

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 October 2004

Asia

Filipino fishermen arrested on charges of mutiny

Police in the Philippines have arrested 10 fishermen employed by RD Tuna Ventures Inc. The arrests were made after the Regional Trial Court in General Santos City upheld a company claim that industrial action by 200 of its employees last August 24 constituted an act of mutiny. The detained workers are being held at the General Santos City Rehabilitation Centre and could face life sentences. Warrants have also been issued for the arrest of two officials from the Filipino Seafarers' Union (PSU) and a Papua New Guinea (PNG) maritime union leader.

The dispute began in August after fishermen and crew on 10 RD Tuna vessels off the coast of PNG seized seven of the vessels and cutoff communications with the home base. They were protesting over substandard working conditions. The issue was finally resolved when the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs brokered an agreement for improved conditions and guaranteed no reprisals against crewmembers.

The International Transport Workers Federation has issued an "action alert" to its affiliates in the Asia-Pacific Region and in the fisheries' section urging them to send protests to the Philippines government. Mayong Aguja, a member of the Philippines parliament, has called for a congressional inquiry into the plight of crews on Philippines fishing vessels and working conditions in RD Tuna's canning factory in PNG.

Massive death toll in Chinese coal mine blast

A gas explosion on October 20 at the state-owned Daping Mine in China's Henan province has claimed the lives of 56 coal miners. The mine employs 4,100 people and is in the Songshan Mountains, about 25 miles southwest of the major industrial city of Zhengzhou.

The death toll could rise dramatically. According to the deputy administrator of the State Administration of Work Safety Sun Huashan, there were 446 workers underground when the explosion tore through the mine during the night. Only 298 workers escaped and 92 are still missing. Of the survivors, 20 are in hospital with four in a critical condition.

Although more than 1,000 rescue workers are engaged in a frantic search for survivors, authorities say the chance of finding the remaining men alive is slim. If they were not killed by the blast, many would probably have been suffocated by toxic gas.

While an official from the Henan Province Coal Mine Safety Inspection Bureau said the cause of the explosion was under investigation, China's mines are notorious for poor ventilation which allows the dangerous build up of gas. The Daping disaster is the worst so far this year, adding to the 4,153 coalmine deaths since the beginning of January 2004.

Blast at fireworks plant kills 31 workers

A blast on October 4 at the Changling Firecrackers Factory in Pubei County in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region in southwest China killed 31 workers and injured 57 others. At least two of the injured were reported to be near death after suffering burns to most of their bodies. The explosion flattened six of the plant's buildings.

Most of the 120 employees at the plant were women workers from poor farming families in neighbouring villages. They are paid a monthly salary

of just 300 to 500 yuan (300 yuan is about \$US36). According to a report by the official Xinhua News Agency, the Pubei County government has offered to pay bereaved families just 4,000 yuan (around \$US500) compensation.

The tragedy at Changling is the third fatal accident in firework plants in Pubei County since May. On August 20, a factory manager was killed in an explosion at Beitong while two workers died in a blast at an illegal plant in the same town in May. Two children who were playing in the rubble were also injured when some of the remaining explosive material ignited.

Industrial accidents claim the lives of thousands of workers every year in China. According to statistics released in August 2004 by the State Administration of Work Safety, 63,735 people perished in 426,283 industrial accidents in the first six months of this year.

South Korean public servants to walk out over anti-strike bill

Public servants in South Korea are planning to strike in early November over the introduction of new legislation abolishing their right to strike. President Roh Moo-hyun's government finalised a bill on October 19 forbidding public servants to strike or engage in political activities. It plans to push the legislation through the National Assembly this month. While the Democratic Labor Party has pledged to oppose the act, it is believed that a majority of legislators will support it.

A government spokesman said that under the new law the administration would "deal sternly" with any public servant involved in industrial action. Korean Public Servants Association leader Kim Young-gil said the union expects support from the country's two main peak union bodies, the Korean Confederation of Trade Union and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, during the strike action.

Protesters march against privatisation

Two thousand workers in Taiwan marched on October 19 from the Chiang Kai-Shek Memorial in Taipei to the Legislative Yuan to protest plans by President Chen Shui-bian's administration to privatise 18 state-run companies. In 1991, the government sold-off 31 state enterprises and 17 have since been declared bankrupt.

The Taiwan Confederation of Trade Unions (TCTU), which organised the protest, is demanding the government drop its plans for further privatisations and cease interfering in the affairs of state-run enterprises.

Indian bank employees poised for one day strike

Over 225,000 workers from Indian state banks have been staging protests outside corporate centres, branch head offices and zonal offices in cities across the country since October 8. The campaign also included a sit-down protest on October 19.

The workers want extra staff recruited to cut workloads, improvements in the welfare fund, pensions increased to 50 percent of salary and a review of interest rates on staff loans. They are also protesting decisions taken by management without consultation, including the relocation of regional offices, the closure or merger of bank branches and outsourcing.

The workers, members of the All India State Bank Officers' Federation and All India State Bank of India Staff Federation, are threatening a one-

day national strike on November 5.

Cargo handlers demonstrate for improved conditions

Cargo handlers from a private labour pool at the Visakhapatnam port in Andhra Pradesh, India are campaigning for parity of welfare and other benefits with workers at the Dock Labour Board. They demonstrated in the port and held a sit-down protest outside Karmika Jyothi Bhavan in support of their claims on October 19.

The workers are insisting that the special meeting of the Dock Labour Board on October 26 consider their claims. They also want representation on the port managing committee to regulate the functioning of the private pool.

Tamilnadu drivers demonstrate for insurance cover

Truck and container lorry drivers in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated outside the Tuticorin collectorate on October 15 to demand introduction of a provident fund, coverage under the Employees State Insurance and a bonus scheme.

The protestors, members of the Tuticorin Truck and Container Lorry Drivers' Union, presented a memorandum outlining their demands to the authorities.

Pakistani transport workers protest for compensation

Transport workers retrenched from the Sindh Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) in Pakistan established a "hunger strike camp" outside the Karachi Press Club on October 15. They are protesting against the transport department and Sindh provincial government refusal to compensate them for the loss of their jobs in 1999.

The protestors claimed that 123 retrenched workers have died because of the hardship caused by the non-payment of compensation. They plan to intensify their protests in the coming weeks.

Teachers protest arrest of colleagues

Teachers at 220 colleges in Sindh Province, Pakistan went on strike on October 15 over police violence and the arrest of a number of their colleagues in Karachi during a protest campaign on October 12. The initial demonstration was to demand the authorities process all due promotions.

Teachers in Hyderabad, Shikarpur, Thatta, Nawabshah and Sanghar hoisted black flags on college buildings and wore black armbands during the strike.

Pakistan telecom workers on protracted hunger strike

A hunger strike by workers at the Pakistan Telecom Company (PTCL) to demand security of employment for 646 daily-wage workers entered its tenth day on October 17. A number of strikers have been rushed to hospital for treatment during the protest.

Daily-wage workers in Karachi and other parts of Sindh province are not guaranteed employment security despite many having up to 12 years service. The hunger strikers say they are determined to continue the protest until their demands are met.

Sri Lankan public sector workers protest

Public sector employees, including civil servants, technologists, drivers, office and manual workers, began lunchtime protests outside the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council Office Complex in Ratnapura some 80 kilometres from Colombo this week. They are demanding the abolition of salary anomalies.

Power workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) picketed the front of the CEB head office in central Colombo on October 20. They are demanding the company drop a restructuring program designed to prepare the way for privatisation and want the government to approve construction of a proposed hydro power plant in Upper Kotmale and a coal thermal power plant in Norochcholai.

On the same day points-men and shunters at the Sri Lankan Railway Dematagoda work site suddenly walked out on strike on October 20 to protest the withholding of overtime pay. They resumed work after management issued the pay in the evening.

Australia and the Pacific

Qantas admits recruiting strike breakers

On October 22, Qantas chief executive Geoff Dixon admitted that hundreds of staff employed on short-term contracts and stationed overseas were being trained as strike breakers. "People say they have a right to strike, and we have a right to try and run our airline," Dixon said after leaving the company's annual general meeting in Brisbane. While Qantas has admitted that it is recruiting up to 350 "contingency workers" (short-term contract employees) to be based in London some media reports suggest the number is far higher.

The Flight Attendant's Association is threatening industrial action over the strike-breaking force. Ground staff, who are members of the Australian Services Union, could also strike in December. They are angry over being restricted to 3 percent pay rise while Qantas management decided last week to increase fees for its non-executive directors by 66 percent, from \$1.5 million to \$2.5 million.

Customs officers strike over pay

About 4,500 customs officers employed at international airports and shipping terminals across Australia walked off the job for 24 hours on October 21 following a break down in negotiations over pay and staffing.

The officers rejected the management's latest 5 percent pay rise for the first year of the agreement followed by another 4 percent on January 2007. The previous offer was 4 percent annually for two years.

A spokesman for the Community and Public Sector Union said: "We need a pay rise that will allow the agency to easily attract and retain highly skilled officers." The union claims that the service needs an additional 140 staff.

Union lifts picket in dispute over conditions

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) called off a picket by maintenance contract workers outside the Esso Longford oil and gas plant near Sale in Victoria on October 21. The union ended the protest after the company agreed to withdraw from Federal Court action over previous industrial stoppages. Esso offshore workers who refused to cross the pickets are also back at work.

The contract workers are opposing Esso's attempt to abolish the present week-on, week-off rosters in favour of fortnight-on, fortnight-off rosters. The outcome of talks between the union and the company is not clear with an AMWU spokesman saying only, "we should have a handshake deal on a process for us to go forward and resolve these issues".

New Zealand junior doctors vote for national strike

Over 2,000 junior doctors in public hospitals throughout New Zealand voted to strike for six days from November 2. The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) this week gave notice of the national strike that will include house surgeons and registrars and affect services across all of the country's 21 district health boards. It will be the first-ever national strike by junior doctors.

The RDA's national secretary said the doctors were not seeking a pay rise but more rostered time off to guarantee safe performance. Although health boards are not allowed to roster doctors for more than 72 hours a week, the limit is frequently exceeded. The union's claim for penalty payments was rejected during the round of negotiations that began in May.

Doctors want the present 12-day rosters reduced to 10 days and are demanding changes to the current system that requires they work seven consecutive 10-hour night shifts. The union has signalled it is prepared to forgo a cost-of-living increase if the rostering issues are addressed.

A spokeswoman for the health boards dismissed the junior doctors' claims, saying that "throwing money at the problem" to put more trainee doctors on ward floors was "not an option".

The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists said that its 2,400 senior doctor members may be unable to cope during the six-day strike and warned that there could be "catastrophe" because of the lack of

resources to provide safe emergency cover.

Air New Zealand ground staff strike over pay

A strike by 400 Air New Zealand ground staff in Auckland and Christchurch went ahead on October 15 after airline management turned down a union offer to enter negotiations over a new work agreement. Management insisted the strike notice be lifted as a precondition for talks.

Check-in and baggage handling staff struck for 22 hours from 2 a.m., and demonstrated at the Auckland International terminal in support of a pay rise. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) wants an immediate 6 percent increase with an additional 3 percent next year. The company has offered a 9 percent over three years and is demanding a reduced overtime provision.

A SFWU advocate said the talks failed to get off the ground because of the company's "take it or leave it approach" to the mediation. The company has refused to explain why it had waited for 14 days before attending mediation or why it turned down union attempts to discuss the issue at an earlier date.



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