

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 September 2005

Asia

Transport strike paralyzes major Philippines city

Davao in the Philippines was brought to a standstill on September 12 when the city's transport workers struck in protest over high fuel costs. City Hall was forced to suspend work at 1 p.m., and send employees home.

The strikers—led by various transport groups—want the suspension of deregulation laws that allow oil companies to determine the price of fuel at the pump. They are also calling for abolition of an extended value added tax (E-VAT), the rollback of fuel prices and for wage increases.

Sixty percent of transport workers in Manila struck over the same issues on the same day. The protest was organized by the Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Tsiper at Opereytors Nationwide (Piston).

Union abandons sacked union officials

The three-month strike at the Philippines' largest gold mine—Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation—ended on September 11 with 19 union officers of the Lepanto Employees Union (LEU) forced to resign from their posts and the company.

Over 1,600 workers struck on June 2 over a deadlock in negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Over 1,000 workers initially refused to return to work until the company agreed to reinstate 19 sacked union officials but management ruled this out. LEU president, Ninian Lang-agan accepted the company's decision, cynically arguing that union officers could not compromise the welfare of more than a thousand workers and their families.

LEU officials and Lepanto management have agreed on a memorandum of understanding stating that both parties would drop legal actions filed against each other and providing for the reinstatement of 200 LEU members sacked during the strike. The LEU also agreed to cease all industrial action. The management has promised there will be no retaliatory action against workers who are rehired.

The new CBA provides wage increases in three stages to 2006, which will lift daily pay by 81 pesos (\$US1.47). The union initially called for a 91-peso rise.

Asiana pilots accept arbitration by government

Asiana Airlines and the pilots' union have accepted compulsory arbitration by the Korean government's 10-member National Labor Relations Commission ending a protracted dispute. About 400 of Asiana's 826 pilots were on strike from July 17 to August 10. The union, however, has filed an injunction against the Minister of Labor to reverse emergency mediation which forced an end to the pilots' 25-day strike.

The commission's compulsory arbitration decision supports union demands for a gradual reduction of flight hours but denies it a say in managerial decisions, particularly those relating to recruitment and discipline. It also denied any extension of pilots' current retirement age of 55. It limits the transfer of various fines relating to the violation of aviation laws from the carrier to the pilots. The agreement takes effect from September 17.

Taiwan bank workers protest privatisation

Taiwan Business Bank (TBB) employees began an indefinite strike on September 14 to oppose government plans to privatise the state-owned enterprise. The striking workers protested outside TBB branch offices in northern, central and southern Taiwan shouting: "Oppose the Merger, Oppose Invasion."

According to union estimates about 2,500 bank workers took part in the industrial action, the first bank strike in Taiwan's history.

The government has named TBB for its "Second Phase of Financial Reform" and this week ordered the Financial Supervisory Commission to allow open bidding for TBB's stocks. Second Phase of Financial Reform was introduced in October 2004 and is aimed at pushing through "banking sector privatisation and consolidation".

The Financial Supervisory Commission threatened to place TBB "under custody" and directly run the enterprise if the strike "gets out of hand".

China's mines claim more victims

Thirteen miners were trapped underground and remain missing after the Dahao Coal Mine in Southwest China's Guizhou province flooded on September 11. A fire at the Jinyuan coalmine in China's northern Heilongjiang province killed one miner and trapped 14 others on the same day.

Indian miners demand suspension of police for assault

Over 100 miners at the Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) in Kiriburu, Jamshedpur went on strike on September 11 to protest a police assault on the driver and cleaner of the company's bus. The striking workers went to the local police station to demand the immediate suspension of the officers responsible.

The assault occurred on September 10 when Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) Binod Kumar Singh and Constable Devendra Kumar Singh boarded the company bus, which is used to transport employees between Gua railway station and the mine.

The policemen wanted to go to Kiriburu police station some 40 kilometres from the railway station but when the bus reached Kiriburu, the constable allegedly asked the driver to drop DSP Singh at his home. When the request was refused, both driver and cleaner were assaulted. Both were seriously injured and had to be admitted to SAIL hospital for treatment.

Post-graduate teachers strike for permanency

Post-graduate teachers in Aizawl, capital of the Indian state of Mizoram, began indefinite strike action on September 7. They are protesting over the state government's refusal to provide permanent employment for 137 postgraduate teachers currently hired on a contract basis. Over 30 teachers are on a hunger strike in Aizawl's Bazar Bungkawn area.

The teachers called off an indefinite strike on August 22, on the condition that the government resolved the issue by the end of the month. Lalthanzuala, Mizoram Post Graduate Teachers' Association assistant general secretary, said: "It has been six days past the deadline, but there is no positive development."

The Mizoram Secondary Teachers Association has also threatened an indefinite strike from September 26 if the government does not meet its demand for separate administrations for secondary schools.

Workers at major Indian zoo demand pay salaries

Contract workers at Indira Gandhi Zoological Park in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, staged a sit-in protest with their families on September 12 over the non-payment of salaries for the past four months.

The workers are supposed to be paid 2,636 rupees (\$US52.72) a month in accordance with a government order but have only been receiving 1,600 rupees. This reduced payment is irregular. The sit-in was called by the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

Municipal workers demand higher wages

Municipal workers employed at Bangalore Mahanagara Palike (BMP) in the Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated outside the BMP head office on September 12 to demand higher wages.

Over 8,000 municipal workers are employed by private garbage contractors and are demanding a guaranteed fixed wage of 3,975 rupees (\$US79) a month. They had been promised 1,800 (\$US41) rupees a month but have only been paid between 1,500 and 1,200 rupees (\$US34 and \$US27).

A spokesman for the protestors said: "Chief Minister N. Dharam Singh had promised equal wages to all contract municipality workers in the state". He said the workers want parity with workers in Gulbarga who are paid the higher rate.

Insurance workers protest cuts to working conditions

Workers from four public sector general insurance companies in Chandigarh, India, demonstrated outside the Oriental Insurance Company regional office on September 12. They were protesting against the linking of wages to acceptance of a transfer and mobility policy, increased working hours, the reduction of casual leave, and the abolition of half-day casual leave.

The workers, who were from New India Assurance, United India Insurance, Oriental Insurance and National Insurance Co. Ltd, pledged to step up their action against management intimidation and in defense of working conditions.

Sanitary workers strike for permanency

Municipal sanitary workers in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh walked off the job on September 13. They are demanding the regularisation of jobs of about 100,000 sanitary workers across the state.

The strikers, who demonstrated outside the Lucknow Municipal Corporation, have threatened to strike indefinitely if their demands are not met.

Bank workers demand back pay

Punjab State Cooperative Agricultural Development Bank workers held a rally on September 6 outside the bank's head office in Chandigarh, India. They are demanding payment of two years' outstanding bonuses and clearing of all promotion cases. They have also condemned the "anti-employee" policies of the Punjab state Government.

The Coordination Committee of Markfed and the Cooperative Bank, Agriculture Development Bank, Milkfed, Housefed and Puncofed Employees Unions called the rally.

Tamilnadu workers demand social security scheme

Workers from a range of industries in Chennai staged a daylong protest on September 9 over several issues, including demands for a comprehensive government social security scheme. Domestic workers, fishermen, load men, washer-men, tailors, auto-workshop labourers and construction workers participated in the protest.

Sri Lankan tax officers impose work-to-rule

Tax officers at the Inland Revenue Department of Sri Lanka began a work-to-rule campaign on September 7. The collection of tax arrears, tax investigations and a range of other fieldwork are all at a standstill.

The officers want all vacancies filled and promotions instituted. They are also demanding management cease its intimidation of union members and want a full investigation into corruption charges against top management.

Teachers demand job confirmation

On September 8, around 300 voluntary teachers in Sri Lanka's Uva province demonstrated outside provincial council offices in Badulla, which is about 225 kilometres from Colombo.

They were demanding confirmation of teaching positions and protesting against political interference in teaching appointments. Teachers from Badulla, Monaragala and Mahiyangana education zones were involved in the protest.

Sri Lankan doctors' strike continues

An indefinite strike by Registered and Assistant Medical Officers in Sri Lanka entered its second week on September 14. The doctors' main demand is for salary increases in accordance with the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government's 2005 budget proposals. They picketed the Ministry of Health on September 14.

The government is deploying recently qualified medical interns to hospitals in an attempt to break the strike action, which has affected more than 900 district and rural hospitals.

Three die in fireworks factory explosion

At least three workers were killed in an explosion at the Jana Handa fireworks factory after the plant caught fire on September 13. The factory is located in Kimbulapitiya, about 35 kilometres from Colombo.

While the cause of the fire is yet to be established, fireworks plants in Sri Lanka are notorious for poor safety standards.

Two Pakistani guest workers die in trench cave-in

The dangerous situation facing guest workers was again highlighted with the death of two Pakistani labourers in the United Arab Emirates on August 31. Mohammed Omran Khan Mohammed and Saleem Akhtar Mohammed Rafeeq were buried alive when a trench they were digging near Ain Al Fayda and the Jabal Hafeet tourist area caved in.

Other workers on the site were unable to rescue the men due to the large amount of sand that collapsed into the trench. The Al Ain Preventive Medicine Ambulance took the bodies to the local morgue for post-mortem.

The two workers were employed by Al Jaber Establishment Transport and Contracting. According to a media report, the company did not use any props to prevent cave-ins.

Australia and the Pacific

Police intimidate pickets at auto-parts plant

A protracted dispute at auto component manufacturer National Parts at Smithfield in western Sydney is continuing. The workers, who are members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU), have been picketing the plant for more than three weeks. They want wage parity with workers at the company's warehouse.

The AWU said that local police have been escorting delivery trucks through the picket and intimidating women workers on the picket. The company has provided the police with a timetable for truck deliveries.

Stood-down news staff return to work

Forty advertising sales staff at Leader Newspaper Group returned to work on September 13, after being on strike from September 6. The dispute arose over the employer's refusal to insert a clause in a new workplace Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) allowing the Australian Industrial Relation Commission to arbitrate industrial disputes at the company.

The workers, who are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW), were stood down after placing bans on the processing of sales dockets. Even though the issue remains unresolved, the NUW instructed its members to return to work to allow negotiations to resume.

Ambulance officers impose work bans

St John Ambulance officers in Western Australia have voted to step up a campaign for a pay rise and impose work bans. The paramedics have refused to complete paperwork required by St John Ambulance to bill its patients. For the past two weeks they have refused to work unpaid

overtime or do early starts.

They want a 25 percent pay rise over three years and pay parity with registered nurses and other degree-qualified health professionals. While ambulance paramedics must complete a degree before being employed in the industry they are paid around 25 percent less than similarly qualified health professionals. The dispute escalated when St John Ambulance failed to make a pay offer before a September 12 deadline.

New Zealand health workers strike for pay

About 500 health workers in Cadbury went on strike for five days on September 12 for a 30 percent pay increase in line with recent catch-up increases given to doctors and many nurses. The strikers, members of the National Union of Public Employees (Nupe), held a street rally outside Christchurch Hospital. Included are mental health nurses, mortuary technicians, occupational therapists and social workers, as well as clerical, maintenance and information technology staff from across all Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) facilities.

A Nupe spokesman said the government had acted “shamefully” offering only 1.7 percent to health support workers. The government provided only 1.7 percent in extra funding to meet pay increases for clerical, maintenance and cleaning staff. No pay offer has been made to clinical staff.

In a similar pay dispute, about 200 nurses employed by Nurse Maude and caregivers went on strike for 24 hours on September 2.

Canterbury university staff ratify work agreements

Academic and general staff at the University of Canterbury last week ratified the conditions in four main collective agreements, bringing to an end several months of industrial action. Union members will receive a salary increase of 5 percent from 1 August, with 2.75 percent backdated to 1 May.

Canterbury is the first of the major universities to settle local agreements following the signing of a national umbrella agreement between vice-chancellors and the combined university unions the previous week. Under that agreement, which becomes effective when all local collective agreements are finalised, the parties will refer all outstanding salary and funding problems to the government-backed University Tripartite Forum.

An Association of University Staff (AUS) spokesman said that staff action had shifted the university from its original offer of 3.25 percent and that it had agreed to a national process for future salary discussions. The deal, however, has closed down the dispute without the AUS having achieved its central demand—a multi-employer contract covering all seven universities and pay rises of up to 20 percent to meet international standards.

Staff at Victoria, Auckland, Otago, Massey and Lincoln Universities are currently voting on local agreements. Negotiations are resuming at the University of Waikato. The university has offered 3 percent pay increase, the lowest in the country.

NZ hospital cleaners locked out

Hospital cleaners at OCS Limited, a company contracted to Capital Coast Health, have been locked out from Wellington, Kenepuru, Porirua and Paraparaumu hospitals in a pay dispute. The cleaners are asking for a 5 percent pay rise—approximately 54 cents an hour—to achieve \$11.38 (\$US8) an hour. The increase would cost OCS, one world’s largest cleaning companies, only \$20,000 (\$US14,000) a year.

During the lockout OCS has been paying wages, travel allowances and accommodation for out-of-town replacement workers. Many of the hospitals’ staff are refusing to accept the replacement labour in wards and departments.

NZ wood industry workers strike

Hundreds of workers at several Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) sites around the country went on strike on September 12 after the company failed to grant a 5 percent pay increase. Pickets were held at CHH’s head office in Auckland and company offices in Whangarei, Tokoroa and Christchurch.

CHH workers in Nelson also took industrial action. The strikes follow a national day of action by CHH workers on August 19.

A union spokesman said negotiations at various sites were at different stages but no offer on wages “in or around the 5 percent range” had been made. The company—the biggest pulp and paper conglomerate in Australasia—claims that it cannot afford the increase and said that each enterprise should negotiate a separate agreement.

NZ polytechnic tutors to strike

About 100 Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) tutors in New Zealand plan to walk out on September 19. Collective contract negotiations between management and the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) broke down this week. SIT has offered a 3.25 percent rise in the first year and 3 percent in the second. Pay rates at other polytechnics are considerably higher. ASTE is seeking a 6.5 percent rise in the first year and 5.75 percent in the second year.

An ASTE spokeswoman said staff contribution to the success of the polytechnic’s zero fees scheme—the SIT is the only one in the country not charging student fees—had not been recognised. SIT returned a surplus of 9.4 percent in 2004 and had high student-tutor ratios but its average personnel cost is relatively low. Staff will decide on further action at a meeting on Monday.

Samoan doctors strike for salary increase

Public sector doctors in Samoa walked off the job on September 10 after the government refused to discuss a long-standing wage dispute. Most services at hospitals have been withdrawn and doctors are attending emergency and life threatening cases only.

In an attempt to appease doctors, Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailele said he would set up a Commission of Inquiry to look into the doctors’ grievances. The committee will report to Cabinet on October 7.

A spokesperson for the Samoa Medical Association Dr Viali Lameko said the doctors would continue to strike. They have been negotiating for two years and “are wary about what is being offered”. He said the government had not honored promises it made after doctors imposed a 24-hour work to rule in April this year.

The doctors’ demands include an entry salary level of \$US11,000 but the government is refusing to shift from the salary scale it offered on July 1 of \$9,314, increasing to \$10,930 by July 2007.

Indonesian sailors left stranded in Solomon Islands

At least 47 Indonesian sailors are stranded in the Solomon Islands port of Honiara with no means of returning home. They have not been paid for 14 months and are living on 12 fishing boats belonging to their employer Yung Huang Fishing Company. A local fish exporter Solgreen contracted the company to fish in local waters.

Solgreen claims it cannot send the sailors home because it is facing financial difficulties. Water to the 12 boats has been cut off and sailors have no food. They are living on handouts from locals. The Mission to Seafarers office in Honiara said that the situation is beginning to cause psychological stress among the men.



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