

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 September 2004

Workers blockade Chinese cotton plant

Despite rain, more than 1,000 workers continue to blockade a cotton factory at Xianyang in China's central Shaanxi province. The Xianyang Number Seven Textile Factory was once run by the Tianwang Group but has been acquired by the Hong Kong-based China Resources Group.

The protesters are opposing the new employer's requirement that 5,000 workers undergo a new probationary period of three to six months. The salary offered for the probation period is below the present pay rate and little more than the government stipulated monthly living allowance in Xianyang of about 30-40 yuan (\$US4-\$6). Workers are also unhappy with the amount of redundancy offered by the company to the 1,000 employees who are to be laid off.

The blockade began on September 21 and at one point there were about 10,000 protestors, including workers, relatives and friends, outside the plant. One worker said there was no trade union at the factory, but they had gone on strike "spontaneously" and organised the blockade themselves. About 40 management and staff remain trapped inside the factory. Thousands of police had been deployed in the vicinity.

Indonesian editor's jailing widely condemned

About 30 organisations from around the world dedicated to defending freedom of the press have signed a declaration condemning the recent jailing of the editor of Indonesia's *Tempo* magazine, Bambang Harymurti, for one year for defamation.

The editor and two journalists were sued by businessman Tomy Winata for an article published in *Tempo* in March 2003 alleging that he stood to profit from a fire in February that year which destroyed the Tanah Abang textile market in Jakarta. Winata had submitted a 53 billion rupiah (\$US5.9 million) proposal to the Jakarta city administration to renovate the market three weeks before the fire.

A few days after the article was published, a gang of thugs employed by Winata, an associate of Indonesian president Megawati Sukarnoputri, attacked *Tempo's* offices and assaulted Harymurti and other journalists. The attack provoked a series of protests by journalists. The Association of Independent Journalists took legal action against police authorities because officers had stood back and watched as the thugs went on a rampage.

Calling on the government to review the country's archaic defamation laws, the declaration states: "In our view, imprisonment for defamation can never be legitimate and, on its own, represents a breach of the right to freedom of expression regardless of the statements which have been challenged".

The two journalists have been exonerated and Harymurti presently remains free pending an appeal case.

Indian rice mill workers fight "inhuman" conditions

On September 20, men, women and child workers from over 500 rice mills in Red Hill, Chennai in Tamilnadu demonstrated against "inhuman" working conditions in the mills.

Most rice-mill workers are from the Irula tribe and around 10,000 of them are bonded labourers. The demonstrators demanded the district

administration take immediate steps to end the feudal form of labour that has persisted over generations.

Mill workers are paid meagre wages and work in extremely unhygienic conditions without even basic facilities, many working more than 18 hours a day. The work includes soaking, boiling, drying and removing rice from the paddy, with the process lasting four gruelling days at a time. Workers are paid only 15 to 20 rupees (\$US 30 to 40 cents) for the entire period.

The workers' demands, include regularisation of working hours; wages fixed in line with government directives, the provision of educational facilities for their children and amenities for their parents.

One of the workers, D. Sekar, told the media that his wife died when she was forced to work three days straight after she gave birth to their third child. "I was not even allowed to complete the final rites until I finished the day's work," he said.

Indian transport workers demand improvements

Around 12,000 workers from the State Transport Corporation in Tiruchi, Tamilnadu demonstrated in the city on September 21. They are demanding a 20 percent enhancement in bonus payments, a revision of the basic wage, and the filling of all vacant positions. The protest began in the busy Salai Road and ended at the Uzhavar Sandhai grounds.

The workers plan to meet and decide on further action if their demands are not fulfilled within 15 days.

Indian power workers protest

Power workers from Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh held a sit down protest outside the office of the Transmission Corporation (Transco) Superintendent Engineer on September 21. They want immediate filling of all vacant posts through promotions, new jobs to meet increased workloads, permanency for workers presently employed on a contract basis and the revoking of all transfers made outside official guide lines.

On September 17, Kerala State Electricity Board workers demonstrated outside the Kollam Electricity Circle Office to demand a wage revision, permanency for contract workers, restoration of a scheme whereby workers could cash-in leave, and the lifting of a freeze on staff recruitment.

Health workers protest over inadequate medical provisions

Public health workers in the Cuddapah industrial zone in Andhra Pradesh staged a sit-down protest outside the office of the Regional Director of Medical and Health on September 20. They were protesting over the inadequate supply of essential medicines by authorities and want the restoration of promotions that had been abruptly stopped recently, additional increments for paramedical staff and a fixed travelling allowance.

Pakistani telecom workers strike for incentive package

Exchange workers employed by the Pakistan Telecommunication Company (PTCL) in Haripur struck for three days up to September 18 to demand an improved incentive package. PTCL is refusing the improvement even though its annual profit of rose to 87 billion rupees.

The workers also want the corporation to provide employment for their children, revise medical policy and introduce a more expedient promotion

scheme. The protestors wore black armbands to register their concern over “delaying tactics” used by the authorities to avoid dealing with the workers’ demands.

Sri Lankan oil workers fight suspensions

Workers at the Caltex Oil Company picketed the company’s head office in the Colombo suburb of Kollonawa on September 2. They were protesting the suspension of 14 of their colleagues who were union activists.

The activists were suspended recently after the union filed a legal case against the management over workers’ entitlements.

Samurdi workers fight lay-offs

Employees of the Samurdi Authority, (a Sri Lankan state agency for the distribution of poverty assistance allowances) picketed the head office in Sathsiripaya, Battaramulla, a suburb of Colombo, on September 22. They want the government to drop a plan to terminate the contracts of 19 drivers who have been working for the authority for past five years.

The sackings are proceeding despite the existence of vacancies for six drivers. The workers allege that the authority wants to lay off the 19 drivers and recruit supporters of the ruling political parties. The protesters have threatened to begin a hunger strike from September 30 if the termination plan is implemented.

Xerox workers strike over high-tech spy equipment

Over 100 Xerox technicians in Sydney began on indefinite strike on September 22 over the company’s plan to install global positioning technology (GPS) in work vehicles so employees can be tracked continuously throughout the working day. The company employs 250 technicians to repair Xerox photocopiers and other equipment in offices in Melbourne and Sydney.

The workers believe the move to GPS monitoring is excessive and infringes on civil liberties. Their movements are already heavily scrutinised. Two years ago, Sydney City Council attempted to bring in a similar high-tech system to spy on its mobile workforce.

Also involved in the Xerox dispute are claims by technicians for improved pay and working conditions, including job security.

Settlement reached in school cleaners dispute

A settlement has been reached in the three-month industrial dispute between public school cleaners and the New South Wales state Labor government over job security. The dispute, which included a three-day statewide strike, was sparked by the government’s refusal to guarantee jobs and working conditions when the current five-year cleaning contract comes up for renewal before October next year.

While the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union has not released details of the agreement, a union spokesman claimed it would mean that all 7,000 cleaners would receive a job offer maintaining the current weekly hours under a new contract. The union intends to call report-back meetings around the state in two weeks time when schools return from holidays.

New Zealand airline caterers to strike

Up to 400 workers at New Zealand airline catering company LSG Skychefs plan to strike over stalled pay negotiations. The industrial action by members of the Service & Food Workers Union and the Engineers Union will start on October 1 with rolling stoppages in Auckland and Christchurch and a total ban on overtime in Wellington.

The unions said three days of bargaining had resulted in a stalemate, with the company refusing to discuss workers’ claims and only offering a 4 percent pay increase over the life of a two-year agreement. The unions want seeking a 5 percent increase, along with team leader allowances, time-and-a-half for overtime and the “sorting out” of classification systems.

The company is the country’s major airline caterer, supplying Qantas, Air New Zealand and other international airlines. Unions say that the effect of the action will be considerable. Because the workforce is highly

unionised, only a few people will be on duty during the stoppages.

Journalists ban work on new Sunday paper

New Zealand Herald journalists have banned working on a new Sunday edition until the newspaper’s owners allow collective negotiations for pay and working conditions.

The editor has hired all staff on individual contracts and informed them that no collective coverage is available. Australian publisher APN, controlled by Irish millionaire Tony O’Reilly, said it is prepared to negotiate with workers collectively if journalists who are hired from now on for both the weekday and Sunday editions give up long-standing rights.

APN is attempting to claw back the payment of double-time for work after noon on Saturdays or for overtime beyond the first three hours. It wants all double-time rates reduced to time-and-a-half. Other conditions under attack include: extra pay loadings for casual workers, the right to accumulate sick leave, established weekend and leave provisions, paid meal breaks after five hours’ continuous work and various allowances for early starts, night work and transport.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, which represents the journalists, said that it had “bent over backwards to help APN”. The union had accepted journalists working on fixed annual salaries with no differentiation between weekday and weekend work, provided that salary levels were at least equivalent to those under existing pay scales.

The company expects to make a profit of \$NZ131 million this year, but claims that profitability of the new edition depends on cuts to journalists’ conditions. Weekday journalists have voted overwhelmingly against working for the Sunday edition until their colleagues achieve the right to bargain collectively.

Wellington cinema workers picket over pay

A group of 50 predominantly young workers employed by the US-owned Reading Cinema chain picketed the Courtenay Central Cinema in downtown Wellington on the evening of September 17. Accompanied by a brass band, they gave out leaflets to cinema patrons and handed out free popcorn, encouraging patrons to boycott the candy bar.

The workers, members of the low-paid workers union Unite, are campaigning for a decent wage increase and recognition for length of service. They are paid just above the minimum wage. Despite increases to the legal minimum, the company has refused to lift pay rates accordingly.

NZ prime minister faces protest over defence workers’ pay

A visit by Prime Minister Helen Clark to Burnham Military Camp was greeted by a demonstration by members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) last week. Clarke was at Burnham for the passing out of the latest batch of Limited Service Volunteers. NUPE represents civilian workers at the camp who do a range of jobs, including storekeeping, administration and payroll, and catering.

The union has been in talks with the Defence Force (NZDF) for the past six weeks for an 8 percent salary increase. NZDF has offered 2.5 percent. Military staff have received up to 23 percent increases in pay since 2001. Civilian staff, however, on whom the NZDF has become increasingly dependent in recent years, are paid as little as \$22,500 a year.

NUPE members have already voted in favour of industrial action in principle and are currently preparing to vote on specific strike action.

Fiji construction workers strike for better conditions

About 280 construction workers employed by J S Hill walked off a building site in Lautoka on September 20. They were protesting over poor safety and the lack of facilities on site.

The workers want an immediate safety audit and inspection, the provision of adequate safety gear, decent eating and toilet facilities, transportation to and from the job, regular training and a pay increase.

Although management has agreed to address some of the issues, the workers are continuing their sit-down protest outside the construction site at the Lautoka Teachers College. A spokesman for the non-union group said the workers did not intend to return to work until all the issues were

resolved and the company responded in writing.



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