Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 November 2003

Riot police attack Cambodian garment workers

On November 19, 300 riot police armed with electric batons attacked 200 garment workers outside the Wonrex garment factory in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh. Seven workers were arrested during an hour-long clash. The workers, who have been holding protests for the past week over forced overtime and improper pay, had planned to march to the National Assembly building during a "fact finding" visit by US State Department officials. The officials were supposedly looking at conditions in the country's garment industry.

After police eventually withdrew from the factory area, Free Trade Union of Workers president Chea Vichea accused the authorities of using excessive force. Channy, an opposition parliamentary member who was involved in the protest, said he had several large welts on the lower part of his body after being beaten with electric batons. Police chief Suon Chheang Ly denied that Channy had been assaulted saying, "had authorities really wanted to beat the member of parliament, he would be dead".

After being informed of the incident, the US State Department's Office of International Labor Affairs director Robert Hagan, who was leading the fact-finding delegation, told the media that the general situation at Cambodian factories "appears to be improving, and there seems to be a better relationship between workers and management".

Hagan's report to the US government will influence the setting of the US trade export quota that Cambodia receives for 2004. The State Department claims improved working conditions and labour rights will gain Cambodia extra quota points. Since the passage of the 1999 US-Cambodia Bilateral Textile Agreement, the Cambodian garment industry's exports have quadrupled to $US1.3 billion, and the number of workers employed has grown from 80,000 to more than 220,000.

Singapore Airline pilots oust union leadership

Pilots at Singapore Airlines have voted to remove the 20 office bearers of the Air Line Pilots Association of Singapore, including union president Dilip Padbidri. Pilots voted no confidence in the union leadership at an extraordinary general meeting on November 17.

While the vote at the meeting was 55 to 45 in favour of the no-confidence resolution, 1,000 votes were cast earlier at ballot boxes at the airport with the union's office overwhelmingly supporting the move.

Pilots are angry over the union leadership's acceptance of company demands for wage cuts and layoffs. After recording a loss of $312 million for the three months from April to June (its first loss ever), the airline sacked 596 staff, including 26 pilots, and shed 145 more jobs via early retirement. Those who remained were forced to take compulsory unpaid leave and wage cuts of between 5 percent and 16.5 percent.

The move against the leadership was sparked by the announcement last month that Singapore Airlines made a $306 million profit for the third quarter of this year. It is believed that the successful no confidence vote is only the second time this has happened in the union's 22-year history.

Deaths multiply in Chinese mine blast

An explosion on November 14 at the Jianxin Coal Mine in China's Jiangxi province killed 49 miners. Initially 55 workers were trapped underground as a result of the blast. The mine has been shut since the explosion while investigators look into the cause of the accident.

Jianxin is one of the largest state-run coalmines in southern China with an annual capacity of 600,000 tonnes. Figures on mine deaths in China for the past eight months reveal that on average 17 coal miners are killed every day.

Indian power workers work-to-rule for promotions

Power engineers in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh began a work-to-rule campaign from November 18 for the implementation of long overdue promotions. They are demanding that "time-bound" promotions be introduced and that all vacancies be filled immediately.

According to engineers, there have been no promotions for the past two and half years resulting in 48 managerial positions being left vacant, in addition to other categories. Engineers are working only from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Faults in power generation or transmissions that occur outside these times are not attended to until the next day.

The campaign is organised by the Uttar Pradesh Rajya Vidyut Parishad Abhiyanta Sangh. Engineers are planning to intensify the industrial action if their demands are not met.

Indian bank workers on indefinite strike

An indefinite strike by workers at the Ellaquai Dehati Bank (EDB) in Srinagar, capital of the northern Indian state of Kashmir, entered its 12th day on November 17. The strike affects 80 banks in the Kashmir valley.

The bank workers' main demand is that all vacancies are filled through the recruitment of new staff. Workers say that EDB branches scattered in far-flung and remote areas of the valley are without proper staff or security. They pointed out that just 32 clerks and 75 officers are running all 80 branches while vacancies exist for 110 clerks and 50 officers.

A workers' spokesman said some branches are run by a single person, putting employees at enormous risk. He highlighted the fact that 18 of the bank branches had been looted during the past 10 years because of the lack of security.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike over late salary payments

Transport workers in the bus depots in Kandy and Matara went on strike on November 10 and November 11 respectively, demanding the payment of salaries due on November 9. The strike at Matara involved 150 bus drivers, 129 bus conductors and 65 technical staff.

The non-payment of salaries to bus workers has become a regular occurrence, forcing them to take industrial action to gain payment. Kandy is situated 115 kilometres from Colombo and Matara is 160 kilometres south of the capital.

Medical scientists rally against pathology deregulation

Around 200 medical scientists went on strike on November 18 and rallied against the Victorian state Labor government's decision to abolish the Pathology Services Accreditation Board (PSAB). The PSAB was established to regulate pathology services and ensure accurate pathology testing. The rally called on the state government to immediately abandon its plan and endorsed a resolution condemning the move.

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At the rally, health professionals expressed their grave concern at the removal of the PSAB, saying that only last year 34,000 women had to be re-screened because of inaccurate pathology tests. They claimed that if pathology services in Victoria were deregulated it would remove any guarantee that tests would be reliable.

Victorian chairperson of Australian Medical Scientists, Professor Alan Turner, told the rally that the government's decision to deregulate pathology services was "unbelievable". "The Minister will argue that Commonwealth regulations will apply to our pathology services but these regulations are flawed and lack the strength of the current Act."

Education workers protest job cuts

About 1,200 workers from Victoria's Department of Education and Training went on strike on November 17 to protest against planned staff cuts. They are opposing the state Labor government's program, titled "Blueprint for Education," which was launched last week. It will destroy at least 300 departmental jobs.

Victorian Education Minister Lynne Kosky declared that she is determined to continue with the government's plans despite industrial action, and that all sectors of the education system must reduce costs.

Nurses reject pay deal package

Nurses in Victoria this week rejected a government pay offer that is conditional on them agreeing to staffing changes. The offer is for an immediate 2.25 percent pay increase with a further 0.75 percent if nurses agree to the ending of the current staffing system, which requires the provision of one nurse for every four patients.

An Australian Nurses Association spokesperson said nurses would not condone the scrapping of the present nurse-to-patient ratio because "for the first time, they have been able to control their workload". According to the union, "beginner nurses" were one of the lowest paid professions in the state, with salaries far lower than new teachers and police officers.

Manufacturing workers locked out at two plants

On November 19, Australian Defence Industries locked out 200 workers at one of its plants in the regional town of Bendigo in central Victoria. The lockout occurred after Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members rejected conditions demanded by management in a new enterprise work agreement and negotiations became deadlocked.

A union spokesman said the workers were looking for a far better wages and conditions package than the one offered by management. The lockout could last more than one week and workers decided to picket the site until it is lifted.

In a separate dispute over a new work agreement, P&H Mine Pro at Mount Thorley in New South Wales locked out 65 maintenance workers for two weeks on November 14. The workers have been campaigning for seven months for a new work agreement, including improved wages and working conditions.

The company rejected negotiating a collective work contract and is pushing workers to sign up to a non-union agreement. An AMWU spokesman said the company is using contract labour to continue operating during the lockout. Workers are picketing outside the front gate. The same company locked out workers in a similar dispute last year at its Moss Vale plant.

Blackouts possible as dispute at power station continues

A strike by 60 AMWU members at Western Power's Kwinana power station in Western Australia has entered its third week. The striking workers, employed by labour hire company Skilled Engineering on a maintenance shutdown at the power station, claim that they are being paid below the correct rate and are demanding a pay increase.

The strikers have set up a picket line outside the plant. Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union and Australian Services Union members, who are permanent workers at the station, have refused to cross the picket line. This week they forced Western Power management to re-deploy them to other locations after rallying outside the company's head office.

According to union officials, if the dispute continues it could result in power blackouts as the state enters its hottest period.

Stevedoring company locks out workers

Maintenance workers, members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), at ports in Sydney and Brisbane were locked out on November 17 in a dispute with stevedoring company Patrick Corporation. Patrick has outsourced its maintenance work to labour-hire company Skilled Engineering. On November 16, Skilled Engineering announced that it would not hire workers employed by Transfield, the previous contract holder.

Those to be re-hired were told they would be locked out if they did not sign individual employment contracts. They are now picketing the engineering workshops.

New Zealand polytechnic staff face suspension

Northland Polytechnic threatened to suspend staff who went on strike for two days last week over pay. The polytechnic's chief executive decided on the suspensions for the duration of the strike but said he had delayed taking the action "in good faith". The threat came after staff struck on November 12 and 13 and threatened to continue for a third day after their claim for a 2 percent pay increase was rejected.

The polytechnic refused to pay any increase for the first year and only 1.5 percent for the second year. After suffering financial problems last year the polytechnic is currently under the jurisdiction of a crown manager and depends on loan funding. It is facing a budgeted deficit of $1.5 million for 2003.

An Association of Staff in Tertiary Education spokesman said the union had presented "alternatives" that would "minimise financial impacts on the polytechnic, while enabling staff to maintain relativity with others in the sector".

Staff at the Western Institute of Technology Taranaki, Unitec in Auckland, the Waikato Institute of Technology, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic and Whitireia Community Polytechnic have also been involved in industrial action over deadlocked negotiations.

Employer gets token fine over building site death

New Zealand property developer Brent Clode and two of his companies have been fined a total of just $89,000 over the death of building worker Te Rue Taparia Tearetoa, who was crushed when a wall collapsed on him on an Auckland building site. The property developer was building a multi-level apartment block at the inner-city site. Another worker, Bruce Harvey, was badly injured when he was buried up to his neck by debris.

The court was told Clode's engineering company failed to comply with building consents and changed construction methods. It had also excavated the site to a depth of 7 metres instead of the approved 4.5 metres. The court found that had consents procedures been followed there would have been no death or injury. The prosecution said the deviation from the consents was gross and, from an engineering perspective, "reckless in the extreme".

The judge awarded $12,500 to the Cook Islands parents of the dead worker. The man's sister, Annie Tearetoa, said Clode, a former Olympic canoeist, had got off lightly and her father was extremely angry at the outcome. "My car cost more than that," she said. Another $7,500 was awarded to Harvey. Clode originally faced some 85 charges under the Health and Safety in Employment Act and the matter was due for trial beginning last week. But Clode pleaded guilty to 25 charges after the others were withdrawn.

Fiji construction workers strike over wages

About 150 building workers walked off the job at the Fletcher Construction site in Suva on November 14, demanding a pay increase and improved working conditions. The company ordered the workers to call off the industrial action and return to work or they would be sacked.

Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck said that while the action by the company was illegal, it was also illegal for the union to call the strike. He

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then declared, “it would be in the best interest of the staff to go back to work” and promised he would request the company to discuss the issues with the employees.

PNG pilots union calls off impending strike

The National Air Pilots Union at Papua New Guinea’s state-owned airline Air Niugini called off a scheduled strike this week after signing an agreement with the airline. The pilots at the airline who fly international routes have been locked in a protracted dispute and were working to rule after rejecting company demands for a 10 percent pay cut.

The airline claimed it needed to cut wages of staff earning over $US11,000 annually in a bid to resolve some of its financial difficulties. Union president Captain Peter Ansphil claimed that one of the core issues in the dispute was the company’s refusal to present its financial audits for 2001 and 2002. While details of the new agreement have not yet been made public, Ansphil had indicated earlier that the union might consider the pay cut if Air Niugini allowed an independent auditor to check its books and determine the company’s financial situation.

Noumea doctors strike for improved conditions

Doctors in the emergency ward at New Caledonia’s main hospital in Noumea went on strike on November 18 in support of improved working conditions. They are demanding that their present category as hospital assistants be upgraded to that of other doctors who are classified as hospital practitioners. The emergency ward doctors say that while they carry out the same standard of work they do not receive the same benefits.

The strikers also demanded increased staff numbers because wards are understaffed. The hospital authorities have continued to ignore the issues even though the emergency doctors went on strike one month ago. Meanwhile, other doctors at the hospital have been protesting the cancellation of their accrued leave.

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