

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

20 November 2004

Workers gunned down in Philippines plantation dispute

At least 13 workers were killed and over 200 injured on November 16 when 1,000 police, assisted by the military, moved in to disperse 6,000 protesters blockading the gates of the Hacienda Luisita sugar plantation in Tarlac. The attack was authorised by the Philippines Labor Secretary Patricia St. Tomas after workers rejected a ministry direction to end the blockade and return to work.

Riot police, armed with tear gas and backed by water cannon on four fire trucks, a bulldozer and two V-150 armored personnel carriers, attacked the workers at around 3 p.m., but were driven back in a 40-minute battle with workers throwing Molotov cocktails and stones. At that point, shots were fired into the crowd.

United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU) president Rene Galang told the media: "The shooting erupted from everywhere and a number of protesters fell to the ground." He said workers had seen snipers in the buildings inside the sugar estate's factory compound and in nearby sugarcane fields. Among those killed during the fighting was a three-month-old child who died of asphyxiation when police fired teargas into the family's shanty. The child's father was also shot and killed.

The 11-day strike involved members of the ULWU and the Central Azucarera De Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU). CATLU wants a 100-peso (\$US1.79) increase in the daily wage and a 30,000-peso signing bonus for 700 mill workers. The company has offered only a 12-peso increase and a 12,000-peso signing bonus.

The ULWU, which covers some 5,000 plantation workers, is demanding the reinstatement of 327 farm workers who were dismissed last October. Those sacked included the union's president, its vice president and eight other union officials. The blockade brought production at the mill to a standstill, with trucks loaded with sugarcane from the plantation lined up in a huge traffic jam outside the mill.

President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo failed to condemn the killings and instead appealed for an "amicable settlement" of the dispute. At the same time, she ordered the deployment of more police and troops into the area "to restore order". The family of former president Corazon Aquino owns the plantation.

"Illegal" workers flee Malaysia

Over 95,000 so-called illegal migrant workers in Malaysia have fled the country during the past month to avoid heavy fines and jail sentences under Malaysia's tough new immigration act. The workers can now be fined 10,000 ringgits (\$US2,632) and face a jail sentence of up to five years. They can also be caned. Of those

who have fled, about 85,000 were Indonesians with the rest from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, China, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Thailand and Singapore. The Indonesian government estimates that at least 700,000 of its nationals are working in Malaysia illegally.

Many workers, however, cannot leave the country because employers are refusing to handover severance pay that they need for fares. Some who cannot leave are registering with their country's consulate, hoping to take advantage of an amnesty offered by the Malaysian government that exempts illegal migrants from punishment if they agree to leave the country by the end of the year. The Indonesian and Philippines governments are providing a limited number of vessels to transport workers home.

Chinese workers fight sale of state-owned factory

Workers from the state-owned Number 26 Scientific Instruments Factory in Nanjing, China, have been blockading the plant for more than 10 days. They are protesting the closure of the factory and the destruction of jobs.

On November 12, more than 1,000 workers demonstrated outside the plant condemning the sale, and shouting slogans such as "State-run factories have changed their system to sell, sell, sell".

Factory owners detained over unpaid wages

Workers at a Shenzhen factory in southern China are holding the plant's Hong Kong owners hostage over unpaid salaries. The owners were detained on November 12. The plant manufactures audio speaker parts.

Workers claim they have not been paid since September and are owed a total of 200,000 yuan (\$US24,200). While the owners have promised to pay within three days, the factory workers still refuse to release them, fearing that the plant is slated for closure and its owners will flee to avoid payment.

Sri Lankan medical technicians on indefinite strike

Public health laboratory technicians across Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on November 15 in opposition to a shift system to be introduced on December 1. The technicians are also protesting the management using newly recruited technicians without on-the-job training.

The technicians recently began a work-to-rule campaign over cuts to an allowance for processing patients' laboratory reports after normal working hours.

The strikers will provide emergency services to hospitals and have exempted the Borella Ridgeway Childrens Hospital, the Maharagama Cancer Hospital and Central Blood Bank from

industrial action.

The Health Ministry has served dismissal letters on 57 newly recruited technicians who joined the strike. The government has also issued a statement calling on the public to “revolt against the striking trade unions”. Assistant Medical Officers and Registered Medical Officers are threatening to join the strike action.

Health workers demand overtime dues

Nearly 1,000 health workers from the Kurunegala Teaching Hospital in Sri Lanka’s North West Province went on strike on November 16, demanding the payment of all overtime accumulated since last July. Clerks, drivers and their assistants, as well as telephone operators, cooks, supervisors and minor staff, joined the strike. They have threatened further action if the payment is not made.

Pharmacists at Polonnaruwa hospital in the North Central Province walked out on November 17 to demand payment of outstanding overtime dues.

Power workers demand promised pay increase

Power workers from the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) picketed the CEB head office in Fort, Central Colombo on November 17 demanding the payment of salary increases promised by the government about a year ago.

The workers chanted anti-government slogans and condemned the rise in the cost of living. They want an immediate 10,000-rupee (\$US100) interim allowance if the salary increase is delayed further.

Shoe worker in Pakistan burnt to death

A shoe factory worker was burnt to death when the plant in Gujranwala in Pakistan’s Punjab province caught on fire on November 17. According to early reports, the blaze was caused by a lighted cigarette being dropped in one of the plant’s rooms used to store inflammable chemicals.

The fire quickly engulfed the entire building, reducing stocks of shoes to ashes and destroying machinery. The fire brigade worked for at least two hours to extinguish the blaze and had to call on local people to help. Yasin, the worker, succumbed to his severe injuries on the way to the hospital.

Train drivers oppose attempt to scapegoat colleagues

Angry rail drivers in Queensland are threatening to strike for 24 hours over the premature release of information related to the derailment of a high-speed passenger train on November 16. Although about 120 people were injured, no one was killed in the crash.

Just days after the incident, Queensland Rail (QR) released details recorded on the train’s black box, revealing that it was traveling at 112km/h when it left the rails—almost double the speed permitted on the particular section of track. The information was released before the train’s driver and observer were interviewed. Drivers fear that the state Labor government is attempting to blame the accident on the train crew.

A spokesman for the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Employees (AFULE) said: “QR has come out with this very selective piece of information that suggests driver error when there could be any number of reasons why the train was doing the speed it was.”

New Zealand polytechnic lecturers stop work over pay offer

On November 11, a meeting of lecturers at the Wellington-based Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ) rejected the latest offer made by management in collective agreement negotiations. The offer consisted of a one-off cash payment equal to 2.5 percent of actual salary tied to “efficiencies”. The meeting called for a strike ballot over a pay claim.

A spokesman for the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) said it was very hard to believe that the polytechnic could not afford the additional annual cost of about \$180,000 to lift 130 lecturers’ base wage rate by 2.5 percent. He condemned the management’s offer as “nothing short of insulting”.

According to ASTE, the lecturers have previously been called on to prop up the institution by taking lower salaries than those paid elsewhere in the sector. The basic salary rate at TOPNZ is thousands of dollars behind other polytechnics.

Oil workers threaten strike over agreement

This week, about 100 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) employed at the Taranaki onshore oil exploration in New Zealand threatened to strike indefinitely at five of the company’s drilling sites.

A union spokesman told media: “The strike will be indefinite. Until the employers come back with an offer that we are happy to accept, these wells will remain closed down.”

Marchers in Fiji to demand reinstatement of suspended staff

About 1,000 workers and supporters are expected to take part in a protest march through Lautoka City on November 20, according to the Fiji Trade Union Congress. The march is in opposition to the Lautoka City Council’s refusal to abide by an arbitration court ruling to reinstate two members of staff it recently suspended, including town clerk Pusp Raj.

A rally at the end of the demonstration will also discuss the council’s alleged misuse of tax payers’ money. Speakers will include prominent union officials from the Fiji Bank Employees Union and the Fiji Public Service Association. A union spokesman said the council had “shown complete disrespect and disregard for all agreements, labour legislation and orders of the ministers for local government and labour”.



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