

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 November 2004

Protracted strike ends at Chinese textile plant

A strike by 7,000 workers at Huarun Xianyang textile factory in China's Shaanxi province has ended after almost seven weeks. The employees struck on September 14 and protested outside the plant in defiance of the police. Some 20 of the workers' representatives were arrested during the strike and warrants issued for three more.

The workers were opposing demands by the company's new owners that 5,000 employees had to undergo a probationary period of between three to six months on reduced pay and the amount of redundancy offered by the company to some 1,000 laid-off workers. They also rejected union officials being appointed by the official All-China Federation of Trade Unions and demanded the right to select their own representatives.

While the company has agreed to drop the probationary period and allow long-term work contracts, it has ruled out improved compensations for laid-off workers.

Filipino airport workers delay protests

Airport employees at Mactan-Cebu International Airport Authority (MCIAA) have agreed to delay recommencing a campaign of protests that ended on October 20. The two days of protests began when the MCIAA board refused to discuss how it would fund benefits owed to the workers from 1991 to 2003 and estimated to be 200 million pesos (\$US35,700).

While the Court of Appeals last year ordered MCIAA to pay the back benefits, the company is using a loophole in the ruling to delay payment. The court order states that payment is "subject to the availability of funds". This week, facing threats of renewed industrial action, MCIAA agreed to hold meetings with the MCIAA Employees Mutual Association but has made no commitment to meet its obligations.

Sri Lankan public sector workers condemn the government

On November 3, thousands of public sector workers from health, railway, clerical services and other state-owned services gathered at the Viharamahadevi Park in central Colombo and marched to busy Lipton Circle to demand a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) pay increase.

They carried banners and chanted slogans condemning the government for making false election campaign promises that it would improve working conditions.

At Lipton Circle the workers called for an indefinite strike if funding for the pay increase is not included in the forthcoming government budget. Members of 52 unions participated in the protest, including female workers from the Free Trade Zones.

State-government workers defend jobs

Sacked health workers in Sri Lanka's Eastern province protested in Ampara on October 31 to demand reinstatement. The Director General of Health Services claimed that the dismissal of 315 employees was a "procedural issue", but the workers allege that they have been victimised because they had been hired by the previous government.

In a separate dispute, auxiliary health workers at Embilipitiya Hospital in Sabaragamuwa province struck on November 2 against the hiring of 15 contract workers. The strikers returned to work the next day but threatened wider industrial action involving other health workers across the province if hospital management continued to hire contract labour. The public sector health workers are members of the Health Services Trade Union Alliance.

In another dispute involving state government employees, transport workers from state-owned bus services picketed the Ministry of Transport in Central Colombo on November 3. They were protesting over the government's plan to sell-off bus routes to private bus companies.

Pakistani teachers protest non-payment of salaries

Teachers from primary schools in Dadu, in Pakistan's Balochistan province, began a hunger strike outside the local press club on November 2 over the non-payment of their salaries for the last five months. A spokesman for the teachers told the media that the education department had not paid 58 newly-appointed teachers. He said they would continue to protest until the matter was resolved.

On October 29, around 100 teachers protested in Nowshera, a northwest frontier province of Pakistan, over the non-payment of their salaries for the last eight months. The teachers marched to the Department of Education offices. Later, they organised a public meeting in the town, where speakers criticised the department for ignoring teachers' problems. The teachers and their families will demonstrate again on November 8.

Former transport workers on prolonged hunger strike

A hunger strike by workers from the defunct Sindh Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) entered its seventh day on October 31. The protest is being held outside the Karachi press club. Some 1,844 retrenched SRTC workers are demanding the government pay them adequate compensation. They are members of the SRTC Employees Action Committee.

Sindh Food Department workers also began a hunger strike in front of the press club on the same day, demanding confirmation of continuing employment for 490 watchmen. They are planning a sit-down strike outside the Chief Minister's home on November

25 if they do not receive an answer.

Indian insurance workers demand wage rise

Life Insurance Corporation employees walked out for two hours on October 29 against a delay in payment of a wage rise. The stop-work involved employees at branch offices in the Machilipatnam division and in the Guntur and Krishna districts of the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Workers from branches in Vijayawada also joined the action. The Insurance Employees Union and the Insurance Corporation Employees' Union coordinated the walkouts.

Bus workers protest attack on conductor

Workers on 41 private buses operated by Vytilla-Vytilla circular bus services in the southern Indian state of Kerala went on strike on October 29 to demand the arrest of those responsible for a recent assault on bus conductor K.B. Joshy. According to workers, Joshy was attacked by "anti-social elements" near the Ernakulam Medical Centre.

The strikers held a demonstration and a public meeting.

Queensland vets demand pay improvements

Veterinarians employed by the Queensland state government began a work-to-rule campaign this week, calling for improved pay in order to attract new staff and improve retention rates. Some 32 Department of Primary Industry vets are involved in the industrial action, which includes a ban on the export certification of beef.

The inability to retain staff has seen veterinarians' workloads increase. Paul King from Queensland's Public Sector Union claimed the vets' "pay classification and structure is the lowest in Australia".

"It's an indefinite industrial action, and what we're trying to achieve is talks with the department," he said.

The State Labor government claims the demands are outside the existing enterprise bargaining agreement, which is not due to be renegotiated for another 18 months.

Virgin Blue attempts to impose extended rosters

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) said this week it intends to fight roster changes planned by low-cost domestic airline Virgin Blue. According to the union, the airline is introducing a 12-week roster cycle which will force pit crew and guest services staff to work almost 11 hours a day. The changes will also mean that ordinary working time, without penalty rates, would continue for 10 hours a day.

The union has already made an application to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for a hearing and plans to meet with the company to resolve the issue.

Aircrews employed at low cost providers such as Virgin Blue already receive inferior wages to those paid to their colleagues employed by Qantas's international operations.

New Zealand teachers accept pay rise

Teachers in New Zealand primary and intermediate schools have voted to accept a new collective employment agreement negotiated by the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI).

The new agreement—which covers 25,000 teachers and is worth \$420 million over the three-year term—provides for an 8.74 percent pay rise over three years. It also includes the hiring of up to 800 extra staff so full-time primary teachers will have 10-hours

guaranteed classroom release time each term. A \$500 payment will be made to union members covered by the collective contract.

Over 90 percent of union members agreed to ratify the agreement, which was the product of 25 days of talks between NZEI and the Education Ministry.

Casino worker disciplined for wearing badge

A Service & Food Workers' Union (SFWU) member employed on the gaming floor at Sky City Casino in Auckland faced disciplinary action last week for refusing to remove a badge celebrating Labour Day. The badges were put out by the National Distribution Union (NDU) to promote the eight-hour working day. The worker received a written warning in a disciplinary meeting. The Service & Food Workers' Union (SFWU) says it will challenge the decision.

Sky City claimed that wearing union badges breached the company's dress and uniform policy. Workers, however, regularly wear other badges and ribbons, including ANZAC poppies, breast cancer ribbons and cancer awareness daffodils and are not asked to remove them.

While other SFWU members at Sky City wore badges bearing the slogans "I'm Union" and "Proud 2 B Union" on the same day, only one was disciplined.

NDU members at Progressive Enterprises, which runs the Foodtown, Countdown and Woolworths supermarkets, were also told not to wear the badges, but management did not force the issue.

Fiji government workers prepare to strike for wage increases

The Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) has been holding membership ballots in various workplaces over whether to strike in support of a Cost-of-Living-Allowance (COLA) increase for the years' 2003 and 2004. The confederation wants a 5 percent salary increase for 2003 and is in negotiations with the Public Service Commission on a COLA payment and a Salary Scale Progression Payments for the year 2004. Prime Minister Laisenia Qaras has instructed the Commission not to grant any salary increases this year.

The CPSU has been holding rallies in its West, North and Central divisions. A ballot result endorsing a strike is expected to be announced by the end of the week and a 28-days notice of industrial action will then be lodged.

Meanwhile, local government workers employed by the Suva City Council plan to strike from November 18 if management does not approve a 10 percent pay increase, including 5 percent for 2003. A strike ballot was conducted in July and a report of the dispute was submitted to the Ministry of Labour. Town Clerk Ilitomasi Verenakadavu said that although the council is willing to negotiate "it must consider its own financial status".



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