

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Philippines public servants rally for pay increase

On November 24, thousands of public service employees held torchlight marches in cities across the Philippines. The national protest, coordinated by the Confederation of Unity Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees (CURAGE), included teachers, health workers and employees from various government departments.

The workers are demanding a 3,000 peso (\$US56.60) across-the-board wage increase and are opposing planned job cuts throughout the public sector. CURAGE spokesman Danilo Alcoriza said the pay hike "is long overdue" as the public sector employees' last increase of just 5 percent in basic salary was in 2001. He questioned why the government had difficulty finding the 54 billion pesos to meet the pay increase for 1.5 million employees while it had no difficulty allocating 30 billion pesos to finance mass redundancies.

Transport groups end strike over fuel prices

A Philippines-wide strike by public transport operators and drivers brought the major cities of Manila, Cebu and Davao to a virtual standstill on November 25. Smaller cities across the country were also affected. The strike was organised by the 450,000-strong transport union, Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Opereytor Nationwide (Piston), and supported by most other transport groups. It was called to protest continuous increases in oil and fuel prices.

Since January 2003, the price of fuel and oil has gone up 15 times. In the past, the transport groups pushed for fare increases to compensate for higher running costs, but drivers' groups ruled out raising a similar demand this time. A spokesman declared that pushing for fare increases amounted to "tolerating unjust oil price increases by the cartel of Shell, Caltex and Petron".

The strikers are demanding the government repeal the Oil Deregulation Law that they claim has given the oil companies a free hand to raise oil prices. The strike ended after the government offered a minor discount on sales of gasoline. Strike leaders promised no further action if the agreement is honoured.

Workers in China fight for severance pay

Hundreds of workers producing goods for home appliance manufacturer Durable in the free trade zone city of Shenzhen walked off the job on November 23 over the refusal of management to pay compensation for impending layoffs. Workers

forced open the plant gates and blocked the entrance after clashing with security guards.

More than 100 police and local militia were called to break up the blockade and one worker was arrested. The workers eventually dispersed in the afternoon.

The factory, previously owned by a Hong Kong company, was sold in September to a Chinese firm, which plans to relocate production to Zhuhai and lay off the 3,000 workers in Shenzhen before the end of the year. Despite having signed an agreement, the new owners are refusing to pay workers the stipulated severance, equivalent to one month's salary, and pay the employees' social and medical insurance. The workers, mainly immigrants from other provinces, are paid only 574 yuan (\$US70) a month. One female worker said: "Our salary is only enough for basic living. We have nothing left to send back to our family." Many of her colleagues had already left Shenzhen because of the harsh working conditions.

Indian public sector workers strike over pay

Workers at government offices, educational institutions and health centres in Kashmir went on strike for two days from November 24. They are seeking a 5 percent increase in their basic wage and a 50 percent increase in their cost-of-living allowance. They are also demanding the government reduce the retirement age to 60 years.

During the strike, workers demonstrated in the state's capital Srinagar. The workers are members of the Employees Joint Action Committee (EJAC) and Trade Union Centre (TUC).

Secretariat employees protest against outsourcing

Employees at the government secretariat in the Indian state of Kerala formed a human chain around the main office on November 23 over the outsourcing of work normally performed by in-house personnel. Workers claim that increasing amounts of work are being handed over to the private sector agencies, paving the way for inevitable layoffs.

According to the protest organisers, the human chain was symbolic of the workers' determination to protect the secretariat from privatisation.

Sri Lankan railway workers strike

Workers employed at the Maligawatte yard of the Sri Lanka Railway Department went on strike on November 22 against the disciplinary action taken against four workers by the Railway Inspection Unit. Officials of the unit did a surprise visit to the yard and alleged the four workers were absent from the premises. Three trains to various parts of the country had to be cancelled due to the

strike.

In a separate dispute, sub-stationmasters picketed in front of the busy railway station in Maradana, a suburb of Colombo, on November 22. They are demanding job security and confirmation in their positions.

Company fails to head off Australia-wide strike

More than 600 workers at Visy Industries packaging sites in four Australian states went on indefinite strike on November 23. While the company had offered a 14.25 percent pay increase over three years, prolonged negotiations broke down over another key issue. The workers are seeking automatic continuance of salary payment, without further medical assessment, when injuries cause employees to be off work for more than 104 days.

Visy had sought court orders to stop the strike going ahead but the Australian Industrial Relations Commission ruled that the workers' action was "protected" until February 22 under the provisions of the Workplace Relations Act. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union Print Division wrote to the company this week advising that it was "prepared to meet and work through the issues".

Hospital orderlies fight staffing cuts

Orderlies at Royal Perth Hospital imposed work bans this week to oppose moves by the hospital authorities to cut the number of orderlies working night shift in emergency. They began by refusing to carry out security duties in the emergency department, which often has to deal with aggressive patients.

On top of their regular duties, the orderlies are required to provide security to ensure the safety of staff and patients. The hospital management wants to cut the number of night shift orderlies from 12 to 9 to achieve "efficiency", even though this will jeopardise safety.

Ferry staff picket jetty over pay claim

Staff at Oceanic Cruises—a ferry operator providing regular services between Perth and Rottnest Island—went on strike this week. They are demanding the same pay rates as their counterparts working for other ferry companies, who are paid 4 percent more.

The workers say they will continue the strike until their demand is met. While several other ferry companies run services from the busy jetty near the Perth CBD, the strike has halted the 12 daily Oceanic Cruises services that are used by hundreds of tourists and commuters.

Electricians strike for pay and working conditions

About 80 electricians employed at Energex depots in the towns of Caboolture and Stapylton in south-east Queensland went on strike for 24 hours on November 23. They are demanding pay rates on par with those paid to their colleagues in other states as part of a new enterprise work agreement. Electricians in New South Wales earn an extra \$3 an hour. The current enterprise work agreement at Energex expires in May 2005 but workers want the new pay rates to commence from December.

Power workers employed by Enron Energy, which covers regional Queensland, went on strike last week over the same issue. Besides pay increases, the workers at both companies are demanding agreed staffing levels and a ceiling on the hiring of casuals and part-time workers. They are also seeking the retention of a ban on forced redundancies.

Striking New Zealand oil rig workers ordered back to work

About 100 workers at five Taranaki onshore oil and gas exploration rigs in New Zealand's central North Island returned to work on November 21. They walked off the job on November 19 to protest the company's failure to settle a multi-employer collective agreement despite three months of negotiations.

Although the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) had said the strike was indefinite, it called off the action after the Employment Court issued an interim injunction ordering the workers back to work. The union resumed talks with employers the following day, even though a hearing into the injunction was still pending.

The EPMU quickly reached a settlement and recommended it for ratification by the workers. It provides for a pay rise of between 3.25 and 4 percent plus protective clothing and laundry allowances. Workers originally asked for a 5 percent pay increase, better redundancy provisions to compensate for the transient nature of their work, payment for training time done outside working hours and improvements to meal and clothing provisions.

Fiji hotel staff vote to strike to defend worker

At least 94 percent of staff employed at the Mocambo Hotel in Fiji voted on November 22 to strike over the unfair dismissal of one of their colleagues. The National Union of Hospitality, Catering and Tourism Industries Employees conducted the secret ballot. The Ministry of Labour, Industrial Relations and Productivity has been advised of the results.

The sacked worker, Waisale Seru, was accused of stealing used animal fat from the kitchen. The fat is discarded in any case and Seru claimed he had permission from his supervisor to take it. Following the ballot result, the union is seeking talks with management about reinstatement.

Solomon Islands strikers occupy plantation

On November 22, striking workers at the Russell Islands Plantation Estate (RIPEL) in the Solomon Islands occupied the company's mill and some administration buildings. The company processes coconut oil.

The occupation was sparked by the failure last week of the Solomon Islands High Court to set aside an earlier High Court order declaring a six-month-old strike at RIPEL illegal and ordering a return to work. About 1,000 workers are on strike over the sacking of 100 employees and the eviction of their families from the island, after the introduction of a new harvesting method.

The leaders of six major communities in the local province signed a petition demanding the withdrawal of International Comtrade Shipping Line (ICSL) from a partnership shareholding in RIPEL. The petitioners claim that since ICSL took over the management of RIPEL it has provoked industrial unrest. They asserted the present strike was the result of "stubbornness" by company chairman Patrick Wong and general manager John Whiteside.



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