

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 November 2003

Bangladeshi knitwear workers fired on by police

Police in Narayanganj, Bangladesh fired on demonstrating garment workers on November 3, killing one worker and injuring 200 others. Thousands of garment workers from the BSCIC hosiery estate and surrounding factories near the town of Fatullah had gone on a half-day strike over salary arrears and poor working conditions. They are also seeking an eight-hour working day.

Demonstrations continued on the day following the slaying. Infuriated workers attacked 26 factories in the area. Several vehicles belonging to various companies were destroyed and one factory was set on fire. The columns of workers, however, avoided marching on the BSCIC estate, where large contingents of para-military police and security personnel were concentrated.

The workers are demanding that the government pay compensation to the dead worker's family and to the relatives of all those injured. The Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturing and Exporters Association called on the government to deploy the army to "stop the workers' movement in the country's knitwear sector".

Suspended Indonesian aircraft workers demand full pay

Thousands of suspended workers from state-owned aircraft maker PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) rallied in Jakarta on November 5. They are demanding the company pay them their salaries in full as per an agreement made at the time they were stood down in July. The 3,900 workers received only 10 percent of their pay this month, about 30,000 rupees (\$US3.50).

Originally 9,647 workers were suspended but 4,957 were recently reinstated after passing a selection test. Their wages have been slashed by 25 percent. The management claims it is unable to pay the full amounts because the government has not yet handed over a \$US54 million bridging loan to fund company's working capital and severance payments. The company has suffered financial problems since the economic crisis in mid-1997.

Power workers threaten strike against privatisation

Workers at state-owned electricity company PT PLN in Indonesia will go on strike on November 27 unless the government abandons its moves to sell the company's core business. The decision came this week after the PLN union reported the contents of a letter signed by the Director General of Electricity and Energy Utilities, Luluk Sumiarso, instructing PLN to restructure its transmission, distribution and power plant units into separate entities.

The union believes that Java and Bali will be the first candidates for power privatisation due to begin in 2007 because the large power consumption in these areas means they would be an extremely lucrative investment. Between them, the islands consume about 80 percent of the country's total power generation capacity of 21,000 megawatts (MW).

The restructuring of PLN's core businesses, including two of its most lucrative units—PT Indonesia Power and PT Pembangkit Jawa Bali (PJB)—is part of an agreement signed by the government in October for a \$US242.6 million loan from the World Bank. About half the loan will finance power projects in Java and Bali that will eventually end up in private hands.

Workers in Vietnam take action over working conditions

Workers in Vietnam are taking action against increasing levels of exploitation by overseas companies that have set up operations to take advantage of the country's cheap labour. On November 1, about 500 employees at Chinese-owned garment company Upgain in Ho Chi Minh City went on strike over management attempts to cut wages by lowering the unit price paid to workers. The workers also complained that management continually increased the length of shifts and supervisors were rude and abusive.

The Ho Chi Minh City Export Processing and Industrial Zones (Hepza) trade union president Le Trung Nghia negotiated with Upgain in an attempt to hose down the dispute. The company agreed only to "reconsider" unit prices after calculating October salaries.

Another 150 workers at the UK-owned AmanDa Food Co Ltd in southern Dong Nai province went on strike on the same day because management refused to pay correct salaries. The company, which processes seafood for export, insists on paying the same rate to both skilled and unskilled workers during a compulsory two-month probationary period for new employees. Employees are also required to work an extra 1-2 hours every shift for no extra pay.

Philippines courts hit by industrial action

Court workers throughout the Philippines began industrial action this week, demanding a pay increase. Some 900 walked out in Negros Occidental on November 3 for four days. Hundreds of others in the Cebu, Iloilo, Aklan and Bicol regions took leave en-masse on November 5. Manila court employees went on strike on the same day.

The workers ignored an appeal by Regional Trial Court Executive Judge Pepito Gellada to return to work. A spokesman for the court employees demanded to know why "only judges and justices were allowed pay increases".

Ambulance workers ban night rescue flights

Paramedics and ambulance officers in central Queensland voted on November 3 to support a ban on accompanying night rescues in single-engine helicopters. They believe flying at night is risky because the single-engine helicopters rely on pilots' visibility to navigate.

The ban comes in the wake of similar action by Queensland Health doctors who refused to fly in the aircraft at night after a single-engine Bell 407 on its way to a rescue crashed in the state's north, killing three crewmen.

The Ambulance Employees Union is conducting a poll of its

members to determine if they want to impose the ban statewide. Emergency rescue helicopter services are based in eight locations across the state with three relying solely on single-engine aircraft.

Australian electoral staff stop work over pay

About 700 workers employed by the Australian Electoral Commission (AEC) in 140 metropolitan and regional districts went on strike for three hours on November 7. The industrial action, which will disrupt trials of procedures and systems for the next federal election, followed a breakdown in negotiations in a long-running dispute over a new work agreement for wages and working conditions.

The workers are seeking a 4 percent wage rise each year over two years. Management wants to peg wages for three years, offering 3 percent on certification of the agreement, 3.5 percent from July 2004 and a further 4 percent from July 2005. Over 75 percent of the AEC workers, both union and non-union, rejected the management offer in August.

Workers walk out over asbestos contamination

Contract maintenance workers at the Shell Refinery in Newport, Melbourne walked off the job this week over the company ignoring complaints about asbestos contamination. The six workers, who had been on site for six weeks, reported on October 27 that they believed there was blue and white asbestos in piping on the site. The site is owned by the Port of Melbourne Authority and leased by oil companies Shell, Mobil, BP and Caltex.

Shell did not close down the site or carry out an inspection. The company claims that it is not responsible for the situation because there were no Shell employees involved and that the site is a joint oil industry pipeline facility. A labour-hire company employs the six contract workers involved.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union has called for Shell to release a list of employees and contractors who have worked on the site during the past 30 years and who may have been exposed to blue asbestos, the most deadly form of asbestos fibre.

New Zealand airline engineers impose bans in pay dispute

Engineers at Hamilton-based Eagle Air imposed work bans on November 1 after a breakdown in pay talks. The 18 staff at the airline's engineering base are now working reduced hours and refusing overtime. The bans will continue indefinitely. Eagle Air is a wholly-owned subsidiary of Air New Zealand and operates the airline's provincial routes.

The engineers want pay rates increased from \$15.75 to \$17 an hour but the company is trying to force a wage moratorium similar to one previously instituted at Air New Zealand. A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said Eagle Air had returned a \$5 million profit last year and the demand for a moratorium was a "bullying tactic" by Air New Zealand. He confirmed, however, that the EPMU was prepared to accept a wage moratorium this year if offered a "good rise" next year. Eagle's current offer was not "good enough".

Nurses pushed into mediation

The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) this week closed down rolling strikes by nurses and administrative staff at Oamaru Hospital and opted to return to mediation over collective agreement negotiations. A NZNO organiser said the union was "heartened" by a public statement from the Otago District Health Board's chief executive that there was "more money" available to settle the dispute. "We are holding out an olive branch and are willing to hold off from filing further strike notice to take a two-week timeframe to focus on mediation with all the

parties," she said.

Nurses and other health workers at Oamaru Hospital began rolling strike action 10 days previously, claiming pay parity with the rest of the South Island. The workers at Oamaru have significantly worse pay and conditions than other South Island nurses, but the employer has so far only offered a 1.9 percent rise. The NZNO said members would meet again after mediation to hear a report back and "consider their options".

Polytechnic lecturers in strike ballot

Academics at six New Zealand polytechnics this week voted on taking strike action after negotiations to conclude a multi-employer collective agreement remained deadlocked. After 16 days of negotiations between the polytechnics and the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE), pay offers from employers ranged from zero to 2.5 percent. The offers were accompanied by demands for the dismantling of standard workload protections for staff.

The lecturers involved in the dispute are from Waikato Institute of Technology, Western Institute of Technology (Taranaki), Northland Polytechnic, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Whitireia Community Polytechnic. Ballot results are yet to be announced.

Lockout notices issued to caregivers lifted

IHC, a support organisation in New Zealand for the intellectually disabled, withdrew lockout notices issued to about 2,000 union members involved in limited industrial action on November 4. About 200 workers were locked out while others kept working defiance of management orders. The employees will not have their pay docked after a deal between the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and IHC under which the SFWU agreed to end all industrial action.

SFWU national advocate John Ryall and the IHC said in a joint statement that an agreement had been reached in principle on a formula for backdating a 2 percent pay rise. Neither side will disclose further details before the union's 2,000 IHC members vote on the deal.

The SFWU held a three-hour strike a fortnight ago and last week re-imposed restrictions on doing paperwork and van-driving duties in a bid to gain backdating to May 12, when a previous collective agreement expired. The IHC argued that inadequate government funding meant it could not backdate the pay beyond August.



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