Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 September 2005

At least 32 people killed in factory blast in India

On September 15, at least 32 workers were killed and 50 others injured in an explosion at a fireworks factory in Patna, the capital of the eastern Indian state of Bihar. Among the dead were five women and 10 children. At least 100 people were in the plant's industrial unit at the time of the blast. Three warehouses containing explosive materials, gas cylinders and powerful firecrackers were completely destroyed.

Investigators believe the explosion was caused by an electrical short circuit and claim that the plant was illegally manufacturing ammunition and explosives. Residents in the surrounding area allege that authorities turned a blind eye to the illegal operations even though a large number of people were killed in an explosion at the same factory 12 years ago.

Auto component workers demand higher wages

Workers at Talbros Automotive Components in Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, have been on strike since September 15 demanding higher wages. Negotiations have been going on for 10 months but employees have refused to sign a three-year wage agreement.

The management is attempting to overcome production problems caused by the strike by increasing output at its facilities in Faridabad and Pune. The Chennai unit produces gaskets that account for about eight percent of the company's overall turnover.

Textile workers continue sit down protest

A sit-down protest by 200 workers laid off by the state-owned Orissa Textile Mills (OTM) four years ago is continuing. OTM, located in Choudwar about 11 kilometres from Cuttac, was the largest composite cotton textile mill in east India.

Workers began industrial action on September 1 to demand the payment of outstanding entitlements.

The Orissa state government took over the mill in 1981 but closed operations in 2001 and wants to sell the factory. It promised to pay outstanding entitlements to the 3,120 employees either through voluntary retirement schemes (VRS) or voluntary separation schemes (VSS) within 45 days. Over 3.5 billion rupees ($US70 million) is owed in retirement benefits and VSS and VRS packages. About 300 retired workers are still waiting for payment.

Electricity and water supply to the workers' living quarters was disconnected in 2001. At least 150 workers have died over the four-year period because they had no money to pay for medical attention while several more, unable to bear the hardships, have committed suicide.

The workers want the state government to abandon the sale and resume production. A legal challenge to the privatisation attempt is presently before the Orissa High Court.

Mine workers strike for pay and permanency

Some 650 casual workers employed in the Gua mining region by the Indian Iron and Steel Company (IISCO) began an indefinite strike on September 13. Gua is in West Singhbhum district in the eastern Indian state of Jharkhand.

The men are employed to carry out essential services, sanitation and maintenance in the Gua township and a local guesthouse. They are demanding better wages and permanency.

The strike began after negotiations with management broke down. The workers are threatening to blockade the Gua iron mine and stop the movement of ore if their demands are not met.

Childcare workers in Punjab continue sit down protest

Despite heavy rain, about 50 childcare workers in Punjab are continuing the sit-down protest they begun on August 25 at Matka Chowk in Chandigarh. The protesters are demanding higher wages and better working conditions for over 25,000 childcare workers and helpers in the state.

As well as five hours of daily childcare duties, they are expected to perform other jobs. One worker said: "Once we were put on the job of counting beggars and flush toilets in villages. We fill forms for old people applying for pensions, handle surveys regarding leprosy, TB and malaria and we are even asked to register voters. We take care of various schemes meant for below-poverty-line families. We fill forms for birth certificates. However, what we get in return from the state government is just a pittance."

Childcare workers are paid just 1,000 rupees ($US20) from the national government and another 200 rupees from the state government. Helpers only receive 600 rupees.

On September 19, childcare workers in Kharar demonstrated near the town's bus stand and burnt an effigy of the Punjab chief minister.

Indian doctors protest for improved pay and benefits

Doctors belonging to the Punjab Civil Medical Services (PCMS) protested outside the local civil hospital in Ferozepore on September 14. They want a salary increase in line with recommendations made by the state pay commission. Patients, including women and children in the Outdoor Patients Department and the immunisation clinic, joined the protest.

State government workers in southern India protest

Karnataka state government workers protested in Mysore on September 19. The workers, members of the Karnataka State Government Employees' Association, are demanding that their salaries are paid on time in the first week of every month. For the past year, the government has paid wages in the second or third week.

Employees in the accounts, education, animal husbandry, social welfare, engineering and child and women's departments are among those being paid late. After the protest, a delegation submitted a memorandum to the Karnataka deputy commissioner.

Executive officers campaign for improved conditions

Nearly 2,500 executive officers employed by Bharat Coking Coal Limited (BCCL) in Jharkhand, India, protested on September 19 outside the company's headquarters in Dhanbad. The action is part of a 13-day protest campaign for a 12-point log-of-claims. The employees are demanding a rent allowance, cooking gas and a decentralised system for granting leave.

The government has ordered state-owned companies such as BCCL to resist staff demands for improved conditions and impose "fiscal

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austerity".

Sri Lankan plantation workers on indefinite strike

Workers at the Monaragala Kumarakanda tea estate in Uva province began an indefinite strike on September 12. They want their employer make deposits into the Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee Trust Fund (ETF). The management has not paid into the funds since 1998.

In addition, the company has failed to make payments to the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA), even though installments were deducted from employee salaries. As a result, the NHDA is preparing legal action against workers. The strikers are also protesting over inadequate conditions in the estate's hospital, which is unable to supply basic medicines.

Tax officers picket

Tax officers in Sri Lanka picketed the Inland Revenue office in central Colombo on September 14. They were demanding the filling of all vacant positions, an end to the harassment of union members and a full investigation into charges of corruption against top management. A work-to-rule campaign in tax offices that was initiated on September 7 is still continuing.

Sri Lankan teachers demand improved conditions

Teacher advisors picketed the Ministry of Education in the Colombo suburb of Battaramulla for four hours on September 14. A memorandum was handed to the Ministry of Education secretary demanding the absorption of 3,500 teacher advisors into the education service and solutions to a range of outstanding problems. While the position of teacher advisor has been in existence for the last 43 years, they have no professional recognition.

Graduate teachers in the Eastern province also demonstrated on September 15 demanding permanent positions. Only 1,800 of the 3,500 graduate recruits in the area have permanent status. Trainee teachers also protested in Batticaloa and Jaffna over the same issue.

Philippines hospital employees file for wages strike

On September 12, the union representing employees at the Makati Medical Centre in Manila filed a strike notice.

The strike move has been provoked by an impasse in negotiations on a new collective bargaining agreement. The workers want a 1,500 peso ($US27.30) across-the-board monthly salary increase. The management is demanding a two-year moratorium on wage increases, claiming that the hospital is in financial difficulties and trying to restructure debts. It has threatened to close the 60-year old hospital if the strike goes ahead.

Australian drivers protest rising fuel prices

About 300 truck drivers drove a convoy of trucks from the Kewdale industrial area in Perth's eastern suburbs to the Western Australian state parliament to protest increased fuel costs, high fuel taxes and crippling registration costs.

The truck drivers are demanding the right to charge a fuel levy, similar to the one introduced for the airlines, and a one-third reduction in state government registration fees.

According to a spokesman, drivers are paying up to $10,000 a year on registration and third party insurance. Combined with the increase in fuel costs, many drivers say they are facing bankruptcy and are struggling to make ends meet.

On September 22, members of the National Owner-Drivers' Trucking Association used 100 trucks to blockade the major Pacific Highway at Macksville Bridge in northern New South Wales. They were also protesting against rising fuel prices and operating costs.

Workers strike to defend union delegate

About 60 workers at Australian Envelopes in the Melbourne suburb of Notting Hill are on strike over the sacking of a union delegate. While management claims the delegate, who had worked at the company for more than 10 years, was sacked over a "harassment incident", the union maintains he was "set up" for dismissal because he was an "effective activist".

The workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), have been picketing the plant for more than a week. The AMWU alleges that dozens of security guards have been hired by the company to intimidate workers.

Legal aid workers take action for pay increase

Legal aid practitioners in Victoria struck for 24 hours on September 19 for better pay and working conditions. The workers are seeking a 17 percent wage increase over the next three years, but the Victorian government is offering just 10 percent.

A spokesperson for the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) said that legal aid services were understaffed and the pay offer is not enough to retain and attract new staff. The workers are demanding improved funding for legal aid services.

Ambulance officers dispute enters third week

A campaign of industrial action for improved pay and working conditions by 500 paramedics employed by St John Ambulances in Western Australia is continuing. The paramedics are enforcing a work-to-rule policy. They are refusing to work paid or unpaid overtime, or to complete paperwork required for the company to bill their patients.

The paramedics are seeking a minimum $25 an hour pay rate, as paid to other similarly qualified health professionals such as registered nurses. They are also demanding improved working conditions and better facilities in ambulance depots.

One ambulance officer told the media that there was "anger and frustration" and lack of confidence in the management. Officers reported run-down ambulance depots, under-equipped ambulances, male and female officers having to share sleeping facilities and dangerously low staffing levels which at times has led to ambulance depots closing.

Australian unions limit campaign against government's IR laws

Australian unions are restricting opposition to the Howard government's proposed new draconian industrial relation laws to community rallies and publicity stunts. The new laws will reduce workers rights to penalty rates, annual leave, minimum wages, unfair dismissal and restrict union rights in the workplace.

Unions NSW—the peak union body in New South Wales—began a "Your Rights At Work" tour bus of rural and region areas on September 18. The bright orange bus, packed with union officials and young union staffers, has visited about eight major towns along the NSW East Coast and Highlands where union officials addressed a number of small meetings on the IR laws. They offered no perspective other than calling on people to petition their local MP to vote against the legislation when it comes before parliament.

On September 7, 4,000 union delegates met in Melbourne. Union officials called for a "sustained and disciplined campaign" to defend workers rights but only made recommendations for a "National Community Day of Action" on November 15. No broad campaign of industrial and political action is planned.

New Zealand airport workers strike for pay

About 55 baggage handlers and ticketing staff at Queenstown Airport went on strike on September 17, just one day before New Zealand's general election. They are seeking a five percent pay rise for the next two years from Mount Cook Airlines and its parent company, Air New Zealand. Management personnel and non-union workers are being used to keep the airport running.

Air New Zealand has offered a three-year 3.25 percent deal, well below the level of inflation. Workers need the pay rise because of the high cost-of-living in Queenstown, a major tourist centre in the South Island ski fields. The small size of the airport and operating restrictions mean they have little opportunity to boost their take-home pay by working shifts or overtime.

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A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said it had no plans to return to negotiations. The union has already made significant concessions but claimed they were not prepared to compromise on their baseline demand for decent pay. Management said it would make another offer on September 20, but then refused to do so until the union reduced its claim.

In a separate dispute, 80 baggage handlers at Auckland International Airport went on strike for seven days on September 21 for a pay rise.

University staff reject pay offer

Academic and support staff at Waikato University in New Zealand this week rejected a 3 percent pay offer. A combined unions' spokesman said that the offer was less than the rate of inflation and demonstrated the vice chancellor had "no real commitment to resolving long standing salary problems".

The Association of University Staff has shelved its demand for a multi-employer contract covering the seven major universities. It is seeking separate settlements for each university while transferring the issue of overall pay rates and tertiary funding to a government-sponsored consultative committee.

Vanuatu workers seek permit to demonstrate over sackings

The National Workers Union on September 19 submitted a third application for a permit to hold a demonstration against the sacking of 26 employees by state-owned Air Vanuatu. The workers, all union members, were sacked after participating in a five-hour strike by 100 employees on August 22.

Previous applications for a permit were rejected by the Police Commissioner, who claimed the action would "disturb the peace" ahead of a local election due next month. If the latest application is granted, the demonstration will take place on September 24.

Union general secretary Ephraim Kalsakau said that over the last 20 years hundreds of workers have been laid off because they had joined the union and "most of the time it has happened at companies owned by the government".

Samoan government seeks strike breakers

Samoan health minister and acting prime minister, Mulitalu Siafausa, has approached New Zealand's High Commission in Apia to investigate the possibility of recruiting New Zealand doctors to fill the positions of striking Samoan government-funded doctors.

The Samoan doctors walked off the jobs on September 10 after the government refused to negotiate a longstanding wage dispute. They want an entry salary level of $US11,000, but the government is refusing to increase its July 1 offer of $9,314, with an increase to $10,930 by July 2007.

The doctors are refusing to return to work and are awaiting the results of a cabinet inquiry into their grievances. It is due to be brought down on October 7. Only emergency cases are being attended at hospitals and clinics.

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