

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

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Filipino police fired guns in plantation clash

A leading police officer has testified that soldiers discharged firearms during a clash with striking workers and their families, who were picketing the Hacienda Luisita plantation on November 16. Immediately after the incident, a military spokesman denied soldiers were even carrying guns.

This week, Francisco Lintag, the sheriff sent by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to enforce an order to restore operations at the sugar mill, said in a sworn statement to the National Bureau of Investigation that he had seen, "soldiers rushing toward the strikers while firing their firearms upward". When the firing stopped, he saw people being carted off in ambulances to hospital. At least 14 people were killed in the incident, including two small children who suffocated when teargas was shot into their homes.

The prolonged strike and blockade of the plantation involves members of the United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU) and of the Central Azucarera De Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU). CATLU is seeking a 100 peso (\$US1.79) increase in the daily wage and a 30,000 peso-signing bonus for 700 mill workers. The company offered only a 12-peso wage increase and a 12,000 peso-signing bonus.

The ULWU, covering some 5,000 plantation workers, is demanding the reinstatement of 327 farm workers who were dismissed last October. Those sacked include the union's president, its vice president and eight other union officials.

The dispute remains unresolved. A union spokesman claimed that the number of picketers at the sugar refinery's main gate is again steadily building up and has reached more than 2,000. Former President Corazon Aquino's family owns the plantation.

Company thugs in China beat up construction workers

On November 30, about 100 company-hired thugs assaulted 27 migrant construction workers in Nanning, China, hospitalising 12 of them. The attack occurred when the painters went to the company office to collect unpaid wages and entitlements after they were fired earlier that day.

While they were employed as painters, the employer demanded they do additional work, including plumbing, electrical work and cleaning. Deductions were made from their salaries if they failed to go straight to the provided dormitory after finishing work. They were sacked after asking for changes to the dormitory regulations.

Indonesian workers call for wage increase

About 3,000 workers in the Cimahi regency, Indonesia protested outside the regent's office on November 30. They were demanding an increased minimum wage in the regency in line with wages in the

Bandung municipality.

Currently the minimum monthly wage in Cimahi is 610,000 rupiah (about \$US67) while in Bandung it stands at 642,500 rupiah, even though the cost of living has risen equally in both areas.

Indian road workers demand reinstatement

Road workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated in several cities on November 25, demanding the reinstatement of 9,914 colleagues terminated by the state government. In Madurai, thousands protested in the streets, carrying placards and shouting slogans against the government, and later attended a rally.

Around 350 workers held a candlelight march and then picketed in the front of the municipal office in Dindigul, while 150 workers demonstrated in Virudhunagar. Sacked road workers, supported by family members, held a dawn-to-dusk fast in Chennai on November 26.

The Tamilnadu Highways Road Employees Association and Tamilnadu Road Gang Mazdoors Union are demanding that the state government act on a High Court verdict ordering reinstatement.

Manufacturing workers protest against retrenchments

Workers at manufacturing company Voltas in Balanagar near Hyderabad in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated on November 26 inside the factory complex. They were protesting against the company's announcement that day that it intended to retrench 450 workers out of total workforce of 836. Police were deployed in the factory.

Voltas is one of the major air-conditioning and cooling appliance companies in India and in 2001 it established a joint venture with the US Fedders Corporation. The employees are members of the Voltas Employees Association, affiliated to the Indian National Trade Union Congress. The union has been negotiating a voluntary retirement scheme with the company for some time but discussions stalled over the amount of severance pay.

Municipal workers on hunger strike

Workers at the Kalimpong Municipality in the Indian state of Sikkim began an indefinite hunger strike from November 29 after being sacked. The 22 former employees, members of the Kalimpong Municipality Workers Union, are staging a sit-in at the municipality's main building.

The municipal chairman said he sacked the workers on the Indian central government's orders. He claimed funding to the council would be blocked if it employed excess casual staff, saying that this had "happened with a couple of other municipalities in the state". The sacked workers rejected a management offer of temporary employment on a commission basis to collect property tax, license fees and remove garbage.

Sri Lankan health workers protest over pay

Indigenous Auyrvedic physicians picketed at the front of the

Ministry of Indigenous Medicine in Colombo on November 29. They demanded the correction of salary anomalies affecting Auyurvedic physicians employed by the central government.

In a separate dispute, radiologists in the heart patient unit of the Colombo National Hospital refused to do overtime as from November 26. They are protesting the non-payment of overtime pay since April. The government has not made any move to resolve the issue although the ban will affect scheduled heart surgery.

Medical laboratory technicians across the country are still fighting for overtime payments owing for the past several months.

Sri Lankan teachers oppose forced transfers

Teachers in the North West Province of Sri Lanka picketed at the entrance road to the Provincial Education Ministry in Kurunegala on November 30. They were protesting against unjustified and forced transfers.

Their demands include an end to political interference, transparency in decision-making on transfers and no transfer to take place without the teacher's consent. Kurunegala is about 93 kilometres from Colombo.

Australian technical college teachers to impose bans

On December 1, head teachers at Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges across the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) began voting for a campaign of industrial action. They are demanding a pay increase in line with that granted to colleagues in day schools. They have also rejected the demand of the NSW Labor government to accept an increase in class sizes and job cuts in exchange for additional pay.

Teachers at the Wollongong and St George TAFE colleges have already voted overwhelmingly for an industrial campaign and other colleges are expected to follow over the next days. The teachers will impose a number of work bans, including withholding students' results. A union spokesman said: "We think many students will be sympathetic to the dilemma teachers find themselves in."

Rail union drops threat of drivers' strike

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) has ditched a threatened Sydney-wide strike by train drivers over the Christmas after stitching up a deal with RailCorp over pay. Negotiations have dragged on now for months. RTBU state secretary Nick Lewocki refused to give details of the agreement before putting it to union members early next year.

The pay increase is tipped to be around 16 percent over three years, short of the 18 percent originally demanded by drivers. The rail authority has also agreed to consult with the union on workplace "reform". In reality, this amounts to the union bureaucracy working more closely with management to head off any independent action by train drivers.

Earlier this year, drivers refused to work excessive overtime. The action, which threw the rail system into crisis and exposed chronic understaffing, went ahead without union authorisation. Since then, the RTBU has been working to mend its bridges with the NSW Labor government.

There are indications that the union agreed to concessions to reach an agreement. One newspaper reported: "State government heavyweight Chris Raper from the Public Sector Employment Office was instrumental in driving the deal forward and extracting key concessions from both sides."

Rally calls for release of jailed unionist Around 5,000 workers marched through the city of Melbourne, Victoria calling for Labor state premier Steve Bracks to release jailed former Australian

Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) state secretary Craig Johnston. Johnston was jailed in August for nine months on charges arising from a union protest at the Johnson Tiles factory and Skilled Engineering offices in 2001. Johnston led a "run-through" at both premises over the sacking of 29 workers at Johnson Tiles and their replacement by contract labour. While office and factory equipment was damaged in the run-through, no one at either place was injured. The political nature of Johnston's imprisonment was confirmed when the Victorian Court of Appeal overturned a previous 12-month suspended sentence even though Johnston had paid fines and damages.

The drive to jail Johnston was part of a campaign to close down the Workers First faction that he led in the AMWU. Johnston and his fellow officials posed no real threat to the employers, but it was felt that the militant sections of the workers in Victoria that supported Workers First needed to be disciplined. Bracks was instrumental in urging the AMWU national leadership to strip Johnston of his union post, even as he was under prosecution.

A letter written by Johnston was read to the rally and a 10,000-name petition was presented to government officials calling for his release.

New Zealand hospital staff impose bans

Clinical records staff at New Zealand's Christchurch Hospital placed work bans on December 1 after a decision to axe 12 of the 29 jobs in the department. The job cuts followed plans to introduce a system allowing clinicians to sign off lab results electronically.

The workers, who are members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), say the changes have increased the workload of the remaining staff and put them under significant stress. A NUPE organiser said bans would be put into place on a list of identified tasks. Fijian public servants protest over pay increase

Members of the Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions (FICTU) will march through the streets of Suva on December 4 to protest against the government's decision to refuse cost of living allowance (COLA)-based wage increases to public sector employees. The marchers will include members of the Fijian Teachers Association, Public Employees Union and Viti National Union of Taukei Workers.

Nearly 12,000 public sector workers voted in early November for a national strike in support of their call for a 5 percent COLA-based wage increase. Prime Minister Laisenia Qarase is insisting there will be no future wage increases based on COLA. He has instructed the Public Service Commission not to grant any increases for this year and for all future increases to be based on the recently introduced Performance Management System.

Meanwhile, the Fiji Nursing Association has lodged a 28-day strike notice with the Labour Ministry and said its 2,000 members will strike from midnight December 27 in support of a 5 percent COLA increase.



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