Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 October 2004

Store workers protest against pay cut

Several hundred workers from the former state-owned Jining Department Store in China's Shandong Province went on strike and picketed the premises on October 18. They were protesting against a wage cut imposed by the Nanjing Central Group, which recently took over the store. The strikers also say they were forced to work grossly extended hours after the new management reopened the store on October 15.

The city government supported the take-over. Officials claimed that the store was facing bankruptcy and approached the Nanjing Central Group to invest. Jining's deputy mayor, Li Guangsheng, and other local government officials visited the protest, demanding workers end the strike action. Workers responded by chanting, "It's corrupt officials like you who make us bankrupt". About 200 police were dispatched in an attempt to intimidate the workers.

While the *Jining Daily* did not report the protest, the newspaper's chief editor later told the *China Labor Bulletin* that he had been directed by the Communist Party's Propaganda Department not to publish stories on "sudden strikes and protests".

Death toll escalating in Chinese mine explosion

The confirmed number of deaths from a gas explosion on October 20 at the Daping Mine near Zhengzhou city, Henan province, has risen to 129. The latest figure was reported on October 27, after rescuers retrieved the bodies of 79 more coal miners. While 19 men remain missing, authorities have all but ruled out hope of them being found alive.

Only 60 of the families of workers killed have agreed to sign papers for compensation payments. According to a report by the *China Labour Bulletin*, one of the missing men was forced to work in the state-owned mine because his farming plot had been taken over by the mine's expansion. The miner's wife said her husband had worked all month without a single day off but only earned 1,000 yuan ($US12) a month.

The Daping death toll makes it the worst mining disaster since 2000, when 162 people were killed in an underground coal mine explosion in the southern province of Guizhou. There have been 4,153 deaths in China's coal mines so far this year.

Philippines public servants protest job losses

Philippines public service unions claimed this week that a government plan to merge or privatise various public offices could result in the early retirement of about 40,000 government workers, while some 420,000 employees overall stand to lose their jobs.

Courage group (Confederation of Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees) president Ferdinand Gaite called for all government employees to hold lunchtime protests in major cities across the country on October 28. The union wants a 3,000-peso (approximately $US53) across-the-board wage increase. Government workers have not received a pay increase since 2000.

Sri Lankan bus workers strike over sackings

Bus drivers and conductors began an indefinite sit-in strike on October 24 and are picketing the Ampara bus depot, in Sri Lanka's eastern province. They are demanding the reinstatement of 109 workers sacked by the state-owned New Eastern Bus Company. Management claims that the workers' employment contracts were not valid.

Health workers fight retrenchments

Health workers marched from the Sri Lankan health ministry to the President's office in Colombo on October 26 demanding reinstatement of 309 minor staff workers. Despite attempts by police to obstruct the marchers, who wore black overcoats, they reached their destination and presented a memorandum with their demands.

The march is the latest in a series of protests over the issue. On October 12, health employees marched from Ridgeway Children's Hospital in the Colombo suburb of Borella to the health ministry and the next day from the National Hospital to the Prime Minister's office.

The retrenchments occurred after the workers had completed six months' service. The health minister is using a technicality to dismiss the employees, claiming their appointments were not valid because they had been recruited after the dissolution of parliament earlier this year. The workers claim they are being victimised.

Railway workers strike over pay cut

Points-men and shunters at the Sri Lankan Railway work site in Maligawatte, Colombo struck on October 25 over a management decision to cut two hours' overtime pay from every 24 hours worked. The strike meant that carriages were not coupled and trains could not be brought out of the yard. Most long-distance trains were delayed.

Agriculture workers on indefinite strike

Forty-eight agriculture workers at the state-owned rubber plant nursery in Welikadamulla, about 30 kilometres from Colombo, have been on strike since October 16.

The workers are fighting for a 23-rupee (20 US cents) daily allowance in addition to their daily wage of $US1.07. The 45-acre nursery supplies approximately 40 percent of Sri Lanka's rubber plant requirements and is run by the Rubber Research Institute under the direction of the Ministry of Plantations.

Sri Lankan apparel workers on strike in Bahrain

Sri Lankan female apparel workers at Noble Garments in Bahrain have been on indefinite strike since the beginning of the third week in October. They are demanding the payment of salaries, bonuses and leave so they can visit their families in Sri Lanka.

The 600 employees were recruited to work in the factory in 2001 and have completed three years of service. They have not been given leave to return home in that time and have been physically threatened when they asked for due salaries. Non-payment has meant that many go without food and other essentials. The workers have informed the Sri Lanka embassy and state authorities in Bahrain about their plight but nothing has been done to date.

Pakistani workers fight social security privatisation

Industrial workers in Pakistan's northeastern Punjab province protested near the local Social Security Hospital in the city of Gujranwala on October 25. They are opposing the privatisation of the social security department.

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The workers displayed banners and placards with slogans condemning the government for implementing the privatisation agenda of the International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which will deprive thousands of factory workers of health and educational facilities.

Indian power workers demand salary arrears

Contract power workers from sub-stations in Andhra Pradesh held a sit-down protest outside the Vidut Bhawan in Cuddapah city on October 26. They were demanding the non-payment of salary arrears for the last seven months.

The workers presented a memorandum containing their demand for payment to the Superintending Engineer of Southern Power Distribution Company and also called for permanency for contractual workers, the extension of the employees' prudential fund and other insurance facilities, and the supply of safety equipment. They are members of the United Electricity Employees Union.

Indian transport workers protest anti-labour policies

A large number of transport workers from the Delhi Transport Corporation (DTC) staged a daylong sit-down protest in front of DTC Headquarters on October 20. They were protesting against the national government's anti-labour policies, including its intervention to weaken the corporation and encourage private operators.

The protestors also condemned management corruption and the continuous harassment of the employees. The workers are members of the DTC Workers Union, DTC Workers Unity Centre and Delhi Parivahan Mazdoor Sangh.

Oil workers threaten strike action over rosters

Oil and gas workers at Esso's Longford Gas plant in eastern Victoria will step up their campaign against roster changes requiring them to remain on offshore rigs for two weeks at a time. About 80 maintenance contractors have threatened to strike for 100 days from the end of the month if the issue is not resolved.

Talks between the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the company are due to begin in Australian Industrial Relations Commission. A CFMEU spokesperson said the union had been trying to negotiate on the issue "for a very long time" and that workers "just want the same working patterns that they and their families are used to".

Father calls workplace death fine a "joke"

On October 28, the New South Wales County Court fined packaging firm Amcor just $120,000 over negligence leading to the death of 29-year old Darren Moon in March last year. Moon died from head injuries after he was pulled into a paper cutting machine at the company's Fairfield plant in Sydney.

The large machine, which is used to create paper from liquid pulp, had been in operation since 1966 but the court heard it had "little or no [safety] guard". The dead man's father, Paul Moon, also an Amcor employee, described the fine as "a joke". He told media that his son was doing his job as he was trained "and now he's dead".

WorkSafe executive director John Merritt told the media that Moon had been killed in "circumstances which were known to be dangerous" He declared the "issue that had been identified... and the solution to prevent it was at hand. It wasn't done."

Airline catering workers resume strike action

Over 400 workers at New Zealand airline catering firm LSG Skychefs have voted to strike again over pay and overtime rates. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members will ban overtime for 24 hours before going on strike on November 4 and 5. They will also picket LSG Auckland to gather public support.

The action follows eight hours of rolling strikes earlier this month in protest over an inadequate pay offer and management's refusal to discuss overtime rates. While the company had previously refused to enter mediation, it contacted the SFWU after the strike notice and said it was prepared to negotiate with the union.

The union wants a 3 to 4 percent pay increase in line with other workers. The SFWU says it has come up with "a range of options around the overtime claim", but LSG has refused to discuss it. It promised to withdraw the strike notice if LSG returns with an improved offer.

Junior doctors strike called off

A scheduled six-day strike beginning on November 2 by up to 2,000 junior doctors at New Zealand public hospitals has been called off. Negotiations over a new work contract resumed in Wellington this week after the country's 21 district health boards (DHBs) indicated they would make an offer to the Resident Doctors Association (RDA).

Negotiations have been in progress for six months. Had the strike gone ahead, it would have been the first-ever national strike by the country's junior doctors.

The union and the DHBs are hoping to reach agreement quickly. The union wants RDA work schedules, requiring doctors to work 12 days in a row, cut to 10 days. It also wants a break for doctors working seven consecutive 10-hour night shifts. Doctors say they often work hours in excess of the maximum stipulated 72 hours a week.

Fiji university staff to vote on strike

Staff at the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji will vote on November 3 on a proposal to strike the next day. Their union filed a 21-day strike notice on October 12 with the Ministry of Labour. The notice expires on November 3.

Union secretary Litiana Waqalevu said the USP staff union had exhausted all avenues to resolve an issue over the employment arrangements for new recruits. She said management had been recruiting staff on a contract basis and were ignoring a previous union-management agreement that all new recruits would be made permanent after serving six months, if not terminated. Contract staff receive inferior benefits compared to full-time employees.

The Ministry of Labour has processed the strike notice and nominated a representative to monitor the secret ballot on November 3.

Solomon Islands plantation strike enters 16th week

About 1,000 plantation workers from the Russell Island Plantation Estate Limited (RIPEL) are ignoring a Solomon Islands High Court judgment declaring their strike illegal and ordering them to return to work. The workers are facing contempt of court charges and heavy fines as well as a court order to pay the company compensation for lost income.

Production virtually ceased at the RIPEL copra and cocoa plantation in Yandina on Russell Island when the workers walked off the job on June 17. They are opposed to a new harvesting system that has already led to 100 sackings since September last year. A spokesman for the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) confirmed that RIPEL had also sacked the wives of terminated workers, evicted them from company homes, and ordered them to leave on the first boat out of Yandina.

On October 25, police began writing a report for the High Court, claiming that the strikers stopped police and other workers from loading about 500 bags of cocoa onto a boat for delivery to Honiara. The boat returned to Honiara without the cargo. The union lodged an application with the High Court on October 14 to re-list the RIPEL case for a hearing.

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