

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 November 2003

Immigrant workers sacked for demanding correct pay in Thailand

After they stopped work and staged a protest for improved pay and working conditions, 115 Burmese female immigrant workers at a Taiwanese knitting factory in Thailand were sacked in mid-November.

The workers demanded their wages be lifted from 70-80 baht a day to the legal minimum of 133 baht (\$US3.30). They stopped work when the factory owner, Simon Sue, refused to meet them to discuss the issue.

The immigrant employees complain that working conditions at the plant are also extremely poor. Even though they had been promised Sundays off, they were forced to work seven days a week. The sacked workers are still owed wages.

Such conditions are widespread in Thailand. In recent inspections, 27 out of 32 factories visited by government officials were found to be in violation of minimum wage and welfare laws.

South Korean workers face law suit over strikes

The management at Hyundai Motors' Ulsan factory announced this week it had filed a damages suit against nine workers for leading strikes at the company on November 6 and 12.

The strikes were part of national action called by the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions against the use of the repressive provisional seizure laws that allow employers to rip millions of dollars out of unions and individual workers for losses caused by so-called illegal strikes. Over the past months there have been a spate of suicides by workers protesting the laws.

If the company succeeds with its suit, the outcome will be devastating for the nine workers involved. The company claims that the strikes cost it 34.2 billion won (\$US28.5 million) and is seeking 100 million won damages from the alleged strike leaders. Management said it is also considering filing damage suits against other unionists.

Nine killed in explosion at Indian detonator factory

Nine workers were killed in a blast at Indian Detonators Ltd (IDL), a detonator fuse manufacturing facility in Kukatpally, Hyderabad. The explosion occurred on the afternoon of November 25, an hour after the commencement of the second shift. Three surviving workers were admitted to the hospital with injuries.

The powerful explosion collapsed the entire facility strewing charred bodies all around and shattering windows of homes in a one-kilometre radius. The factory is situated just a few hundred metres away from a suburb with 200,000 residents. According to a spokesman for Gulf Oil, which merged with IDL some time ago, the blast occurred when a motor was switched on.

Unit-11, where the blast occurred, was established two years ago and was a cramped facility with little space to move. Yet it was using high explosives such as PETN (penta-erythritol-tetra-nitrate), which can ignite an object many kilometres away in a fraction of a second. In 1979, five workers were killed in another unit of the same factory.

In a bid to defuse tensions building up among workers, Andhra Pradesh Chief Minister Chandrababu Naidu ordered a judicial inquiry into the latest incident and promised all precautions to prevent a recurrence. IDL

announced compensation of 1.5 million rupees (\$US30,000) for each of the dead workers' families and 200,000 rupees (\$US4,000) for those injured.

Indian publicity workers demonstrate for jobs

Workers at the Pondicherry Information and Publicity Department held a demonstration in the office premises this week demanding that all job vacancies be filled immediately. They want 20 percent of vacant Public Relations Assistants (PRAs) posts to be filled by reporters from the department and the remaining 80 percent through direct recruitment. The workers are also demanding that the vacant position of Assistant Director at the department's Karaikal branch be filled.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand festival bonus

On November 21, garment workers across Bangladesh joined demonstrations to demand the payment of a festival bonus. The Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council organised the demonstrations in a number of garment industrial districts. The council is an umbrella organisation covering seven garment workers' federations, including the National Garment Workers Federation.

The past weeks have seen several protests by garment workers over the deplorable conditions in the industry. On November 3, one employee was killed and several others injured when police opened fire on a demonstration of thousands of garment workers from the Bangladesh Knitwear Manufacturing and Exporters Association hosiery estate near the town of Fatullah. The workers were demanding the payment of wage arrears and improved working conditions.

Sri Lankan municipal workers on sick note campaign

Workers from the accounts section of the Gampaha Municipal Council, a city adjoining the Colombo municipality, held a sick note campaign on November 21. Workers stayed away from work en-masse by reporting in sick.

The action was to protest the use of abusive language by a parliamentary member from the ruling United National Front against the accounts section staff. The dispute held up salary payments of other municipal workers.

Transport workers continue strike over salary delays

A strike by transport workers in the bus depot in Matara, one of the major cities in southern Sri Lanka, entered its second week on November 18. The workers are demanding the payment of overdue wages totaling 1.7 million rupees (\$US17,000).

Those on strike include 150 drivers, 129 conductors and 65 technical staff. Approximately 50 buses are out of service.

Australia and the Pacific

WA teachers strike for pay and conditions

More than 10,000 teachers employed in state secondary and primary schools across Western Australia (WA) walked out for 24 hours on November 18 as part of a push for a 30 percent pay rise over three years and improved working conditions. It was the first all-day strike in eight years.

About 5,000 teachers marched on state parliament to protest the Labor

government's refusal to negotiate. The government has offered teachers a rise of between 9 and 14 percent over two and a half years. The pay dispute is now headed for the arbitration commission, with a hearing scheduled for next week.

In a parallel dispute, more than 7,000 WA state public servants, members of the Community and Public Sector Union and the Civil Service Association, went on strike for 24 hours on November 27 as part of an ongoing campaign for a pay increase. The workers want a 6.3 percent a year increase for the next three years but the Labor government has offered only 11.1 percent, spread over three years.

Picket lines were established outside metropolitan and regional government offices and Parliament House, yet all Labor MPs complied with an instruction from Premier Geoff Gallop to cross the picket.

Among the departments closed during the strike were Land Titles, Vehicle Licensing, Fisheries, Land Management, Housing, Marine and Harbors and the Department of Consumer and Employment Services.

Hospital workers walk out over pay

Enrolled nurses and allied health support staff went on strike this week at the Peel Health Campus in Mandurah, south of Perth, in a dispute over pay and leave entitlements.

The workers, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, are demanding an eight percent pay rise over two years, plus leave entitlements equivalent to health workers employed in the WA public health system.

The Peel Health management has offered just six percent. The hospital is run privately but dependent largely on government funding to service the growing population in the southern region. Workers are due to meet later this week to consider further industrial action.

Aged-care workers protest over staffing levels

Aged-care health workers employed at the William Carey Court Village Aged Facility in Busselton, in Western Australia's southwest, walked off the job this week to protest inadequate staffing levels and increased workloads.

The expansion of the aged-care facility, with the opening of a 17-bed dementia unit, left workers unable to cope with the extra workloads or maintain their standard of patient care and normal duties. The health workers are considering further action if management does not address the issues.

Train drivers stop work in pay dispute

Perth metropolitan train drivers in Western Australia called a snap strike this week walking off the job for two hours to attend a stop-work meeting to discuss progress in negotiations over back pay.

The train drivers, members of the Rail Tram and Bus Industry Union, returned to work after the meeting but threatened further strike action in coming weeks if the back pay issue is not resolved.

Childcare workers demand wage rise

Childcare workers in South Australia, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, lodged a claim on November 25 with the Industrial Relations Commission for a new wages and conditions agreement. They want a 25 percent wage rise.

The workers say they are among the lowest paid workers in the state. Many unqualified childcare workers are paid an hourly rate as low as \$11.80, while qualified staff with two years study and training earn just \$14 an hour.

NRMA workers strike over wage deal

National Road and Motorists Association (NRMA) roadside maintenance workers in New South Wales walked off the job for 24 hours on November 28. The strike is over a breakdown in negotiations for a new wages and conditions agreement and plans by the NRMA to employ contractors. The strike is the third by mechanics in the last two months.

On the eve of the strike, the NRMA withdrew threats to sack the roadside mechanics over their plan to stage a protest at the company's

annual general meeting in Sydney while wearing their uniforms. About 420 roadside maintenance workers are involved in the dispute.

Mining union backs off national strike threat

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) dropped threats of a national strike over mine safety after the issue went to the Industrial Relations Commission this week. The union is demanding that the responsibility for safety in New South Wales (NSW) and Queensland mines be taken out of the hands of the Department of Mines and given to another body, such as WorkCover.

The union claims that despite hundreds of mining deaths in both states over the years, the Department of Mines has not successfully prosecuted companies involved in fatalities. The CFMEU holds that WorkCover has been more successful in convicting employers over safety breaches.

The claim, however, does not stack-up against recent revelations showing that NSW WorkCover has failed to successfully prosecute a single employer over a workplace death. Fines handed out to companies are acknowledged by the unions to be incredibly lenient.

Despite the deaths of its own members, the CFMEU has not conducted a serious national industrial and political campaign over the issue because the union is deeply implicated in undermining safety in the coal industry.

Over the past 15 years, under the drive to make national-based mining companies "internationally competitive," mining unions have presided over the introduction of conditions that have contributed directly to the demise of safety, including the introduction of 12-hour shifts, seven-day working rosters and reduction in manning levels.

New Zealand nurses take action over pay and contract claims

About 60 nurses and support staff at the Redwood Lodge Rest Home in Rotorua went on strike for 24 hours on November 25 and November 27. Earlier in the month, the nurses had picketed the rest home as part of an industrial campaign for a collective work agreement, including minimum staffing levels.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) says the employer NZ Lifecare will not agree to the level of staffing necessary for the safety and quality care of the elderly residents. The staff are angry at a pay offer that would take the hourly rate for most to just \$10.60.

In a separate dispute, on November 19, hundreds of nurses from the lower North Island took a day off work to join nurses from the 21 district health boards in presenting a 9,000-signature petition over their pay to parliament. The NZNO is campaigning for equal pay with police and teachers. The median wage for graduate nurses is \$31,592, compared to about \$37,000 for teachers and more than \$41,000 for police. Senior nurses get less than \$43,000, compared to \$60,000 for police.

After receiving the petition, Associate Health Minister and Women's Affairs Minister Ruth Dyson said a taskforce had been set up to "look at the issue". But in response to questions in parliament, Health Minister Annette King said no additional funding had yet been committed.

Meanwhile, Oamaru Hospital nurses have accepted a pay offer giving them parity with their South Island colleagues and settling a long-running wages dispute.

Talks resume in tertiary education pay disputes

As a result of mediation held in Auckland last week, negotiations have resumed between the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) and employers from six New Zealand polytechnics. Staff at the institutions had struck for two days during the previous week and served notice of further industrial action.

ASTE national president Lloyd Woods said the talks for a multi-employer collective agreement were "back on track" and that mediation had been instrumental in "shifting" the employers on some demands. The union claims employers were no longer seeking to increase the number of teaching days and there were indications from management that there would be "movement" on salaries. Salary offers had previously ranged between zero percent and just over two percent. Woods said that while

there were still some “significant and difficult issues on the table,” he believed the parties could reach a “satisfactory resolution”.

University unions and employers also met this week to resume the negotiation of national collective employment agreements in the university sector. University unions want a 10 percent per annum salary increase over the next three years for academic staff and 10 percent in 2004 for general staff, plus increases in job evaluation alignments to the higher quartiles of the salary market.

Bank staff seek first pay rise in 12 years

Workers at the New Plymouth-based Taranaki Savings Bank (TSB) have begun negotiating the first collective contract in 12 years. A union-sponsored “community support meeting” was held in the provincial centre on November 24, before pay talks opened the next day.

A spokesman for the bank workers’ union Finsec said that while the TSB promoted itself as a fully New Zealand-owned organisation with 150 years of service to communities, its staff earned far less under individual agreements than those of other banks. Some still received just \$21,000 a year. The union is seeking a 3.5 percent pay rise and improved conditions such as a fourth week annual leave.

Fiji government drops legal action against employer

Hospitality workers and former employees at Fiji’s Turtle Island Resort have vowed to continue protest rallies around the island after the Labour Minister mysteriously withdrew legal action against resort owner Richard Evanson.

After a long-running dispute between Evanson and resort staff over union recognition, he was charged by the Ministry of Labour for not complying with a Compulsory Recognition Order it issued stating that he was not complying with the Trade Unions Recognition Act 1998.

The order was issued on January 22 this year. Evanson ignored the order, so the case was set for mention on November 7. At the last minute Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck withdrew the case.

The resort employs 172 workers but 23 were sacked when they bypassed the in-house staff association and sought assistance from the National Union of Hospitality Catering and Tourism (NUHCTIE).

NUHCTIE general secretary Timoci Naivaluwaqa has demanded that Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase call an investigation. He told the *Fiji Sun* there is “something fishy about the withdrawal” of the legal action. He pointed out that the officer in charge of the case was sent on an overseas assignment. The union was also informed that the ministry had lost all the files on the Turtle Island dispute.

The union is still seeking the assistance of the IUF (International Union of Food and Allied Workers) to pursue the case against the resort. The union contacted the IUF in March but the international body has merely sent protest letters to the Turtle Island Resort management.

Solomon Islands public servants set to strike

Joint Public Sector Unions Committee chairman Clement Waiwari told the Solomon Islands Broadcasting Corporation on November 26 that public servants are ready to strike when a 28-day strike notice expires on November 28. He pointed out that international and domestic flights in and out of Honiara would be disrupted as part of the strike.

The strike notification was issued to the government after its repeated refusals to negotiate a new wage deal. On November 20, Finance Minister Francis Zama delivering the 2004 Budget to parliament saying there would be no pay increases for public servants until the government’s budget was stabilised and the debt situation became clearer.

The public sector unions are seeking police permission to stage a demonstration outside parliament house to present a petition to the prime minister.



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