# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

**2 October 2004**

**Workers in China fight attacks by takeover companies**

Thousands of workers at two factories in the northern Chinese province of Shaanxi are continuing protest action over the destruction of jobs and conditions following takeover of the plants by companies listed in Hong Kong and Shenzhen.

Employees from the former Xianyang No.7 Cotton Factory have maintained a sit-in at the plant since September 14. They are opposing changes to their work contracts made since the factory was acquired by Hong Kong-listed China Resources group from the Tianwang Group.

The new employer wants 5,000 workers to undergo a new three- to six-month probation, during which time they would be paid little more than the government-stipulated 30-40 yuan ($US4-$6) daily living allowance in Xianyang and well below the present pay rate. Employees have also rejected the severance payment offered by the new company to 1,000 workers who will be laid off.

There is no trade union at the plant and workers are running the strike and occupation themselves. They have not elected representatives, fearing that they would be victimised by the authorities.

Meanwhile, workers from the Jingmi Metals Co in the provincial capital Xian have blocked a major road in the area since September 14. They are protesting against asset stripping of the factory, including capital and machinery, by the Shenzhen-based Tianhua Group.

The protestors, including elderly women retirees and workers aged between 40 and 50 years, are demanding the factory's assets be restored and the plant reopened for production. They are also calling for the restoration of health benefits so that older people can get the medical attention they need.

**Indonesian workers demand basic wage increase**

Around 500 workers, members of the Indonesian Federation Union for Workers of Metal Companies (FSPMI), rallied outside the City Council building in Central Jakarta on September 30. They were demanding an increase in the regional minimum monthly wage to 1.25 million rupiah ($US137.21) from 671,550 rupiah. They also want pay rises for workers in other industries.

Their claim is based on a prices survey that shows that the minimum cost of living in the city stands at 968,1354 rupiah a month. The minimum wage is supposed to be about 15 percent higher. According to a spokesperson, the existing provincial minimum wage is barely enough to cover workers' transportation costs, rent, electric bills and meals.

**Dismissed shoe workers protest in Indonesia**

More than 1,500 workers, part of the 2,100 dismissed by shoe firm PT Kasogi International last July, protested outside the East Java legislative council building in Surabaya on September 27. Traffic was held up while sacked employees marched through the city streets to the council building. It was the fifth such demonstration to demand that the new legislative council direct the company to provide severance pay owed to the sacked workers.

PT Kasogi claims it cannot afford the $US2.2 million it was ordered to pay by the Sidoarjo manpower office disputes committee. Protesters threatened to occupy the council building if legislators and the shoe company continue to ignore their demands.

**Indian tea workers demand better healthcare**

Hundreds of thousands of tea plantation workers in the northeastern Indian state of Assam held a one-day strike on September 29 to demand better healthcare and working conditions. The strike follows an outbreak of malaria and waterborne diseases, such as gastroenteritis and diarrhea. Strikes claim 600 tea workers and their relatives have died from these diseases over the past three months.

The strike closed 800 tea plantations across Assam causing an estimated loss of two million kilograms of tea. India is the world's largest tea producer with Assam accounting for 55 percent of the 856 million kilograms of tea produced by the country last year. At least 20 tea plantations in Assam have been closed in the last couple of years leaving hundreds of workers jobless.

**Sugar workers demand factory reopens**

Former employees of the Aland Cooperative Sugar Factory in Gulbarga, Karnataka demonstrated outside the Deputy Commissioner's Office on September 29. They want the closed factory reopened and the payment of salaries pending for the last 18 months. The government closed the plant on June 11 last year.

Workers have rejected the government's claim that the plant lost money because it was overstaffed and blame the financial problems on mismanagement. While the officially recognised workforce required for production at the plant was 680 there were only 480 employees at the time of the closure.

The factory was unable to crush cane last year because of the lack of government funding for annual maintenance and machine overhaul and the purchase of essential chemicals. Distressed workers, now deprived of a livelihood, have threatened to commit suicide if government fails to resolve the issue.

Closure of the cooperative factory, the only crushing plant in the district, also impacts on sugarcane growers in Aland, Afzalpur and Gulbarga who depend on it for their survival.

**Nurses protest staff shortages**

Nurses at the Alappuzha Medical College Hospital (MCH) in the Southern Indian State of Kerala surrounded the hospital superintendent's office for two hours on September 23. They want hospital authorities to take immediate steps to fill 122 nursing assistant and attendant vacancies at MCH. Nurses allege that they are forced to work overtime and denied leave because of staff shortages.

**Pakistani doctors demonstrate against privatisation**

Doctors in Punjab state in Pakistan demonstrated on city roads in Faisalabad and picketed the Kutchery Bazaar crossing on September 23. They were protesting against the government's attempt to privatise state-run medical institutions and health centres under the guise of its "Punjab Rural Support Program".

Doctors allege that the plan would see doctors currently employed in basic health units dismissed and replaced with new appointees employed

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on contract basis.

**Sri Lankan press workers demand salary increase**

Workers at the Government Press of Sri Lanka held a lunchtime protest outside the company on September 23 to demand a salary increase and the abolition of salary anomalies. Employees pointed out that while the government promised to increase salaries by 70 percent within three months of coming to power, this had not been fulfilled.

Under conditions of a sharp increase in the price of essential goods and services such as fuel (both diesel and petrol), cooking gas, rice and bus fares, the workers want a 5,000-rupee ($US50) monthly salary increase to compensate.

**Road workers strike**

About 750 road construction workers, members of the Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), walked off the job for 24 hours at the M7 motorway protect in Western Sydney on September 30. The 40-kilometre road is a joint venture between Abigroup and Leighton Contractors.

The workers are opposing the unfair dismissal of three union delegates earlier this month by one of the sub-contractors on site. The CFMEU is demanding that Abigroup and Leighton ensure that subcontractors abide by the agreed award stipulating that dismissed workers remain on site until the matter goes before the New South Wales Industrial Relations Commission.

Workers are also concerned that subcontractors are ignoring safety concerns. One of the sacked delegates had complained about excessive fumes from a 30-year-old truck he was driving. The union also contends that management had not provided trained first-aid officers, first-aid boxes or clean drinking water at the site.

**New Zealand Defense Force workers fight for wage rise**

Civilian workers at Canterbury's Burnham Military Camp have voted to strike for more pay. About 70 National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) members at the camp, whose jobs include storekeeping, administration, payroll and catering, voted at a stop work meeting last week for a four-hour strike and a month-long overtime ban.

They want an 8 percent salary increase but the New Zealand Defense Force (NZDF) has offered just 2.5 percent. Some workers are paid as little as $NZ22,500 per annum. A union spokesman said that it was "not sustainable" for the armed forces to be propped up by cheap civilian labor. The union, however, has not demanded pay equivalence with the military and only called for the growing gap between military and civilian pay rates to be closed "a little".

NUPE, which has been in pay talks with NZDF for the past six weeks, says it wanted to return to the negotiating table "before the members feel compelled to take action".

**Auckland newspaper dispute goes to court**

The union representing journalists at the Auckland-based *New Zealand Herald* is taking the publisher to court over its refusal to extend an existing work agreement to employees on a new Sunday edition. The journalists earlier banned publication of the paper in protest against company demands that they accept individual contracts containing some 15 items undermining existing pay and conditions.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) claims that the Tony O'Reilly-owned Australian Provincial Newspapers is breaking the law by refusing to allow new journalists to be covered by the existing agreement. The Employment Relations Act requires that all new staff be employed under the collective agreement for the first 30 days, after which they can choose between a collective or individual agreement.

By diverting the dispute into the courts and lifting the ban, the EPMU has opened the way for the Sunday edition to begin publishing this week, after almost a month's delay. The EPMU complained that it had tried to deal with the company's "concerns" during the over three days of negotiations but all its attempts to be "flexible" had failed. The EPMU had indicated that it would allow journalists on the Sunday paper to be employed on fixed salaries so as to dispense with overtime and penal rates. It also reportedly offered significant concessions on Saturday pay rates. The company rejected both proposals.

In a completely derisive action, the union has now demanded that the Immigration Department investigate the legal status of foreign journalists hired to work on the Sunday paper.

**Dunedin McDonald's workers protest management abuse**

McDonald's employees protested outside the company's Dunedin restaurant after three personal grievance claims were lodged by workers last week. A spokesman for the protesters said that McDonald's management had bullied teenage workers.

One of the grievances lodged allege that two female managers conducted an illegal body search of a young female employee in May, following the theft of a mobile phone. Up to 25 protesters participated in lunchtime demonstrations that were held over two days.

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

About 500 Air New Zealand ground staff covered by the Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) voted by a 98 percent margin to support strike action over an employment contract dispute. The workers, whose jobs include ticketing and processing freight, want a 6 percent wage rise. Their pay and conditions have not been upgraded since the government bailed out the airline in 2001, but Air New Zealand is offering just 3 percent.

A SFWU advocate said the strike vote followed five months of frustrating negotiations during which Air NZ management demanded an end to a current agreement guaranteeing national employment conditions. The company wants to split the agreement into four separate deals. Workers have also rejected attacks on conditions, including the gutting of overtime rights for hundreds of part time workers.

The 22-hour strike, due to be held on October 15, will mainly impact on operations at Auckland International Airport. Many international airlines flying into Auckland will be affected because most use Air NZ for their ground services. A smaller number of SFWU members in Christchurch and Wellington will also be involved.

**Airline catering workers to strike for pay**

The failure of mediation talks on September 29 means that strike action by over 400 members of Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and Engineers Union (EPMU) at LSG Sky chefs New Zealand will go ahead. The 8-hour strike involving workers at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch airports will occur over the next few days.

Catering workers want a 5 percent pay increase during the life of a new two-year agreement, team leader allowances, time-and-a-half for overtime and the "sorting out" of classification systems. The company, which is the country's major airline caterer and supplies Qantas, Air New Zealand and other international airlines, is offering only a 4 percent wage rise.

**Saipan hospitality workers sue for back-pay**

Employees at the Pacific Gardinia Hotel in Saipan filed a labour complaint on September 23 over the non-payment of wages. The outstanding amounts range from 3-12 months. The hotel has filed for bankruptcy and workers hope that by registering a claim with the Federal Ombudsman's Office and the CNMI Department of Labor they will secure what is owned to them.

Sara Flojeman, one of the hotel workers, said they were not paid on a regular bi-weekly basis and most of the time only a half of the due amount was paid.

While most of the workforce is Filipino the Philippines government has provided little assistance. Saipan is the capital of the US Pacific territory of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

**Striking Fiji construction workers end strike**

The 280 employees at Fiji construction company J.S. Hill ended their one-week strike on September 28 after management signed an agreement to resolve some of their grievances.

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Construction workers walked off the job at the Lautoka Teachers College on September 20 demanding an immediate site-safety audit and the provision of safety gear. They also want proper eating and toilet facilities, transportation to and from the site, regular training for staff, and a pay increase for all employees involved in the project.

Albert Ratucava, a spokesman for the workers, said that although management had agreed to act on a majority of the grievances, the company wanted “more time” to meet some of the demands. The workers have given the company until the end of the week to meet the demand for full pay for all workers during the strike and to refund a payment for safety boots.

A Building Workers Union official said the strike ended after Labour Ministry officials intervened and issued the company with a seven-day compliance notice.

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