

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 October 2005

## Chinese workers attacked by company thugs

One worker was killed and 24 others were injured on October 16, when 200 thugs attacked a delegation attempting to petition the management of a construction site in Huizhou City, in China's Guangdong province. The delegation represented 102 immigrant workers from Chongqing who are owed back pay totalling 260,000 yuan (\$US32,200).

One of the injured men, Yuan Yongbing, said that a company executive called in the thugs, who were dressed in camouflage gear and wearing hardhats. They pulled iron pipes from a truck and began beating the delegation. One worker drowned when he jumped into a river. Another man is still missing.

## Riot police in China disperse workers

On October 15, police were dispatched to National Highway 106 in Guangzhou, in Guangdong province, to smash down barricades that had been erected by laid-off workers. More than 300 employees from a shoe company had blockaded the highway for more than an hour after the manager disappeared owing them an estimated 1.5 million yuan (\$US185,000) in unpaid wages. They have only been paid 500 yuan (\$60) since July. On the day before his disappearance, the manager announced the company was bankrupt.

## Two workers killed during police attack

More than 400 police attacked a peaceful protest outside the Chongqing municipal government headquarters in central China on October 7, leaving two elderly women dead. The crackdown was aimed at ending two months of protests by several thousand workers who were laid off from the Chongqing Steel Plant in August this year after it went bankrupt. The workers are asking for 2,000 yuan (\$240) in severance pay.

Witnesses said 200 police initially arrived at the protest. When several men, believed to be plainclothes officers, overturned two police vehicles, a 200-strong riot squad arrived and immediately began beating and kicking the workers. As well as the two deaths, another 24 workers were injured. Police detained three protest leaders.

## South Korean truck drivers vote for national strike

On October 19, 7,500 freight drivers in South Korea voted overwhelmingly in favour of an immediate nationwide strike. They will join 4,000 dump-truck drivers who went out on October 13. Drivers in the ready-mixed concrete industry are also expected to join the dispute.

The drivers are demanding the government increase fuel subsidies, grant fuel tax exemptions and provide a discount on highway tolls to compensate for rising fuel costs. They are also demanding an investigation into the sub-contractor hire system that is leading to cuts in drivers' conditions and rates.

The Construction Ministry has threatened to take legal action against any truck drivers who attempt to block ports and rail freight depots. It warned that if the strike began to affect the national economy a State Council meeting would be called to order the truckers back to work.

## Sri Lankan health workers protest

Sri Lankan health workers held a one-day strike on October 19 and demonstrated in front of the National Hospital in Colombo. They were

protesting against a government move to withdraw a 2,500-rupee salary increase and to demand permanency for 6,000 casual and contract workers. The strike included nurses, administrative staff and minor staff from hospitals across the country, including those in the war-torn north and east.

## Voluntary teachers demonstrate for permanency

Hundreds of voluntary teachers demonstrated on October 19 in front of the Education Ministry, on the outskirts of Colombo, to demand permanent positions. Some have begun an indefinite hunger strike. Around 3,500 voluntary teachers were used to fill staff shortages this year in various schools throughout the country. Though some have taught for several years at the same school, the teachers do not have a guaranteed job or regular income.

## Government veterinarians protest staff cuts

Veterinarians employed by the Forest Conservation Department in Sri Lanka stayed away from work in a sick note campaign on October 14 to protest over staff reductions as well as unjust promotion and grading procedures. Veterinarian positions in the department have been reduced from 11 to 8, forcing the remainder to work increased hours and to travel throughout the country.

The Sri Lanka Veterinarians Association is threatening to widen the dispute to include its members in the Zoological Gardens and Health Department if the grievances are not addressed soon.

## Indian public transport workers strike against privatisation

About 119,000 employees of the Andhra Pradesh Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) began an indefinite strike at midnight on October 17. They defied a state government threat to evoke the punitive Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA).

The strike erupted after two days of negotiations between the government and the Joint Action Committee of Road Transport Corporation Unions failed. The workers are seeking a salary increase and opposing a plan to privatise the APSRTC.

The APSRTC operates 19,000 buses, carrying 11.7 million passengers and servicing about 24,000 villages daily.

The government has ruled out a salary increase this year, claiming the company has suffered losses of around 1.35 billion rupees (\$US27 million).

In a separate dispute, bus workers in Kannur in the state of Kerala began an indefinite strike on October 9 over the bus operators' decision to stop issuing free bus passes to staff. An action committee of bus workers' unions called the strike.

## Bank workers protest arbitrary transfers

Bank employees at the State Bank of India (SBI) in four Indian states—Mizoram, Meghalaya, Manipur and Tripura—demonstrated on October 12 against "high-handed" arbitrary staff transfers. According to the general secretary of the National Confederation of Bank Employees, C. Zoliana, staff transfers by the SBI zonal office "violate the bank's transfer policy".

SBI employees across the four states are also boycotting overtime and

have endorsed a campaign of ongoing demonstrations until the bank addresses the issue.

#### **Electricity workers demand wage increase**

Permanent and contract workers at the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) went on strike on October 15 due to dissatisfaction with a recent wage revision. The strikers demonstrated outside TNEB offices in Tiruchi, Pudukottai, Perambalur, Pudukottai Town, Keeranur and Thirumayam. The Labour Progressive Federation Union and the Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) called the strike.

#### **Indian horticultural workers hold protest march**

Hundreds of workers from the Horticulture Department in Udthagamandalam protested on October 17 to demand the district administration immediately set the minimum daily wage at 142 rupees (\$US2.80). They also demanded the retrospective payment of a 10 percent hill allowance that has not been paid for the last six years.

The workers, who have between five to 30 years service, are employed in the Government Botanical Gardens, Centenary Rose Park, Thamizhagam Garden, Nehru Park and the department's farms in Nanjanad and Thummanatty.

#### **Indian workers in Dubai protest unpaid wages**

Over 100 Indian workers employed by three companies in Dubai began protests on October 12 over the non-payment of wages for the last four months. The same person, Kannan Ravi, owns all three companies.

One worker, Subramaniyam Kadhiresan, said that the owner had promised to pay salaries by October 5, "but he did not pay any of us even a penny". Kadhiresan said that workers wished to return home or get their sponsorship to work in Dubai transferred to other companies. They are planning to march to the Indian Consulate if the salaries are not paid within a week.

#### **Australian aged-care workers removed by police**

Aged care workers at Western Australia's largest aged-care provider, Hall and Prior, were locked out of two nursing homes in Kensington and Belmont this week and escorted from the premises by police after they refused to leave.

The lockout occurred one day after 100 aged-care workers from four of the Hall and Prior's suburban nursing homes held a three-hour stoppage, as part of a six-month long campaign for an immediate \$1 per hour pay rise. The workers, members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, are planning industrial action at another 11 of the 14 Hall and Prior nursing homes across the state.

According to press reports, the company agreed to the increase but wants to pay it in three stages so that the new hourly rate of just \$14.90 would not fully take effect until 2008.

#### **Electricity workers plan 24-hour strike**

Electricity workers employed by the Western Australian state-owned utility Western Power are planning a one-day stoppage within the next fortnight to protest the company's unfair disciplinary policies. Up to 400 members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union are expected to take part. Meanwhile, they are maintaining bans on wet weather work because of safety concerns.

The workers say the company's disciplinary policies are unacceptable. Employees who are under investigation for alleged breaches of conduct are not allowed union representation at interviews with management.

#### **Building material workers lockout in contract dispute**

On October 19, building product manufacturer James Hardie locked out 100 workers at its pipe-making factory in the Brisbane suburb of Meeandah. The workers immediately set up a picket line. Another 140 staff at the company's building-board factory in the Brisbane suburb of Carol Park went on strike in support and are picketing the plant.

The dispute centres on failed negotiations toward a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The old EBA covered workers at both factories but the company now wants separate agreements. The workers

want a common agreement covering both plants, to maintain unity and ensure a better outcome in the bargaining process.

#### **Workers demonstrate to defend working conditions**

New South Wales Nurses Association (NSWNA) members at the Wollongong and Shellharbour hospitals stopped work on October 18 to join a rally against the federal government's proposed workplace relations laws. The new laws will allow employers to eliminate a raft of working conditions, remove protection against unfair dismissal for two-thirds of the workforce and imposes harsh restrictions on striking.

The nurses joined a demonstration outside the Telstra Building in the centre of Wollongong, where Prime Minister John Howard was addressing a business lunch.

#### **New Zealand rest home workers strike**

Up to 380 workers employed by Presbyterian Support Services (PSS) in hospitals and rest homes in Southland, Otago and South Canterbury went on strike on October 20. They decided to take industrial action after the PSS rejected a union proposal to settle a pay dispute and refused to set a day for new talks before next year.

The strike affected 14 hospital and rest homes from Timaru to Invercargill. Workers picketed several rest homes and the PSS head office in Christchurch.

Pay talks began in March. Workers are seeking a five percent pay increase but mediation stalled on September 28 when PSS offered only a 3.66 percent increase, plus a commitment to pass on any further funding from the district health boards.

Workers rejected another employer offer of a two-year deal, with a 3 percent increase in the first year followed by a minimum 2 percent increase in the second year, as well as additional health board funding.

#### **Carter Holt workers return to work**

About 200 workers at Carter Holt Harvey's (CHH) Whangarei timber plant voted to end the strike they began on September 23, so that the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) can begin talks with the company's new owner.

The Rank Group bought a 50.5 percent controlling interest in CHH earlier this year. It is currently trying to buy out the rest of the company and by last week its bid had passed the 60 percent mark. EPMU had previously been negotiating with CHH but talks had reached an impasse. The workers want a 5 percent pay rise. CHH offered 3 percent, claiming that the workers' demands, if allowances were included, added up to a rise of nearly 10 percent.

#### **New Zealand Telecom workers on strike**

More than 100 workers employed by Transfield to maintain the Telecom network went on strike on October 14 after pay negotiations broke down. The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union said the workers are frustrated by the company's refusal to offer anything higher than a 2 percent pay increase. Telecom workers were in the top pay brackets 10 years ago, but since then they have dropped far behind other sections of the workforce.

#### **Power workers end strike in PNG**

Power workers in Papua New Guinea (PNG) returned to work on October 15 after striking for 24 hours. The strike caused blackouts in Port Moresby and power rationing around the country. The 700 members of the PNG Energy Workers Union struck over 13 longstanding issues, including accommodation and housing subsidies. They are also demanding the removal of board chairman John Jeffrey and the termination of the services of consultancy firm KPMG.

Union leaders have been summoned to appear before the National Court in Port Moresby to face charges of contempt for allegedly breaching earlier interim court orders obtained by PNG Power to stop the strike going ahead. Kaira said the union will contest the charges and warned that if arbitration talks fail, workers will walk out again.



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