

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 October 2004

## Chinese workers continue factory blockade

A strike by thousands of workers from the Number Seven textile factory in Xianyang city, Shaanxi province entered its fourth week on October 13. The strike began on September 21 after the new owner, the Hong Kong-based China Resources Group, demanded job cuts and for 5,000 workers to undergo a new probationary period of between three to six months on lower pay. The plant was previously operated by the Tianwang Group, a former state-owned enterprise, and was sold to the Hong Kong group in June this year.

Over 1,000 workers are picketing the plant under the watch of about 45 policemen. On September 17 and 18, over 1,000 police and security guards were dispatched to the plant to break the picket. They took no action when over 10,000 people turned out to back the protest.

In late September, a contingent of workers set off to Beijing to petition the government but were turned back by police. China's official media sources are not reporting the strike and the mainland search engine Baidu has deleted all mention of the action.

## South Korean unions organise joint campaign

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) plans to conduct a ballot of its membership from October 25 and November 11 for national strike action for improved conditions for irregular workers (casual workers) and increased union rights for civil servants.

KCTU officials told a press conference outside the National Assembly in Yeoido, Seoul on October 8 that the peak union body would begin a joint action with the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU). The two union organisations agreed to establish a joint campaign headquarters to coordinate industrial action nationwide.

Earlier this year the KCTU, which traditionally presented itself as a militant alternative to the conservative FKTU, was involved in restricting industrial action by its affiliates during its so-called summer offensive for wages and conditions. The union's secretary-general Lee Soo-ho declared that the time had come "normalise" industrial relations with the government and the employers.

## Blast at Thai fireworks plant

At least 10 workers were killed in a massive blast at the Boonleur fireworks factory in Thailand's Muang district on October 3. The explosion flattened the plant and authorities are having difficulty identifying remains and the actual number of people dead. Among the factory workers who survived were several 13- to 15-year-old youths who suffered severe burns.

The blast rocked nearby residential buildings and rocked the

Kohkaew Temple a kilometre away.

The explosion's cause remains unknown but authorities believe that a rush to meet increased orders ahead of the Loi Krathong festival on November 26 may have contributed. There is also confusion in official circle over whether the factory was licensed or operating illegally. Establishing production facilities involving explosives requires the approval of both the Defence and Interior Ministry and the Industry Ministry. The factory's owner Boonleur Insuwan had only received approval from the former.

The factory moved to its current location a decade ago after the original operation was destroyed in a similar incident. One villager said that the previous explosion, which killed four people, caused residents near the new site to reinforce their homes with "bunker walls" to lessen the affects of possible blasts.

## Sri Lankan health workers demand jobs

Hundreds of health workers marched from the Colombo National Hospital to the Prime Minister's Office on October 13 to demand the reinstatement of 309 retrenched minor staff. The workers wore black overcoats inscribed with their demand and representatives presented a memorandum addressed to the prime minister.

On October 12 a march was held from Ridgeway Children Hospital in Borella, a suburb of Colombo, to the Health Ministry in central Colombo followed by a lunchtime rally over the same issue.

The retrenchments occurred after the workers completed just six months service. The Health Minister using a technicality declared that the sacked employees had been recruited after the dissolution of the parliament earlier this year. The workers say they have been victimised.

## Rail workers act over jobs and pay

Engine drivers at Sri Lanka Railway staged a lightening strike on October 12 to demand rail authorities revoke the interdiction of the chairman of the Locomotive Operating Engineers Union. The company took disciplinary action against the union official after he refused to tow a defective engine with a passenger train. Workers contend that the operation was unsafe because the passenger train lacked sufficient braking power.

In another dispute, postal workers across the country banned overtime from October 12. They are protesting over the delayed payment for overtime performed last month. The payments were due before October 10.

## Indian stationmasters defend their position

Around 75 railway stationmasters in the Tiruchi Division in Tamilnadu demonstrated outside the divisional railway manager's

office on October 12 for about an hour. They are opposing attempts to abolish stationmaster positions and are demanding the appointment of higher-grade stationmasters at all appropriate stations. They also want heavy disciplinary penalties abolished for traffic staff and other rail grades. The workers later submitted a memorandum containing the demands to the Protocol Officer in the Tiruchi.

#### **Construction workers fight for better working conditions**

Construction workers in the southern Indian state of Karnataka held a sit-down protest outside the town council building in Udupi on October 11. They want compensation for workers injured on the job, retirement pensions, maternity benefits for the female construction workers and education for workers' children.

A memorandum containing their demands was sent to the state's Chief Minister. The workers are members of the Udupi Taluk Building Construction Workers Association, which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

#### **Indian sugar workers continue indefinite sit-down**

An indefinite sit-in protest by workers from the Brahmavar Sugar Factory in Udupi, Karnataka state, entered its second week on October 13. The protest is being held outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Udupi.

The workers have not been paid for the last 22 months and are demanding government action to ensure the factory remains in operation. The protest has stopped processed sugar leaving the factory and disrupted all administration work.

#### **Pakistani teachers protest government delays**

On October 12, college teachers in Pakistan's Sindh Province held a "black day" protest over delays by the government in processing 1,000 promotions and around 400 requested transfers. They hoisted black flags on college buildings and wore black armbands.

The teachers, who are members Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association, are planning to protest outside the Sindh Chief Minister's office if the government does not act on these issues.

#### **Qantas services could be hit by "sick out" campaign**

Flight attendants at Qantas may begin a "sick out" campaign on November 17 to protest moves by the company to employ 400 fixed-term staff to be based in London. The Flight Attendants Association of Australia believes that the 400 long-haul London-based attendants—who are being recruited on fixed contracts—could be used as possible strikebreakers.

The "sick out" campaign, that could see flights disrupted if large numbers of staff fail to turn up to work, is "unofficial". The flight attendants' union said while it was aware of the call for a "sick out", it was not behind it but confirmed it was "gaining momentum".

This week, Qantas warned it would use doctors and medical staff at its bases to test all flight attendants that report in sick next month. While dismissing claims that the staff in London would be used as strike breakers has "emotive", Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon said the company did have contingency plans against what he termed "business threats".

#### **Customs officers threaten strike over pay**

Australian customs officers are threatening to strike later this month in support of a 10 percent pay increase. While wage

negotiations have been ongoing since March, the management has not improved on its offer of just 8 percent. A strike would disrupt the processing of passengers and goods at the country's sea and air terminals.

A spokesman for the Community and Public Sector Union claimed that customs officers are working "under intense pressure" and the service is "highly understaffed".

#### **Air New Zealand ground staff to strike**

Some 400 Air New Zealand ground staff based in Auckland and Christchurch announced plans last week to strike for 22 hours on October 15 after five months of pay talk negotiations broke down. The workers, whose jobs include taking bookings, processing tickets and running freight, are seeking a 6 percent pay increase.

The Service and Food Workers' Union (SWFU) announced it is prepared to negotiate on the increase and accused management of playing "brinkmanship" by avoiding mediation. An SWFU spokesman said Air NZ was given extended notice of the action to give it the opportunity to agree to talks and avoid the strike.

The SWFU is considering the possibility of legal action over the company's delays and approaching the government to use its position as a shareholder to intervene.

#### **New Zealand nurses union withdraws strike threat**

The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) has withdrawn a threat to strike following three days of negotiations with a mediator in Wellington this week. The country's 20,000 public sector nurses had previously rejected a pay offer of between 8 and 13 percent and authorised strike action over a multi-employer employment agreement.

The nurses are seeking pay rates equivalent to those of teachers and police. A joint statement by the District Health Boards (DHBs) and the NZNO said both sides were "pleased with progress" and talks were set to resume on October 20 and 21.



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