

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 October 2003

Philippines workers protest garment industry job losses

Over 50,000 workers in the Philippines struck for 24 hours on October 13 in protest against mass sackings and plant closures in the country's garment and textile industry. Over 6,000 employees have been laid off in the industry over recent months and thousands of others put on reduced hours.

Peak union bodies Parido ng Manggagawa (PM) and the Bukluran ng Manggagawang (BMP) decided last week to call the action following the recent closure of baby-wear manufacturer Novelty Philippines, one of the country's largest garment exporters. Over 2,365 mainly female workers lost their jobs.

The strikers, who are members of over 100 different unions, came from companies in Metro Manila, Central Luzon and Southern Tagalog. Over 200 workers from Supreme Baby Wear held a daylong picket outside their plant. The factory is currently working a four-day week. Over 5,000 employees from Fortune Tobacco, Alaska Milk, Uratex-Polyfoam and Universal Robina Corp demonstrated outside the Department of Labor and Employment. In Bangladesh garment workers held a solidarity picket outside the Philippines embassy.

Korea Nestlé workers still on strike

On October 14, over 400 striking workers from Nestlé Korea rallied near the company's main plant in Cheongju, 140 kilometres south of Seoul. They have been on strike since early July in support of a 10-percent pay rise.

Nestlé Korea has ruled out any wage increase and closed its branch office in Seoul, fueling rumours that it is considering ending operations in South Korea. The rally demanded the company begin negotiations. Workers also considered a resolution to send a delegation to lobby Nestlé's headquarters in Switzerland.

South Korean chemical workers strike for pay increase

Korea Petrochemical Industry Co (KPIC) workers went on strike on October 16 to demand a 12-percent wage increase. Management has only offered five percent. Over 500 employees or 70 percent of the plant's workforce is unionised.

While KPIC is the country's smallest manufacturer of polyethylene, the strike could cause a major supply crisis because rival Honam Petrochemical Corp was forced to close its three polyethylene plants last week when one was damaged by an explosion.

A KPIC spokesman said further negotiations with the union on the pay dispute were planned for October 20. The company operates a naphtha-cracking centre in Onsan and a polypropylene plant in Ulsan, both in the country's southeast.

More deaths in China's coal mines

On October 12, seven miners were killed in an explosion at an illegal mine in Guangxi Zhuang province in China's south. Eleven were underground when the blast occurred but four were rescued. This week rescuers located the bodies of four miners killed in a mine blast in Dengfeng, Henan province, on October 9. Another 14 miners remain missing.

The latest fatalities follow a spate of mining deaths over the last four weeks. A total of 34 miners were drowned in two separate accidents in early September at the Chuanhe Coal Mine in Xiushan County and the Sangshuping coal mine in Shaanxi province respectively. On September 21, nine men were killed at the Dongfanghong mine in Jiangxi province.

According to vastly understated official statistics, 18 coal miners on average are killed every day in China. Figures released this year show that 3,824 miners die for every million tons of coal produced.

Indian sugar workers protest against wage cuts

Sugar factory workers in Maharashtra in western India are due to hold statewide stop-work meetings against management attempts to impose a 20 percent wage cut. The owners also plan to pay the minimum bonus for the annual Hindu festival Deepavali on October 24. A rally at Sakhar Sankul in Pune on October 14 endorsed meetings in Theur (Pune district), Ahmednagar, Satara, Kolhapur, Sangli, Solapur, Marathwada, Nashik, Dhule, Jalgaon and Nandurbar from October 16 onwards.

Sugar workers union leaders indicated that they would accept pay cuts in certain cases. Speaking to *TNN* this week, union president Kishor Pawar said his organisation would consider a 20-percent cut at 56 sugar factories described as "sick" by the state's sugar commissioner. These are plants experiencing financial difficulties.

Pawar claimed workers would agree to the cuts to prevent closure of the ailing plants. This is in line employer and government claims that workers should bear the burden of the sugar industry crisis.

Sri Lankan water employees hold national protest

Water Supply and Drainage Board employees staged an island-wide six-hour walkout on October 15 to demand a pay increase. They are seeking a pay hike of not less than 4,000 rupees (\$US42), a 1,750-rupee allowance backdated to the beginning of the year and wage deductions to provide for pay advances.

They also want the government to publish a report into public sector salary abnormalities by the B.C. Perera Committee, a

government-appointed body. The government promised to make the report available by August 31. The water board's Trade Unions Joint Committee called the protest stoppage after discussions with Minister Arumugam Thondaman and others had failed to produce a favorable outcome.

Lift repairmen strike for wages

Around 100 mechanics employed by Otis Elevator across Queensland returned to work this week after going on strike on October 9 over a wage claim. They also want a shorter working week. The men are responsible for the maintenance of lifts at 1,800 sites.

The mechanics have had work bans in place for the last three weeks. They want Otis to make a decent pay offer to compensate for increased work responsibilities under the new Electrical Safety Act.

Hospital workers strike against privatisation

Hospital workers at the state-run Mater Hospital in Newcastle, north of Sydney, went on strike for 24-hours on October 14. They are opposing the New South Wales (NSW) state government's plan to operate and redevelop the hospital as a joint venture with a private company.

The strike, which included radiographers, pharmacists, social workers, caterers and other auxiliary staff, was sparked when the government advertised for expressions of interest in the venture. Forty thousand state hospital staff stopped work for four hours across NSW in support.

The moves to partially privatise Mater began in 2000 when the government proposed that the hospital find a private partner to build a new, possibly smaller hospital, on the present site.

Young labourer killed in construction site accident

Sixteen-year-old labourer Joel Exner was killed on October 15 when he fell 15 metres from a factory roof at the Australand construction site in Eastern Creek, in Sydney's west suburbs. The youth had only begun working on the site three days earlier. Employed by a subcontractor, the teenager was not wearing a safety harness at the time of the fall and may not have received proper induction training. By law, employees must be provided with, and wear, a safety harness if they work at heights of three metres or more. WorkCover investigators have now issued a number of prohibition notices at the building project.

Following reports of the death, construction unions called on the NSW Labor government to legislate new industrial manslaughter laws with hefty penalties for deaths caused by employer negligence.

A spokesman Minister for Industrial Relations John Della Bosca, claimed the government was looking at new provisions covering industrial manslaughter. These would be in the framework of the Occupational Health and Safety Act ruling out prosecutions of employers under the Crimes Act. He also confirmed that no timetable had been set for introducing such legislation

Education workers rally to defend jobs

Department of Education and Training (DE&T) workers in Victoria rallied this week against the state government's decision to sack 334 employees by the end of the year. Speakers at the rally condemned the Bracks Labor government for breaking an election promise to make education a priority and warned that the job

losses would result in a "reduction in the quality of service provision".

The job cuts from the DE&T head office in Melbourne were announced earlier this year, the government claiming it was acting under budgetary constraints and that the positions were "superfluous".

Dr David Haywood from Swinburne University's Institute for Social Research told the rally that the cuts were not necessary on a financial basis and that the government's budget review framework was "flawed".

New Zealand hospital strike extended

Staff at Oamaru Hospital have voted to extend their planned forthcoming strike action over pay. The Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced that staff would strike on October 28, 29 and 30, in addition to the strike dates of October 20 and 23 announced last week. The NZNO and the Public Services Association want a 7.5 percent pay rise over two years but Waitaki District Health Services has only offered 1.9 percent.

University work agreement negotiations stall

The first-ever collective agreement negotiations between all seven New Zealand university authorities and tertiary sector staff unions broke down last week because the parties failed to agree on bargaining protocols. The matter was referred to mediation after the universities refused to proceed without an agreement on the protocols.

Areas of disagreement included restrictions on paid leave for staff representatives attending the negotiations and a limit on access to information. Formal negotiations were resumed after mediation on October 13. In the past academic and support staff negotiated contracts on a site-by-site basis.

Solomon Islands public servants demand pay rise

On October 9, the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union (SIPEU) threatened to go on strike if the government failed to agree to demands for a 50 percent wage rise. SIPEU general secretary Clement Waiwori said that public officers had not had a wage rise since 1996 and that high inflation and cost increases justified the claim. He said the union had held five meetings with the government but not received any satisfactory reply to its demands. Waiwori warned that the union would issue a notice of strike if the government fails to respond by October 21.



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