

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 November 2003

Workers clash with riot police in South Korea

Thousands of Korean workers clashed with riot police during demonstrations in three major cities on October 29. The protests were called in opposition to a number of lawsuits that are seeking damages from workers for losses their employers suffered during recent strikes. Under the existing “provision seizure laws,” employers can deduct up to 50 percent of a worker’s wage to pay off damages awarded by the courts.

In Seoul, where over 1,000 workers rallied, protestors threw stones at riot police. Clashes between workers and police in Daegu resulted in several demonstrators being hospitalised with head injuries. In the industrial city of Busan, 2,000 workers, some wielding metal pipes, fought with armed police. Stones were hurled at a nearby factory, shattering about 100 windows.

The latest demonstrations come after two unionists opposing the legal action set themselves alight at separate protests the previous week. One of the workers, 32-year-old Lee Yong-seok, died as a result of his injuries. The self-immolations follow the suicide of union representative Kim Ju-Ik, who hung himself from a crane at Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction on October 17 over the same issue.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) is planning a four-hour national strike on November 5.

Indonesian workers march on manpower ministry

About 3,000 women workers marched on the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration in Jakarta on October 27 to demand that the government not restrict the recruitment of Indonesians to work in Malaysia.

Manpower minister Jacob Nuwa Wea threatened last weekend to blackban Indonesians taking jobs in Malaysia because its government has refused to guarantee it will increase protection for guest workers.

Guest workers—particularly women—are often brutally exploited and violently abused. The acute shortage of jobs in Indonesia, however, means there are many who are prepared to take the risk. Unemployment in Indonesia has reached 41.2 million and Malaysia is one of the closest destinations for employment.

While demanding their right to work overseas, the protestors also called on the government to monitor recruitment agencies to lessen the chance of abuse.

Mine deaths continue in China

On October 29, 13 miners died in a gas explosion at the Chongqing coal mine in Qijiang County. The blast took place at noon. While six miners escaped, the remainder were either crushed by falling coal and rubble or died after inhaling poisonous fumes.

According to the latest official reports, 4,620 miners have died in China’s notoriously dangerous mines in the past nine months alone.

Pakistan teachers protest

Teachers in three regions of Pakistan protested in the past two weeks over working conditions. Teachers in Punjab province demonstrated on October 23, carrying banners and placards demanding that the provincial government stop employing teachers on short-term contracts. A heavy police contingent blocked demonstrators from going onto the roadway.

Teachers from Nawabshah in Sindh province held a protest rally on October 25, demanding the payment of salaries at the start of every month. They have consistently had to endure the late payment of their salaries.

Secondary, higher and middle school teachers in the country’s Dadu region boycotted classes and demonstrated on October 28. They were protesting against alleged corrupt practices in the Executive District Office of Education.

West Australian school workers push for pay rise

On October 28, school workers in Western Australia began a campaign of rolling stoppages, with over 200 from the Swan District of Education going on strike. The workers are seeking a statewide pay increase of 15 percent over two years and improved working conditions. The Department of Education and Training had applied to the Industrial Commission for an order to stop the Swan action from going ahead.

Education assistants, cleaners, gardeners and other low-paid school staff marched on the Education Department building in East Perth on the same day. The workers have imposed a series of work bans in their respective workplaces.

The Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union suspended further industrial action after the department agreed to resume discussions on the union’s claim. Negotiations for a new work agreement have dragged on for the past three months.

Bus drivers continue campaign in South Australia

Drivers at Adelaide bus company SERCO stopped work on

October 29 to discuss the management's latest offer in a long-running pay dispute. The five-hour stoppage disrupted more than 100 bus services on the inner southern, northern and northeastern city routes.

The wage dispute began some six months ago. The drivers struck for four days in July after they rejected a company pay offer of 10 percent over three years. Details of the new proposal are not yet available.

Victimised teachers boycott new postings

On October 29, the Supreme Court rejected the appeal of five teachers against their forced transfer in August by the South Australian Department of Education. The five, who were employed at the Craigmare High School in Adelaide, were only given two days notice and have been on special sick leave since.

The transfer of the five, all active union members, took place following industrial action over a number of issues at the school. The victimisation sparked work stoppages and protests by teachers in Adelaide.

Supreme Court judge Justice Mullighan said he had rejected the teachers' appeal because the Education Department chief executive Steve Marshall had made his decision to transfer them "for good reasons". Confirming the transfers were a form of punishment for being involved union activity, Mulligan said "the school appeared to be in a state of crisis" and the conduct of the teachers was a "significant cause of the crisis".

While Education Minister Trish White said she expected them to report to the assigned schools, the five have decided to continue to boycott their new postings. They intend to take their case for reinstatement to Craigmare to the Teachers Appeal Board.

Forestry workers strike over wages

Timber workers at Carter Holt Harvey in Tumut in New South Wales walked off the job for 24 hours on October 24 over a new enterprise wages and conditions agreement. The union has been trying to negotiate a national agreement since April this year to cover Carter Holt workers in four Australian states.

The company is insisting on maintaining separate enterprise agreements. The workers also rejected the latest wage offer from the company as insufficient. During the course of the campaign, workers at Tumut and the company's facilities in Morwell, Victoria, have received lockout notices.

Thousands of building workers protest

Several thousand building workers in Melbourne, Victoria went on strike on October 27 and rallied outside the Melbourne Magistrates Court in the city centre. The workers were protesting against the charges that have been brought against Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union senior official John Setka for allegedly threatening two senior managers from construction company Grocon. The incident was supposed to have occurred last year in the aftermath of an industrial dispute, which ended with workers voting down a non-union agreement

at the company's Queen Victoria building site in Melbourne.

Roadside mechanics strike in Queensland

Full-time roadside mechanics at the RACQ in Brisbane went on strike on October 30 after being informed that they would be employed on contract. The 66 mechanics employed by the motoring organisation claim the move will lead to a drop in their pay.

The RACQ is attempting to maintain services by using labour from hire companies. Management has refused to discuss the issue with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union until there is a return to work.

New Zealand nurses continue rolling strikes

Nurses and other health workers at Oamaru Hospital continued rolling strike action this week. The strikes, which began with a two-hour stoppage on October 20, were resumed on October 29 and continued for a further two days. The workers are seeking to bring their pay rates in line with those paid to their counterparts in the South Island.

According to the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO), nurses and administrative staff at Oamaru, which is funded by the Otago District Health Board, are paid considerably less than those at nearby Timaru Hospital and elsewhere. A NZNO spokesman said the union was available at any time to "get back to the negotiations table" or return to mediation to resolve the dispute.

Meanwhile, senior nurses in the lower half of the North Island will receive a pay rise of up to 11 percent after accepting a new collective employment contract. About 400 senior nurses working as educators, charge nurses and nurse specialists ratified a multi-employer contract this week. The settlement came after 15 months of talks between the NZNO and seven district health boards. The settlement, which is in line with other agreements around the country, provides for annual progress through the salary scale, with access to "merit" steps based on "performance".



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