

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 November 2004

Police close down union voting

On November 10, the South Korean government dispatched thousands of police to prevent members of the Korean Government Employees Union from voting on a strike proposal at polling booths in 200 government offices across the country.

Workers attempting to vote were threatened with arrest and police dragged some out of polling booths. According to police reports, 186 union members were arrested and thousands of ballots and other documents confiscated in raids on 47 offices.

The strike is in opposition to the government declaring the union illegal and legislation preventing public servants from joining unions or engaging in industrial action. The union, which claims to have 140,000 members, announced that the strike scheduled for November 15 would go ahead in defiance of the government. An indefinite strike is also being considered.

Meanwhile, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) will hold mass rallies in Seoul over the weekend. The peak union body is demanding labour rights and improved benefits for irregular and casual workers in line with the regular workforce. The KCTU, which has 590,000 members working in more 854 companies, is expected to call a nationwide strike on the issue in late November or early December.

Police attack sugar plantation workers

At least 80 striking workers at the Philippines sugar plantation Hacienda Luisita Incorporated (HLI) in Tarlac were injured on November 6 when police, military and security personnel attempted to break up a protest rally that had brought operations at the estate's sugar mill to a standstill.

Over 80 police and soldiers used truncheons, tear gas and a water cannon on protestors, including women and children. The injured were taken to various hospitals in Tarlac City and treated for broken arms and bruises.

The workers—members of the United Luisita Workers' Union (ULWU), representing 5,000 plantation workers, and the Central Azucarera De Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU), representing 700 factory employees—were joined by various labour groups when they blocked the refinery gates. The protest prevented trucks loaded with sugarcane from entering the refinery and caused a massive traffic jam on the MacArthur Highway leading to the plant. CATLU members also shut down the refinery boilers.

The strike was called after CATLU reached a deadlock in negotiations with management over a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). CATLU wants a 100-peso increase in the daily wage (\$US1.79) and 30,000-peso signing bonus. HLI is offering a 12-peso wage increase and a 12,000-peso bonus.

The ULWU is also protesting the retrenchment last October of 327 farm workers, including the union's president, vice president and eight other union officers. Union president Rene Galang called on management to reopen negotiations. "Our demands are legitimate, we are just asking for a small amount, if not [granted] we will stay here indefinitely," he said.

Indian teachers march for improvements

Teachers in Andhra Pradesh, south India, demonstrated in the city of Hyderabad on November 8 in support of several demands. The teachers,

carrying banners and placards, marched from the Central Library in Afzalganj to the College of Physical Education along several busy roads.

The demands include the introduction of salary increments for apprentice teachers, action on overdue promotions and transfers, and common service rules for all teachers. The march culminated in a public meeting.

Autoworkers protest fuel price hike

Around 350 autoworkers in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, staged a sit-down protest on the main rail line on November 6. Protesting the sudden hike in the prices of LPG and petroleum products, they blocked the Ahmedabad-bound Navjivan Express for about 30 minutes.

The workers, members of the Vijayawada City Autoworkers' Union, are concerned that the price increase will impact adversely on the ailing transport sector and impose further burdens on ordinary people. They threatened to step up their protests if the government fails to withdraw the fuel increase.

Bank workers demand a raft of improvements

About 800 State Bank of India (SBI) workers in Vijayawada protested outside the zone office on November 5 in support of a log of claims. A number of their colleagues also demonstrated in front of the SBI branch office in Machilipatnam on the same day.

The workers are demanding the bank lift the ceiling on pensions, reduce interest rates on staff loans and improve the employees' welfare fund. Other issues are job related and include, staff recruitment to deal with increasing workloads, job opportunities for the children of retired or deceased employees and no further branch closures. The protestors are members of the All-India State Bank Officers' Federation and All-India State Bank Staff Federation.

Pakistani municipality workers on strike

Over 800 workers at the Khaipur Taluka Council (Municipality) in Pakistan's Sindh province began an indefinite strike on November 9. The strikers, including office staff and sanitary workers, are demanding the payment of wages for October and an advance for the Eid festival.

Doctors and health workers fight for entitlements

Health workers across Sri Lanka are continuing action over several issues. Around 425 medical doctors at the Kalubowila Teaching Hospital in South Colombo went on strike on November 8 demanding the payment of arrears for overtime and other allowances. Overtime has not been paid for over five months.

The doctors are also demanding adequate security inside the hospital and repairs to their living quarters. The strike ended in the afternoon after the Ministry of Health promised to address the concerns. Two days later, health workers in the Polonnaruwa district of North Central Province went on strike demanding overtime payments for the previous month.

Health workers in the country's northeast province began a two-day sick note campaign on November 9 demanding the immediate resolution of salary anomalies in line with the recommendations of the Ministry of Health early this year. The workers, including drivers and clerks, protested outside the provincial governor's office in Trincomalee on November 10.

The protestors are members of the All Ceylon Health Service Union.

Retrenched Sri Lankan textile workers demand gratuity payments

Around 800 textile workers from the Kabool Lace factory in Mattegama (approximately 50 kilometres from Colombo) are continuing a hunger strike that began on November 6 in front of the closed factory. They are demanding payment of outstanding gratuity, leave entitlements and Employee Provincial Fund dues. The factory closed down earlier this year after it was declared bankrupt by its South Korean owners.

Cooperative workers demand government assistance

Around 2,000 workers from 14 cooperatives in Ratnapura (80 kilometres from Colombo) protested in front of the provincial office complex on November 4. They demanded that the council provide 50 percent of workers' salaries, improvements in the cooperatives' services and financial assistance to cooperatives in need. The cooperatives employ 45,000 workers across the district.

Rail workers set to strike over pay and conditions

Rail workers in New South Wales may strike within the next days. Negotiations between the Rail, Tram and Bus and the NSW State Labor government for a new work agreement have dragged on since March with no solution.

The government is offering a 12 percent pay increase over three years for all rail employees and a further 7 percent over the same period for train drivers. The extra pay for drivers, however, involves an agreement to lift the current limits on the number of kilometres they are allowed to drive during an eight-hour shift. Workers are also concerned that 500 white collar employees have not been guaranteed a job under a pending restructure.

A union spokesman said the wage offer was acceptable but that drivers rejected trading off working conditions. By increasing driving hours the government is attempting to overcome a driver shortage that has led to the collapse of ontime running.

In February this year the passenger rail system was thrown into crisis when a number of drivers refused to work excessive overtime. The union leadership refused to support the drivers' action and publicly declared that it had not sanctioned it. Since July RailCorp has cut out one in three weekend trains in order to divert drivers to weekdays, but the chaos is continuing.

This week, union secretary Nick Lewocki said that drivers were angry that they were being blamed for a crisis that is of the government's making. "The anger towards this government is something I've not felt in 40 years," Lewocki said.

Union withdraws strike threat

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) has withdrawn threatened industrial action at low-cost domestic carrier Virgin Blue in Melbourne. Last week, the union flagged strike action over a proposed 12-week roster cycle that would have forced pit crew and guest services staff to work almost 11 hours a day.

The new rosters were to start on November 7 but the airline has now withdrawn the proposal. A TWU spokesman said the union would now have input in drawing up a roster to operate from December 5.

NZ early childhood teachers settle pay agreement

A pay parity agreement covering 1,000 New Zealand early childhood teachers has been reached between the Ministry of Education and the union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI). The teachers are employed in 150 of the primarily community-owned early childhood education centres.

The settlement involves a four-step pay rise to lift salary rates to the same level as state primary, secondary and kindergarten teachers by 2008. The salary for a teacher with eight-years' experience and a degree in Early Childhood Education will increase from \$37,600 to \$54,400 over the four-year period. The deal is similar to one two years ago giving kindergarten teachers pay parity with primary school teachers.

Fiji public servants vote for national strike

The Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU)—comprising the Public Service Association, the Nursing Association and the Teachers Union—announced this week that almost 12,000 union members voted in support of a national strike for a 5 percent COLA (cost of living adjustment) for 2004 and a 15 percent rise in work-related allowances. CPSU treasurer Karam Chand Bidesi said the union planned to strike before the end of the year.

Prime Minister Laisenia Qaras instructed the Public Service Commission not to grant any salary increases this year. Last week, he increased pressure on public sector unions to drop wage demands. He appealed to union leaders during the course of the budget speech to assist in reducing the public service annual wages bill by \$100 million (US\$55.6million). Qaras said that failure to do so would result in redundancy for a "significant number of workers".

Jobs lost as company relocates operations to China

Nearly 200 Fiji workers employed by furniture manufacturer Pacific Green Company stand to lose their jobs due to the company relocating its operations to China. All workers were sent home this week after a fire on November 6 destroyed the factory workshop under what some newspapers reported were "suspicious circumstances".

Pacific Green, which produces prestige furniture for the US market, has already commenced production in China using Fiji palm wood and sourcing upholstery offshore. Factory worker Nemia Builoma said: "Many of us have been working here for years and this is our bread and butter. We were not even informed of the company's intention to relocate [to China]."

French Polynesia workers agitate for wages and fresh elections

French Polynesia's second biggest union O Oe To Oe rima reported that 2,000 of their members walked off the job on November 8 and hundreds more protested in the capital Papeete. The union covers 8,000 hospitality workers. The strike and protests are in support of a wage increase and the ongoing stalemate over fresh presidential elections.

The workers are demanding an increase in the monthly minimum wage from 110,000 French Pacific francs (\$US1,209) to 150,000 French Pacific francs over the next "two or three years". This is 25,000 more than country's president Gaston Flosse is offering.

Other unions this week called for a general strike on November 10 over two issues—stalled pay talks and the French government's inaction over demonstrators' demands for another general election. The protests erupted following the ousting of President Oscar Temaru by Gaston Flosse in a vote of no confidence. Paris favors Flosse and the French court has recognised his presidency as legitimate. Flosse and Temaru are currently in Paris meeting with the French government.



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