

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 September 2004

Filipino fishermen strike for better wages and conditions

About 200 Filipino crew-members of a Philippines-based fish supply company are continuing a week-long strike over pay and conditions. The company is the major supplier of fish to RD Tuna Limited in Madang, Papua New Guinea. The strike is affecting production at the company's cannery.

The striking workers are paid below International Labour Organisation (ILO) recognised rate, receive no overtime payments and incorrect bonus payments. Nor are the men covered by workers' compensation.

Crew members claim that the fishing vessels are not seaworthy, lack basic firefighting equipment and have asked the International Federation of Transport and the Maritime Union of Australia to intervene and negotiate a resolution to the dispute.

Despite RD Tuna losing around \$US200,000 daily, managing director Pete Celso is refusing to meet with the unions on the basis that the strikers are not employed by the company.

Pakistani teachers demonstrate for contract renewal

Contract teachers from primary schools in Mirpurkhas demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club on August 27 demanding confirmation in their jobs. Contract Primary School Teachers Association president Sain Bakhsh Wasan told the media that the teachers were contracted in 2001-2002 for three years. They are concerned that the government has not yet announced whether the contracts will be renewed and have threatened to intensify the campaign if confirmation is not announced soon.

Indian child care workers campaign for better facilities

Childcare workers in Manglore, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, held a sit-in (dharna) in front of the city's Dakshina Kannada Panchayat office (Village Council) on August 24.

They are campaigning for several demands, including a regular monthly payment for kerosene and firewood, as well as maternity and other medical leave. The workers submitted a memorandum to the head of the Department of Women and Child Welfare.

In an unrelated dispute, sanitary workers and overhead tank workers employed by Panchayat in Madera held a demonstration on August 30. They want a Pongal festival bonus of 1,500 rupees (\$US 30), a minimum wage, the disbursement of salaries by the fifth day of every month, paid maternity leave, job security and pensions.

Indian transport workers protest against privatisation

Hundreds of transport workers at the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) demonstrated in Mysore City on August 31 to protest against the state government's plan to privatise the bus transport sector. KSRTC has a fleet of more than 14,500 buses and employs 75,000 workers.

The workers marched through the city to the Deputy Commissioners' office. The demonstrators also condemned police for "highhandedness" and assaults on KSRTC workers during an anti-privatisation protest in Hubli on August 26.

Under the government's plan, private buses will be allowed to operate a

distance of 50 kilometres on rural routes and 25 kilometres in urban areas. More than 150 private operators have already sought government permission to operate services in urban areas.

A spokesman for the KSRTC Anti-Privatisation Committee said that if private bus operators were allowed to enter the field, "they will only be bothered about profits and will ply only on profitable routes". He pointed out that KSRTC was already effectively catering to the rural areas.

Indian auto parts workers on indefinite strike

Workers at the Ashok Leyland plant in Hosur, Karnataka, launched an indefinite strike on August 25 to demand a wage rise and confirmation of non-technical staff jobs. The strike brought production at the factory to a standstill. The company manufactures auto parts for buses and other vehicles.

Cooperative and textile workers campaign for improvements

On August 25, cooperative employees began fasting outside the Tallum Telegraph Office, India's southern Tamilnadu state. They are demanding 12 percent interest on their provident fund. The campaign is organised by the Tamilnadu Cooperative Employees Federation, an affiliate of the Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU).

On the same day, textile weaving workers from across the state demonstrated in Madurai demanding insurance cover and an increase in their monthly wage, which is just 2,000 rupees (\$US40). The demonstration was called by the Madurai United Handloom Workers Union. The union is also demanding that the official minimum wage be revised upwards and that Welfare Board benefits are extended to cover textile workers.

Mineral workers protest against factory closure

Workers at Cochin Minerals and Rutiles Ltd (CMRL), together with family members, held a dharna (sit-down protest) on August 30 in front of the company offices in Kochi, in the southern Indian state of Kerala. They are protesting against their impending unemployment.

The Kerala State Pollution Control Board has directed the company to cease operations for environmental reasons, but the state government has taken no steps to secure alternative employment for the displaced workers.

Indian boat workers on strike

Hundreds of workers employed on tourist houseboats in Alappuzha, Kerala, went on an indefinite strike on August 25 demanding an increase in the Onam festival season bonus. They want the bonus equivalent of one month's salary.

Alappuzha has around 160 houseboats and the town is popularly known as the Venice of the East.

Sri Lankan university non-academics on indefinite strike

Non-academic staff employed at universities throughout Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on September 1. They are demanding the government implement Sri Lanka Institute of Development Administration (SLIDA) recommendations and resolve salary anomalies.

The strike has affected the Sri Lanka's entire university system, with universities closed and examinations and lectures disrupted.

The Acting Higher Education Minister said he has sent the SLIDA

salary report to the treasury and is waiting for its approval before acting. Workers have voted to continue the strike until the issue is resolved.

Power workers in Sri Lanka demand pay hike

Over 1,500 Sri Lankan power workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) picketed the company's head office in Central Colombo on September 1 to demand a scheduled pay rise. Workers were supposed to receive a salary increase by January 1, 2003. Instead, they received an allowance of just 1,200 rupees (\$US12).

They are also opposing the government's decision to revive of a previous government plan to restructure the CEB. The restructuring is designed to facilitate the privatisation of the CEB. Recently elected politicians who previously rejected the plan when in opposition are now supporting it.

The CEB Billing Officers' Union claims salary anomalies have exist since 1987 and that Power and Energy Minister Susil Premajayanth had promised to increase salaries by 23 percent.

Printing workers strike over victimisation

Some 1,400 printing workers at the State Printing Corporation of Sri Lanka went on strike on August 27 to demand reinstatement of a company storekeeper. The strikers contend that the man was falsely blamed for a fire at the corporation on July 26 and victimised.

Strike action was suspended after the management issued a written assurance that the sacked man would be reemployed.

New South Wales school cleaners to strike

About 6,500 public school cleaners across New South Wales (NSW) plan to strike for four days from September 7. They are opposing the state Labor government's refusal to guarantee their jobs when contracts with private cleaning companies are renewed next year.

After coming to power at the end of 1995, the Carr State Labor government privatised public school cleaning. Since then it has consistently reduced the times allocated for cleaning to cut costs.

Cleaners are paid only \$13 an hour, after tax and the companies awarded contracts next year are not required to retain the present staff. Many of the cleaners are over 45 years and will have difficulty finding alternate jobs. The workers are planning to demonstrate in Sydney's Hyde Park on September 8.

Union reaches deal to end WA power station strike

Contract maintenance workers at Western Power's Muja and Kwinana power plants in Western Australia's southwest voted to return to work on August 31, after being on strike for eight weeks.

The 120 workers—employed by contractor United KG/ Siemens—were campaigning for improved conditions, including a pay increase and the introduction of a 36-hour week in line with contractors elsewhere in the state. They are members of the Australian Manufacturers Workers Union (AMWU) and the Communications Plumbers and Electrical Union.

The return to work was negotiated by the AMWU during talks chaired by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) this week. Details of the agreement are not yet public but the settlement came after the company advertised for alternate labour to be used as strike breakers. The strikers defied AIRC return-to-work orders on three occasions.

Victorian steel workers vote to strike

More than 500 steel workers at BlueScope's Western Port operations near Melbourne voted at an August 30 mass meeting to continue strike action, following a breakdown in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement.

According to an Australia Workers Union spokesperson, the company has refused to discuss improved superannuation and redundancy provisions and better conditions for casual and fixed-term workers. The latest action comes after a series of 24-hour strikes over the same issues earlier this month by more than 1,000 workers at BlueScope operations in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

BlueScope announced a record profit this month of \$584 million for the

2003-2004 financial year, a 29 percent increase on last year's \$452 million profit.

Disability workers strike for improved wages and security

Workers in disability services in Victoria walked out for 24 hours on September 3 in support of a 6 percent pay increase and improved workplace security. The action follows a series of rolling stoppages and work bans over the past three weeks.

A Health and Community Services Union (HACSU) representative told the media that "the government has not been listening and has not been responding to the concerns of this workforce". The government will not shift from its pay offer, which is below that awarded to other state public sector workers.

The union claims that at least 77 percent of disability services workers are assaulted on the job at least once a year.

Joinery workers strike in Tasmania

Workers at McKay's H & K Joinery at Prospect—formerly Hume and Kerrison—in Launceston, Tasmania, will go on strike over a redundancy package. The company is relocating its manufacturing operation to Hobart next February and the 20 workers are being laid off. The company will not release them earlier and pay severance so they can apply for other jobs.

New Zealand port workers to strike over casualisation

Workers are preparing to halt the movement of goods at Ports of Auckland's container terminals for four days from September 8 and will picket the port. The Maritime Union issued a 14-day strike notice on August 25 after the Ports of Auckland refused to agree to a process to make casual staff permanent.

Maritime workers want to establish benchmark employment conditions applicable to all ports and have chosen Auckland to begin the campaign because it is the country's largest. It employs about 240 waterfront workers and handles two-thirds of New Zealand's imports by value and one third of its exports. The port employs permanent workers, part-time workers guaranteed three shifts a week and casuals. Some have been casuals for nine years or more and only recently secured wet-weather gear.

Most ports in New Zealand operate around-the-clock, seven days a week. The system was imposed following a series of bitter disputes. Casualisation is now entrenched throughout the industry. The Maritime Union, which failed to prevent the attacks on employment conditions, recently proposed a scheme whereby workers move from part-time to permanent positions over time. According to the union, the Auckland strike is "just the beginning" of an extended struggle over casualisation.

New Zealand mental health workers stage rolling strikes

Workers employed by private mental health provider Richmond Fellowship staged a series of four-hour stoppages last weekend over a collective employment agreement. A strike committee of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) organised eight stoppages between Friday evening and Monday morning.

Negotiations involving the unions and the Richmond Fellowship have continued since last year but the employer has not yet made a pay offer. Unions are seeking a collective employment deal that includes a wage rise for union members, with pay rates written into the agreement

Fiji airport union caves in to employers

On September 1, the Airports Fiji Limited Staff Association (AFLSA) and the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) accepted a deal that will impact sharply on members' employment conditions. The unions accepted a management proposal for a cost of living allowance (COLA) backdated to January 1, 2000, agreed to management demands that staff undertake job evaluation.

The pay offer came as workers at airports around the country announced they intended to strike on September 2 over several disputed issues. The unions registered three claims with the Ministry of Labour, including a 10 percent pay increase across the board backdated to June 1, 2000, a five

percent salary increase for terminal attendants and an end to the contracting-out of jobs.

The FPSA also demanded the settlement of issues associated with its 2003 and 2004 log-of-claims, including a three percent employer contribution into the Fiji National Provident Fund. Only the COLA issue was resolved but the size of the increase has not been reported.

While the unions claim that the jobs evaluation exercise has the potential to lift some underpaid workers' salaries. AFL chief executive Ratu Sakiusa Tuisolia said prior to the conciliation meeting that many workers were already overpaid. "That's why we need to have a jobs evaluation exercise to determine who is getting what, who needs to be paid COLA and who doesn't," he said.

FPSA general secretary Rajeshwar Singh pledged union commitment to help the company "move in the right direction".

Fiji workers in Cook Islands claim they are exploited

About 200 Fiji citizens working in the Cook Islands have complained to Fiji's Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck about pervasive employer abuse.

Poorly paid workers have been forced to remain in the Cook Islands because employers hold their passports. They are not given return plane tickets until they are officially released from their jobs.

The *Cook Islands Herald* has received many stories from hospitality industry workers on the island of Rarotonga about illegal pay deductions, allegedly to make up for discrepancies in the day's takings. Numerous workers claim that the deductions are made nearly every day and without explanation. If they complain, they are usually sacked.

Zinck has fobbed off the complaints, claiming that because there is no formal agreement between Fiji and the Cook Islands on labour conditions he cannot intervene on the workers' behalf.

The Cook Islands currently has no labour laws defining workers' rights with legislation bogged down in continual redrafts. Director of Labour Relations David Greig claims that he is powerless to check labour abuse.



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