

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 December 2003

Korean union cuts deal to end Nestlé strike

A 145-day strike by 460 workers at the Nestlé plant in South Korea was called off on November 28 after the union cut a deal with the company. The union agreed to accept a 5.5 percent pay increase, down from the original claim of 11.7 percent. The deal includes an improved voluntary retirement package that gives workers six weeks pay for every year of service.

The union abandoned its demand for the right to approve future contracting-out arrangements and any changes in conditions of employment. It has agreed, however, to participate in a union-management committee to discuss “procedures” for voluntary redundancy and downsizing.

Nestlé, which supplies 40 percent of South Korea’s coffee market, attempted to intimidate workers during the strike by threatening to close down its operations in the country. It made the threat under conditions of a series of plant closures and relocations by other firms this year. According to a recent report, foreign direct investment in South Korea fell almost 20 percent in the third quarter of this year, the fourth consecutive quarterly decline.

Thai workers demand end to subcontract system

Around 500 workers from Singapore-based MMI Precision (Thailand) demonstrated outside the Singapore Embassy in Bangkok this week to demand that the company end its subcontract policy. Only about half of the 3,000 workers at MMI Precision (Thailand) are fulltime, with the rest employed on subcontract.

A spokesperson for the workers said that subcontract staff were denied two-monthly bonuses, six-month subsidies for pregnant employees, lump sum severance payments and other benefits received by fulltime employees. They are also denied uniforms and access to the childcare centre.

Police seize Indian childcare workers

On December 1, police in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh arrested 150 childcare workers demonstrating outside the Rangareddy District Collectorate. Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union state convenor was among those detained. The workers were demanding full government employee status, regular payment of salaries and allowances, and an end to harassment by government officials.

Childcare workers are currently paid once every three or four months. They are also forced to retire at 58 but because they are not fully recognised government employees they do not receive retirement benefits, such as pension and gratuity. They want a monthly retirement pension of 1,000 rupees (\$US20) for childcare workers and 500 rupees for assistants.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike over conditions

Transport workers at Anuradhapura bus depot, 270 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on November 30 to protest against company

mismanagement.

Workers claim that directors are misusing funds needed to maintain services and run the depot. Even though there are 96 roadworthy buses in the depot, only 75 are currently in operation. Another 30 buses are in need of repairs. Electricity supplies were recently cutoff to the depot due to non-payment of bills.

If the issues are not solved soon workers are planning to turn to other transport workers in the North Central region for support.

Sri Lankan health workers on walk out again

Thousands of health workers throughout the country went on strike for two days on December 2 to demand a 44 percent pay rise, in line with the increase recently won by medical officers. Members of the All Ceylon Health Workers Union picketed the Health Ministry in Central Colombo over the issue and to register their opposition to government moves to privatise the health sector.

Some 80,000 workers across Sri Lanka, from minor staff to assistant medical practitioners, staged a two-week strike in September in support of the pay increase.

New South Wales teachers vote to strike

About 50,000 teachers from public schools and Technical and Further Education colleges (TAFE) in New South Wales (NSW) held stop-work meetings on December 2 to discuss an ongoing campaign for a new work agreement and a 25 percent pay increase.

The meeting overwhelmingly voted for a statewide 48-hour strike on February 11, at the beginning of the 2004 school term. The teacher also voted to place bans on conducting examinations. TAFE teachers are considering bans on collecting fees and signing enrollment forms.

Many union members called for stronger action, including an indefinite strike, but a senior union official dismissed this, saying teachers needed to “keep their power dry”.

The State Labor Government has dismissed the pay claim as “unaffordable” and is offering only six percent over two years. The NSW Teachers Federation is concerned that there will be cuts to teaching staff and working conditions to fund any pay offer.

The Department of Education has already confirmed that it is eliminating 1,000 jobs from its head offices and sending 100 teachers employed in the administration section back into the schools, as part of a \$70 million cost-cutting program.

Academics strike over wages

About 200 academic staff at the University of Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on December 3 in a continuing dispute over a new wages and conditions agreement. The action, the third strike in eight weeks, followed the refusal of the university management to sign a new pay deal.

The dispute has been inflamed by the federal government’s direct interference in negotiations between the National Tertiary Education

Union and the university management. The government has insisted on linking future funding to changes in university industrial relations structures.

Freight drivers strike over work agreement

Pacific National (PN) train drivers in South Australia and New South Wales went on strike on December 5, following a break down in negotiations for a new wages and conditions agreement. The company is refusing to discuss sick pay provisions and salary maintenance. PN is also threatening to cut drivers' wages unless they accept single-driver operations on freight and coal trains.

Warehouse workers walkout over pay dispute

Warehouse workers at Woolworth supermarket chain in Sydney went on strike on December 4 after negotiations over a wage claim broke down. More than 1,000 National Union of Workers members are employed at five different company warehouses. Woolworth's management wants trade offs in return for 13 percent pay rise over two-and-a-half years.

Quarantine workers robbed of pay and working conditions

Workers manning the Yanba quarantine depot for the Primary Industries Department in South Australia have been working to regulation since November 30. The dispute began when the department abolished a shift penalty and worksite transport payments.

Both conditions had been in place since 1960. The workers want reinstatement of the lost benefits or suitable compensation for their removal and are demanding department officials meet with them to resolve the issue or they will escalate industrial action.

Western Australian public servants union offers to lower pay claim

Western Australia branch secretary of the Community and Public Sector Union, Toni Walkington, told the media this week that the union is willing to lower its pay demand if the state Labor government agrees to discuss job protection and improved working conditions for public servants in regional areas.

The union was seeking an 18.9 percent pay increase over three years for all public servants. The state government offered between 9.3 percent and 11.1 percent over the same period and ruled out negotiations on other issues.

Walkington's statement comes only days after public servants struck for 24 hours in support of the pay demand and pledged further action unless they get satisfaction. Last week Labor MPs crossed public servants' picket lines outside state parliament.

WA health workers continue strike

Health workers at the privately owned Peel Health Campus in Mandurah, Western Australia, are continuing strike action despite hospital management threats to lockout them out indefinitely if they do not return to work. The hospital covers the Peel Region, south of Perth, and is partly government funded.

Staff have established a "tent embassy" outside the hospital. They are demanding an eight percent pay rise over two years and leave entitlements equivalent to those paid to WA public health workers.

Those on strike include enrolled nurses, patient support staff, sterilising technicians, orderlies, cleaners and gardeners. Sue Lines, Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union acting secretary, said this week that Peel Health Campus employees were among the poorest paid workers in Australia.

New Zealand rest home staff to continue strike

Nurses and support staff at Rotorua's Redwood Lodge Rest Home and Hospital have voted to take further strike action before Christmas, after striking for two days last week. They plan to walk out on

December 11 and 17 over a contract dispute with their employer, NZ Lifecare.

The company has refused to increase staffing to levels workers believe essential for the safety and proper care of elderly residents. Staff are also angry that management's offer to increase the hourly rate of most staff to just \$NZ10.60 is tied to a threat to slash weekend allowances.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) is calling for a salary range of \$10.00 to \$12.50 for caregivers, based on formal qualifications and experience. NZ Lifecare rejected an offer by the NZNO that it would cancel strike action planned for this week if the company would agree to return to mediation.

Solomon Islands public service workers out on strike

Thousands of striking public servants in the Solomon Islands were called back to work on December 2, after the government referred their wage dispute to the Trades Dispute Panel. The workers, from nine different ministries and various public sector unions, went on strike on November 28 to demand a 50 percent wage increase. The government has repeatedly ruled out the rise, saying it is unaffordable.

The Joint Public Sector Unions Committee says that the last pay increase awarded to public officers was in 1996 and the current claim is to compensate for inflation since then. While the Trades Dispute Panel held its first meeting on the issue on December 2, there have been no reports on the outcome. Also in dispute is the government's delay in paying a package for public servants made redundant since 2001.

Radio Australia reported on December 3 that the Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission currently operating in the Solomon Islands is planning to cut the size of the public service next year to make it more cost effective.

PNG waterfront workers get pay increase

An attempt by Papua New Guinea (PNG) stevedoring employers to bring about sweeping industrial reforms at PNG ports in exchange for wage increases has failed.

In a surprise ruling this week, the Arbitration Tribunal granted port workers a 12 percent pay increase while rejecting nearly all the measures proposed by the Stevedoring Association of Licensed Contractors. These included demands for "flexible employment" and changes in award conditions.

The wage increase, plus a 12 percent increase to all allowances, will become effective from January 2004 and is to be backdated to January 2003. Port workers had been attempting to get a log-of-claims for improved wages and working conditions before the Tribunal since 2001. While formal hearings on the matter were concluded in May this year, it was only after a 24-hour strike by port workers in September that tribunal chairman Pex Avos agreed to make a final decision on the issues.



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