Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 October 2004

Korean Citibank workers demand parity

Workers at the Citibank's Seoul branch in South Korea went on strike on October 5 and about 300 strikers crowded into the bank's lobby as union officials were in negotiations with management. The workers want parity in wages and conditions with KorAm Bank employees when the two financial entities finally merge.

KorAm was taken over by US giant Citigroup in April this year. The move sparked industrial action by KorAm employees who fear job losses and the downgrading of working conditions. Citigroup temporarily backed away from rationalising workers' conditions at KorAm to get the merger through. The new merged entity, to be named Citibank Korea Inc., will begin operations in November.

Citibank workers are threatening to strike indefinitely if negotiations for improved wages and conditions break down.

Management tries to intimidate Philippines concrete workers

Management at A1 Concrete Poles in the Philippines is preparing to bust up workers' opposition to the scheduled company closure on October 30. The concrete products concern has been sold to Taiwanese competitor TehHsin, which wants an "asset sale only," leaving it free to hire a new workforce.

The Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) union claims that A1 Concrete Poles has employed 16 extra security guards who are stationed with police inside the company's manufacturing plant in Bunawan. KMU secretary Omar Bantayan said guards at the gate checked whether the employees had already signed their papers, “implying that they would not be allowed to leave"if they had not signed".

While attempting to deny that employees were being intimidated to sign termination papers, a spokesperson for the company admitted this week that its security force had been beefed up in anticipation of an "unfavorable reaction from the employees". A1 Concrete Poles is a member of the Aboitiz Construction Group.

Indian transport workers demand wage increase

Thousands of transport workers from private bus companies in Kochi in the south Indian state of Kerala went on strike on October 5 to demand a wage rise. Over 1,500 buses were put out of service and striking workers marched from Kaloor to the Ernakulam District Private Bus Operators Association office in Palarivatton.

Bus workers have not had a pay increase since November 2001 when daily wages rose to 270 rupees ($US5.40) for drivers, 190 rupees for a conductor and 168 rupees for a door checker, all working a 12-hour day. Pay has remained static despite a recent fare increase. The workers are members of the Samyukta Samara Samiti union.

Indian bank workers strike to maintain pay parity

National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD) employees held a one-day strike on October 5 as a part of a nationwide campaign. They were protesting against the Indian government's attempt to drive down pay and service conditions by breaking the parity of NABARD workers with their colleagues at the Reserve Bank of India (RBI).

The pay scale and service conditions of NABARD employees have been on par with RBI workers since 1982.

Indian sugar workers demand entitlements

On October 5, a sit-down protest by workers from Sirguppa Sugars and Chemicals Ltd at Desanur village in Bellary, Karnataka, entered its sixth day. The protest, which is outside the municipality office in Sirguppa, is demanding the payment of back wages, bonuses and other benefits.

The sugar workers were laid off several months ago but did not receive compensation or other entitlements. Management claimed that work at the plant was "seasonal in character" and therefore employees were "not entitled to any compensation during the lay-off period". Yet according to the Deputy Labour Commissioner, the company should not have laid off the workers without obtaining government permission.

Meanwhile, workers from the Brahmavar Sugar Factory in Udupi, Karnataka, are holding a sit-down protest outside the deputy commissioner's office over the closure of their plant.

Health workers oppose privatisation

Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) employees in Pune, Maharashtra state began a hunger strike on October 4. They are protesting the privatisation and contracting-out of services in the health sector. They are also demanding the filling of all current vacancies, the timely supply of medicines, and payment of a patient care allowance.

Health workers employed by the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research Hospital in Pondichery began a relay fast on October 4 to press for a 15-point charter of demands similar to those of their colleagues in Pune.

Pakistani telecom workers fight for salary increase

Pakistan Telecommunication Company (PTCL) employees in the North West Frontier Province struck for two hours on October 6. The workers have walked out on four consecutive days in support of a 15-percent pay hike. PTCL authorities have refused to pay the salary increase, which has already been endorsed by the Pakistan prime minister.

Other demands include improved healthcare facilities, guaranteed employment for daily-wage workers and employment opportunities for the children of employees. A spokesman for the four PTCL unions said that rolling strikes would continue till October 14 and warned that an indefinite strike would begin on October 15 if the demands were not met.

Sri Lankan teachers demand improved conditions

Around 2,000 teachers used World Teachers Day on October 6 to hold a sit-down protest opposite the Sri Lankan education ministry at Isurupaya on the outskirts of Colombo. They want an interim monthly allowance of 3,000 rupees ($US30) until salary anomalies in the service are rectified.

Around 400 teachers from all over the country, including the North and East provinces, also picketed Kollupitiya Junction in central Colombo on the October 5 to demand a special allowance for teachers in remote areas and a reduction in the cost of living. They also raised slogans demanding peace in the country.

The teachers are members of the Alliance of Teachers Unions, which includes the Ceylon Teachers Union, Ceylon Tamil Teachers Union,

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Ceylon Islamic Teachers Union, Education Laboratory Employees Union and the General Principals Services Union. The alliance is threatening a sick-note campaign and other action if its demands are not met by December 31.

Public service workers in Sri Lanka also protested outside the Ministry of Public Administration in central Colombo on October 5. Like teachers, they want a 3,000-rupee interim allowance until wage anomalies in the state sector are resolved. They threatened further industrial action if their demand is not met.

Tea estate workers strike for allowance

Around 850 tea estate workers in four divisions of the Icelab estate in Bandarawela in Sri Lanka's central hill province began an indefinite strike on October 6. They are demanding reinstatement of an annual incentive allowance. Workers allege that management has withheld the allowance for the past two years.

Qantas flight attendants threaten strike

The Flight Attendants Association this week threatened to call strikes if Qantas failed to resolve issues relating to the employment of 400 fixed-term staff to be based in London. The association believes that the Australian airline recruited the workers on fixed contracts and is training them as strikebreakers.

Negotiations between the company and the union before the Industrial Relations Commission this week failed to resolve the issue. One of the demands rejected by Qantas is union access to the fixed-term employees.

Fuji-Xerox workers return to work

Fuji-Xerox employees in Sydney returned to work on September 30 after being on strike for a week. One hundred workers walked off the job on September 22 over the company's plan to install global positioning system technology (GPS) in work vehicles.

The company sent a team of at least 30 photocopier technicians from Singapore to Sydney on "training visas" to clear a backlog of work that accumulated during the industrial action. Management also sent striking workers a DVD containing a personal appeal from Fuji-Xerox's CEO calling on them to end the industrial action. Workers rejected the appeal and voted 98 percent to extend the strike for two more days.

The union later recommended employees end the strike as a "goodwill gesture and to facilitate further negotiations" for a new work agreement, including a pay increase that is below 4 percent. The company employs 250 technicians to repair Xerox photocopiers and other office equipment in Melbourne and Sydney.

Nurses vote to campaign for pay increase

Nurses in Perth, Western Australia, met on October 5 to discuss a 20 percent pay increase and improved working conditions. They voted to campaign outside federal election polling booths on October 9 to explain their demands to the public. The state Labor government has offered only 10.5 percent spread over three years.

Nurses have voted to continue rolling work stoppages in Perth hospitals and extend the action to regional hospitals in Kalgoorlie, Bunbury, Geraldton and Albany.

New Zealand airline caterers strike

More than 400 workers at the New Zealand airline catering company LSG Skychefs went on strike and banned overtime this week after mediation failed to settle a wage dispute. LSG Skychefs, which is owned by German airline Lufthansa, provides on-board catering for Qantas, Air New Zealand and other international airlines.

Workers involved in the dispute are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU). The unions are demanding all overtime to be paid at time-and-a-half. Employees are currently paid time-and-a-quarter for the first three hours overtime, which they are required to do almost daily. Members of both unions previously rejected the company's offer of a 4-percent increase for two years.

SFWU members struck for eight hours in Auckland and Christchurch, while those in Wellington imposed a total overtime ban for one week. About 100 members of the EPMU held a series of two-hour rolling stoppages over three days beginning October 3.

NZ junior doctors back strike

Junior doctors throughout New Zealand have voted to strike if district health boards do not address the issue of long working hours and high levels of student debt. The Resident Doctors Association, representing about 2,000 hospital-based doctors, has been in national contract negotiations with the health boards since May. An association spokeswoman said members had voted to strike unless significant progress was made in the current round of negotiations.

While a first-year registrar in a main centre earns between $51,465 and $94,352, depending on the hours worked, medical students are commonly forced to borrow over $10,000 per year for six years to cover the cost of obtaining a medical degree. Once they start work the debt accumulates interest at commercial rates until the loan is paid off.

Civilian workers at military camp to meet over pay

Civilian workers based at Burnham Military Camp near Christchurch will be holding a stopwork meeting on October 20 to consider the next move in a pay dispute with the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF).

Negotiations between the NZDF and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) have been ongoing since the beginning of August. NUPE is claiming an 8 percent pay increase for its members working as civilian staff at Burnham. NZDF has offered 2.5 percent. NUPE members struck on September 30 after negotiations failed to bring an improved offer. It was the first ever strike by workers at NZDF.

They are employed in administrative, catering, payroll and storekeeping services. While military personnel have had pay increases of up to 23 percent since 2001, civilian staff are paid as little as $22,500. The union, however, is asking for what it calls a "little recognition" in the form of "an adequate pay increase" but not on a par with military personnel. The NUPE negotiating team has declared it is "hopeful" it can resolve the pay dispute before the foreshadowed stopwork meeting.

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