

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 October 2005

Philippines union leader gunned down

On October 25, an unknown gunman murdered Ricardo Ramos, the president of the Central Azucarera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU). Ramos played a leading role in the 11-month-long dispute at the Hacienda Luisita plantation and sugar mill, which is owned by the family of former President Corazon Aquino. He was shot in the back in his yard as he and other union leaders celebrated a settlement earlier in the day that favoured the plantation workers.

In resolving the dispute, the Department of Agrarian Reform recommended the revocation of the Stock Distribution Option (SDO) at the Hacienda Luisita plantation. Under the SDO, owners were exempted from handing land over to indigenous people and farm workers and instead were supposed to pay them a portion of the profits. The workers rarely received any payments and revoking the SDO was one of their central demands.

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) also directed the owners to pay 8.8 million pesos (\$US157,000) in back-pay to CATLU workers, plus an additional order holding all the land at Hacienda Luisita in abeyance. The order has forced the suspension of work on the Subic-Clark-Tarlac Expressway, a priority project of President Arroyo.

From the time the dispute began, workers were subjected to violence. On November 16, 2004, 12 workers and two children were killed and over 200 seriously injured, when 1,000 police and military were dispatched to break up a picket line. Ramos was subsequently forced into virtual hiding by a series of death threats. Labour organisations suspect members of the armed forces or police are responsible for his murder.

In an attempt to minimise popular opposition to the killing, Arroyo issued a statement that she had ordered the Philippines National Police "to leave no stone unturned to establish the motive behind the brutal attacks, to prevent the reign of violence and to make the perpetrators pay for their crimes."

Internet workers in South Korea vote to strike

Unionised workers employed at the Seoul-based broadband internet provider Hanarotelecom, the second largest in South Korea, voted to strike on October 26 over the company's plans to cut almost a quarter of its workforce. The timing of the proposed strike will be determined by the outcome of a meeting between the company and union.

Hanarotelecom workers and their union were informed on October 13 of the company's plan to slash approximately 1,500 jobs through a voluntary redundancy program. A union representative claimed that the company's job cutting is motivated by shareholder intentions to sell the company. The US-based company, American International Group and Newbridge Capital, controls Hanarotelecom.

Police arrest Indian plantation workers

Nearly 1,000 workers picketing at the Valparai tea plantation in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu were arrested on October 23. They were demanding the government cancel a recent pay accord struck by some unions and plantation owners that would only increase their pay to 77 rupees (\$US1.70). The Valparai estate workers received a daily rate of

76.85 rupees in 1998, but this was then slashed to 72 rupees. They are calling for a wage of 86.20 rupees for one day's labour.

Indian tea estate workers demand unpaid wages

Workers at the Kalchini and Raimatang tea estates in Alipurduar, West Bengal, held a series of protests on October 20 over the non-payment of wages. The company failed to honour a commitment to pay a fortnight's wage on October 18. Workers also suspect that money collected from them for their provident fund was not deposited. The Buxa Dooars Tea Company owns the estates.

The protests held up the Siliguri-bound Inter-City Express at Kalchini station for three hours and blocked the Kalchini highway for two hours. Pickets also closed down operations at two banks, the post office, the block development and the village council offices. Police moved in later in the day and arrested a number of protest organisers.

Five construction workers killed in wall collapse

Five building workers in Mumbai were killed on October 23 when a large compound wall near a multi-storied building under construction collapsed, trapping a dozen workers. A pay-loader brought the wall crashing down.

Firemen were forced to use electric cutters to remove the debris. The men killed were Kantilal Chawla (64), Baluram Rathod (45), Nilesh Pawar (18), Sandeep Khairnar (20) and Dagdabai Waghmare (50).

The builder, Pramod Sheth of Panoram Associates, and the site supervisor, were arrested and charged with culpable homicide not amounting to murder. A police spokesman alleged that even though the two men knew the digging operation around the wall could lead to it collapsing, "they failed to take precautions".

Sri Lankan teachers campaign for improved working conditions

Teachers in Sabaragamuwa province began a sick note campaign and stayed away from work on October 24. They also picketed the education office in Ratnapura, 80 kilometres from Colombo, to press for a slate of demands. These include the payment of salaries on time, the systemisation of salary increments and the streamlining of teachers' transfers. Most schools were closed due to the protest.

In a separate dispute, volunteer teachers in the Kurunegala district of Wayamba province protested on October 20 in front of the education ministry in Battaramulla, a suburb on the outskirts of Colombo. They are demanding confirmation of their employment.

Queensland ambulance officers strike over workloads

Ambulance officers in Queensland went on strike on October 19. The 500 paramedics, accompanied by family members, rallied outside the Kedron Park emergency services complex in Brisbane to voice concern over the increasing workloads that have resulted in officers working 50 to 60 hours a week.

The rapid growth of Queensland's population means that the paramedic's workloads are increasing by 10 percent a year. Staff shortages, however, are leaving ambulance stations unmanned and some evenings there are no intensive care paramedics in the Brisbane city area.

In a separate dispute, nurses at the Mount Olivet Private Hospital in

Brisbane walked off the job for two hours on October 27. The nurses want wage parity with public hospital nurses, who receive 9 percent more than private sector nurses even though they are required to have the same qualifications as their public counterparts.

Building company locks out workers

On October 26, James Hardie Industries (JHI) locked out 100 workers for the second time at its reinforced pipe plant in the Brisbane suburb of Meeandah, Queensland. The lockout is an attempt to force its employees to accept a new workplace agreement. It was begun after workers informed the company they were going to hold two-hour stop-work meetings on each shift.

The 140 workers at the company's Carol Park building products plant, also in Brisbane, have gone on strike in support.

The company is demanding an end to the single collective agreement covering both Brisbane plants and its replacement with site agreements negotiated separately. Workers believe the move is a deliberate tactic to divide the workforce and reduce their bargaining strength. Unions are threatening rolling stoppages and overtime bans are being maintained.

NSW teachers accept new pay deal

Teachers in public schools in New South Wales attended a 2-hour stop work meeting across the state on October 26. They voted to accept the government's latest offer of a 12 percent pay rise over 3 years, which will increase "beginning teachers" pay to \$50,522 by January 2008. Classroom teachers will be paid \$75,352 and high school principals \$129,506. The new pay deal covers 60,000 teachers and will commence from January 1, 2006.

The deal includes 14-weeks maternity leave on full pay, one-week paternity leave on full pay and access to pro-rata long service leave after seven years. Clauses in the new agreement agreed to by the teachers' federation make it easier to sack teachers deemed to be "incompetent" or "under-performing". From next year, teachers placed on an "improvement program" by principals will have to prove their subject knowledge, lesson planning ability and that they can effectively communicate with students.

Journalists strike over job cuts

About 200 editorial staff and journalists employed by John Fairfax Holdings in Sydney and Melbourne struck on October 27 over the company's decision to cut 55 jobs.

Management staff produced Fairfax's *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Sun Herald* newspapers during the strike. The journalists are threatening further action unless the plan is withdrawn.

Hospital staff strike over job cuts

More than 100 hospital staff in Melbourne went on strike on October 19 over job cuts at the newly-merged Austin and Mercy hospitals. The workers, members of the Health Services Union (HSU), claim that the job cuts and the recent closure of 15 maternity beds is the result of under-funding of the facility by the Victorian state Labor government.

The strike included theatre and instrument technicians, nursing attendants, pathology lab assistants, ward clerks, cleaners and food services, kitchen and clerical staff. A spokesperson for the HSU said the workers were concerned that more cutbacks were "just around the corner". She claimed that inadequate funding had put the hospital \$650,000 over budget.

Filipino crew stranded in Australia win court case

On October 12, an Adelaide court ruled that wages and repatriation costs be paid to 69 Filipino sailors who have been stranded onboard the Kuwait-registered vessel *Mawashi Al-Gasseemin* for nearly eight months in the Port of Adelaide.

The vessels creditor, OW Bunker, which secured the vessel's arrest at the port on the grounds the owner was bankrupt and owed it money, will pay the workers \$US700,000. OW Bunker intends to recoup its losses from the sale of the ship.

Thirty-five of the crew were repatriated on October 12 and the

remaining will stay on board until the ship is officially transferred to its new owner at the end of October. It is expected that back wages will be paid no later than December.

Fairfax NZ newspapers face more strikes

Nine workers at the *Kapiti Observer*, a Fairfax-owned community newspaper in Paraparaumu, went on strike on October 18 and picketed outside the office near the Coastlands shopping centre. It was their seventh strike since July in a campaign for an immediate 5 percent pay increase.

The company has offered the workers a 3.5 percent pay rise and a \$600 one-off payment this year, with another 3 percent next year.

The *Kapiti Observer* is part of Fairfax's Capital Community Newspapers. Workers at other newspapers in the group, the *Wellingtonian*, the *Kapi-Mana News*, the *Hutt News* and the *Upper Hutt Leader*, have voted to resume industrial action after a series of stoppages last month.

The Australian-owned Fairfax group last year made a profit of \$NZ285.18 million.

Strike by New Zealand social workers called off

A strike by more than 2,000 Department of Child Youth and Family (CYF) workers planned for October 20 was called off at the last minute by the Public Service Association (PSA) to enable negotiations to resume. A separate strike by members of the National Union of Public Employees employed in CYFS offices went ahead on October 26.

PSA National Secretary Richard Wagstaff said most CYF staff had not had a pay increase since 2001 and the gap between them and other state sector workers had grown "very large". Social workers will be paid 20 percent less than those in the health sector if a new pay deal recently negotiated is ratified. Pay rates for support staff are also behind those for similar positions in other departments.

Report condemns unsafe conditions on movie set

Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) issued a sharp report last week condemning the unsafe working conditions on the set of the Peter Jackson film *King Kong* in Wellington. The OSH investigated the set after scaffolding weighing 21 kilograms fell on two workers in October last year.

A lighting technician and a photography assistant were hospitalised as a result of the accident. One worker was knocked unconscious and sustained head injuries, a broken shoulder blade and a fractured spine. The second worker suffered a deep cut to his leg. The chief health and safety inspector said the workers were lucky not to have been killed.

The rigging crew blamed long working hours, exhaustion and the lack of safety standards in the New Zealand film industry. They claimed that they had worked extremely long hours for 13 days in a row, including one 26-hour shift, in the lead-up to the accident. One experienced international hand said conditions were the worst he had seen and the set operated on the basis that "safe" equaled "unaffordable or unachievable".

The report follows previous complaints by crew, actors and extras over the conditions on Jackson's Oscar-winning *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, which made him into a multi-millionaire. The *King Kong* production company Big Primate, owned by Universal City Studios in California, will not be prosecuted.

PNG nurses defy court order to end strike

On October 24, nurses at the Nonga Base Hospital in East New Britain decided to continue their strike in defiance of a court order directing them to return to work. Some nurses had gone back but walked out again when non-striking staff began insulting them. A spokesperson for the nurses said the situation was now out of control. She said the hospital beds were empty, and patients were being discharged or being sent to another hospital.

The nurses first struck on October 19 to demand the removal of the hospital's CEO, his management team, the chairman of the board and

board members. The spokesman for the hospital health staff, Eddie Mago, said the local community supported their action. Board chairman Ronnie Kalulu and his chief executive officer have sought urgent talks with the police but the content of the meeting has not been made public.

PNG teachers end boycott

Teachers in the Papua New Guinea province of West New Britain ended an eight-day classroom boycott on October 18 after the provincial government agreed to pay year-end leave fares for the period 2002-2004. The amount owing was 270,000 kina (\$US90,000).

Jobs to go in airline merger

Nearly 200 Polynesian Airlines employees will have lost their jobs by early next month when the merger between the Samoan carrier and Virgin Blue takes effect.

The Samoan government has agreed to slash Polynesian Airlines workforce from 393 to 195. Redundancy packages have been paid out to about 113 employees so far. The airline will close its offices in Sydney, Auckland and Wellington at the end of October and reduce staffing levels at its head office in Apia, Samoa.



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