harness at the time of the fall.

The protest stoppage was endorsed by around 300 construction, manufacturing and electrical union delegates on October 22 and will call for the NSW Labor government to introduce industrial manslaughter laws.

Joel's mother, Sue Exner, will address the rally in Sydney. Hundreds of mourners attended the teenager's funeral last week.

### **Construction workers strike over assault**

Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union employed by CBI Constructors on the North-West Shelf expansion project in Western Australia voted last week to stay on strike until October 27. They defied a direction from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to return to work.

The strike erupted when a supervisor manhandled a worker on the job. The workers demanded the supervisor be removed from the site. Management said it would keep the supervisor away from workers but refused to sack him.

It is the second time in four months that the 1,700 workers have walked off the job. In July, the project came to a standstill for nine days when workers stopped to oppose the use of non-union contract labour on the site.

### **New Zealand medical staff strike for pay**

Nurses and general staff at Oamaru Hospital stopped work for two hours on October 20. The stoppage was the first in a series of planned strikes in a dispute over pay and working conditions with the Waitaki District Health Services.

The Waitaki District Health Services has only offered a 1.9 percent pay increase even though nurses in other areas were offered up to 9 percent. Negotiations have dragged on for nine months.

### **New Zealand special education contract settled**

A settlement has been reached in an industrial dispute involving more than 600 special education field staff. The agreement follows two weeks of industrial action and comes after eight months of negotiations over pay. The settlement package was announced by the Ministry of Education and the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI) last week, but is still subject to ratification by the workers. The deal includes a \$NZ500 lump sum payment, two annual 2.5 percent pay increases, a 2.5 percent higher duties allowance increase and improvements at the top end of the salary bands.

Industrial action was suspended and workers will be attending union meetings this week to vote on the package. The NZEI is recommending they accept the settlement. Workers covered by the agreement include psychologists, speech language therapists, special education advisors, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, early intervention teachers and advisors on deaf students.

### **Community care workers strike**

Over 2,000 New Zealand community support workers employed by IHC, the central care provider for people with intellectual disabilities, have begun industrial action as part of a long-running pay dispute. They went on strike for three hours on October 17 and set up a picket outside the IHC head office in central Wellington.

The IHC rejected a recent union proposal to settle the dispute with a 2 percent pay rise backdated to the May 12,

the expiry date of the previous agreement. The IHC is only prepared to backdate any pay rise to August 4. The Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) said there will be “escalating” industrial action in support of the pay claim.

### **East Timor aviation workers end two-week strike**

After six months of negotiations and a two-week strike, the employees of Timor Aviation Services, an Australian-owned airfreight company, were awarded an interim agreement covering pay and conditions. The agreement signed last week provides for a 12.5 percent pay increase, penalty rates for overtime and other allowances.

The workers, members of the East Timorese Maritime and Transport Workers Union, have been negotiating for a collective work agreement for nearly six months. Differences sharpened in August when the company took on additional land haulage contracts and demanded that workers perform unpaid overtime to handle the extra workload. When workers began industrial action and refused to unload a plane, two union delegates were sacked. The recent strike occurred after the management refused repeated requests they be reinstated.

The interim agreement provides for the finalisation of negotiations within two to three weeks. The two delegates who were sacked, however, have not been reinstated.

### **Air Niugini pilots reject pay cut**

International pilots employed by Papua New Guinea’s state-owned airline Air Niugini have been ordered by the Department of Labour and Employment to meet company officials this week after refusing to take a 10 percent wage cut. The airline claims it needs to cut the wages of staff earning over \$US11,000 in order to resolve its financial difficulties.

The pilots have been “working-to-rule” since the company withdrew an employees’ travel concession last month. National Pilots Union president Captain Peter Ansphil said the core issues in the standoff are the renewal of salary awards which expired in September 2002 and the failure of the company to produce its financial audits for 2001 and 2002.

Ansphil said the union might consider the pay cut if Air Niugini allowed an independent auditor to determine the financial situation. The company has refused to hand over its books unless the union signs a confidentiality statement. The union has refused to accept the condition.



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