Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 October 2005

Union leader murdered in the Philippines

Diosdado Fortuna, a union leader at Nestlé in Cabuyao, Laguna was killed on September 22 by unidentified gunmen while on his way home from picket duty at the plant. The brutal murder is part of a pattern of intimidation of Nestlé workers, who have been locked out since January 2002. Management imposed the lockout and hired replacement labour after employees demanded the inclusion of retirement benefits in their collective work agreement.

While the National Labor Relations Commission, the Court of Appeals and the Supreme Court of the Philippines confirmed the right of unions to negotiate retirement benefits as part of a work agreement, Nestlé management refused to do so.

The IUF (International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers Associations) has made a futile plea to the Philippines government to fully investigate the murder, declaring that "[f]ailure to do so would encourage further physical attacks against workers and their unions in a country where anti-union violence is not an uncommon occurrence".

However, the government of President Gloria Arroyo has been involved in the violent suppression of strikes. In November last year, 12 strikers were shot and two young children killed when the government sent hundreds of police and army personnel, backed by armoured vehicles and water cannon, to disperse pickets.

Indian rail workers protest for pay and conditions

Around 200 Indian Railways workers protested outside the South Central Railway headquarters in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh on September 23. The drivers, assistant drivers, guards and shunters are demanding increased running allowances, pensions, and pay rates for running staff on par with those of other work categories. Retired rail workers joined the protest.

Three days earlier, railway guards—members of the Tiruchi Division of the All India Guards Council—held a sit-down protest in front of the Divisional Railway Manager's office in Tiruchi for the same demands.

Unemployed teachers demand jobs

Unemployed teachers held a sit-down protest after marching to the Deputy Commissioner's office in Gulbarga in the Indian state of Karnataka on September 22. They were protesting delays in granting appointments to teaching positions.

They demanded that all vacant posts for primary and high school teachers be filled within a fortnight, the appointment of head masters for Karnataka Education Service, permanency for all part-time teachers in Morarji Desai Residential Schools and pay increases.

In a separate dispute, university teachers from across India demonstrated outside the University Grants Commission (UGC) in New Delhi on September 2. They are demanding withdrawal of a UGC letter directing Delhi University to enact a "no work, no pay" provision against teachers and workers who went on strike on August 1 in solidarity with Gurgaon Honda workers. The University Teachers Association (DUTA) called the protest.

Tamilnadu construction workers seek pension increase

Construction workers in Tamilnadu protested in Chromepet on September 26. They are demanding the government increase monthly pensions from 200 rupees ($US4) to 500 rupees, the provision of bicycles for registered members of the Central Welfare Association and an extension for workers who fail to renew their pension eligibility status.

A spokesman for the Tamilnadu Construction Workers Central Welfare Association, which organised the protest, said the government should review the present eligibility age for a pension, currently 50 years, and grant a pension increase to meet the rising cost of living.

Punjab export workers oppose retrenchment

Head office and field workers from the Punjab Small Industries and Export Corporation (PSIEC) in Chandigarh, India held a sit-down protest at the Udyog Bhavan Sector 17 on September 21. They were protesting plans to retrench 595 casual employees who have been working for the corporation for the last 15 to 25 years. Other demands included the restoration of staff welfare funds, the filling of vacant posts through promotions, and permanency for casual workers.

Also in the Punjab, on September 23 thousands of Punjab State Electricity Board workers protested outside the power company's head office over moves to privatise power generation and distribution.

Guest workers demonstrate over non-payment of wages

Hundreds of South Asian guest construction workers employed by UAE & Jordan Joint Venture demonstrated in Dubai for two hours on September 20. The workers, who are from countries such as India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, were demanding the payment of six months in back wages.

Dubai police disbursed the workers and transported them back to the company's accommodation site, which is located in the desert and has the appearance of a refugee camp. Dubai authorities confirmed that the company owed workers back pay, but claims it is only for the past four months.

Sri Lankan estate workers strike continues

A strike by about 900 workers from nine tea estates owned by the Moneragala Kumarawatta Group in Moneragala in Sri Lanka's Uva province entered its third week on September 24. The workers want the company to make regular contributions to the Employee Provident Fund and the Employee Trust Fund and to pay gratuities on time.

In a separate dispute, 2,500 plantation workers from Frotoft in Pussellawa, which is located in Sri Lanka's hill region, walked off the job on September 20. They are demanding that estate land be made available for construction of a hospital.

While about 5,000 people—estate workers and their families—use the Frotoft hospital, it is 150 years old and has few basic facilities. Seriously-ill people have reportedly died in transit to better health facilities in Pussellawa.

Postal workers ban overtime nationwide

Postal workers in Sri Lanka imposed a national overtime ban on September 26 in support of 19 demands. These include the immediate

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filling of vacancies for postmasters and other postal officers and streamlining the intake of graduates. The action will continue, and could escalate, unless workers' demands are met.

Ambulance workers continue pay and conditions dispute

A dispute by 500 ambulance officers at St Johns Ambulance in Western Australia over improved pay and working conditions has entered its fourth week. This week, ambulance officers protested outside the company's new $10 million headquarters, currently being constructed at Belmont in Perth's eastern suburbs. They carried placards reading: "Yes. We do see terrible things—Our pay packet" and "Pay Rise or High Rise". A work-to-rule is continuing with officers refusing to do both paid and unpaid overtime or complete paperwork required by the company to bill their patients.

The ambulance paramedics are demanding a $5 per hour pay increase to establish wage parity with other similarly qualified health professionals, increased staffing levels and the upgrading of inadequate ambulance depots and vehicles. The officers are angry that St John Ambulance gives priority to its administrative facilities rather than funds for depots and the purchase of extra ambulances.

A union spokesman told the protest that the dispute was not just about a pay increase. He said the service was operating on overtime and workers were exhausted and "can't keep on doing it". Paramedics recently had to take on extra responsibilities, including administering drugs to patients. "That's a lot to expect for someone getting paid $20.08 an hour," he said.

St John Ambulance has rejected the paramedics' demands and told the union to take the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission.

Boeing opposes ballot for collective agreement

The protracted dispute between Boeing Australia and 35 maintenance engineers at the air force base at Williamtown near Newcastle, New South Wales is now in its 16th week with workers sustaining a 24-hour picket outside the air base. The workers, who maintain and upgrade FA18 Hornet fighter jets, want wage parity and a union collective agreement.

On September 19, the company opposed an application to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) by the Australian Workers Union (AWU) for a secret ballot of strikers to confirm support for a collective agreement. The maintenance workers are currently employed on individual common law contracts drawn up in 2003. Repeated requests over the last 18 months to renegotiate the contracts have been ignored by the company.

AWU national secretary Bill Shorten said the company's opposition in the AIRC meant the application for a secret ballot would not be heard for another month. "We proposed the secret ballot as a means of bringing this dispute to an end," he said, "but Boeing can't even come halfway and be constructive".

Meanwhile, the company has brought in replacement maintenance workers. The union, however, has isolated the dispute and is restricting support for the strikers to financial assistance, while sending delegations to plead with Prime Minister John Howard and the local Liberal MP.

Social security workers to take action in pay dispute

Workers at Centrelink, Australia's social security agency, will begin rolling stoppages at all 370 offices nationwide during October.

The workers—members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU)—are negotiating a new collective work agreement, including a 12.5 percent pay increase over three years. They have overwhelmingly rejected an 11 percent pay offer, their union describing it as "substandard".

Health workers strike for conditions

Over 100 allied health workers in Launceston and Devonport, in Tasmania held a 24-hour strike on September 28 as part of a statewide campaign over enterprise agreement negotiations. The workers are from 23 professions, including physiotherapy, radiography, medical science, pharmacy, speech therapy, mental health services, child protection and occupational therapy. Outpatient and non-emergency treatment was affected, mostly at Launceston General Hospital.

Over 1,100 health workers across Tasmania voted the previous week for statewide rolling stoppages after the state Labor government offered an 8.9 percent pay increase but refused to negotiate on a series of demands, including a better career structure and recognition of postgraduate qualifications. Health unions immediately called off a planned strike at Hobart's Royal Hospital on September 29 after Health and Human Services Minister David Llewellyn agreed to negotiate on conditions.

Construction workers walk out over safety

About 300 workers employed by construction company Roche at the mineral sands site in Hamilton, southwest Victoria, walked off the job this week. The week-long strike is over concerns about the safety of a level crossing at the site.

When a train narrowly missed a workers' bus last week, management's only response was to replace give-way signs at the crossing with stop signs. The union wants the level crossing upgraded to an active crossing with flashing lights. While the company and Southern Grampians Council have agreed to upgrade the crossing by the time the plant begins operating, the union says this is far too late and does not address the immediate safety concerns of construction workers.

Striking New Zealand airport workers threatened with sack

Striking Mt Cook Airlines' employees in Queenstown, New Zealand, have returned to work after management threatened to sack them. The baggage handlers and ticket staff walked off the job on September 20 in support of a 5 percent annual pay increase, saying that they could not afford to live in Queenstown, a major tourist centre.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union national secretary Andrew Little said union negotiators were told that if the strike was not ended, Air New Zealand would cancel Mt Cook Airlines' contract to provide services at the airport. Mt Cook Airlines is a wholly owned subsidiary of Air New Zealand.

Little denounced Air NZ for bullying the workers into accepting a low pay settlement, calling it "old-fashioned 1990s-style corporate manipulation of the workforce" but did nothing to prevent it and kept it isolated to one airport. Union lawyers are investigating the use of strikebreakers during the dispute.

The union has accepted a 30-month agreement, which includes a 3.5 percent pay rise this year, 3.5 percent rise next year, and a 1.75 percent rise in the final six months. An additional $700 per year during the first two years of the agreement will be tied to increased productivity. The union claimed the settlement was higher than the company's previous offer.

Timber workers prepare for more strikes

Workers at Carter Holt Harvey (CHH), New Zealand's largest pulp and paper conglomerate, are establishing strike funds as a national wages campaign intensifies. Several CHH plants have already been affected by two 24-hour strikes over pay.

More than 200 workers from four CHH plants in Auckland voted overwhelmingly this week to campaign for a 5 percent rise. The company claims it cannot afford more than 3 percent and wants each unit to negotiate separately. Workers at CHH Paperbag Division in Auckland, who were initially offered just a 1.5 percent pay increase, settled this week with 5 percent pay increase now and another 3.5 percent in 15 months. Meanwhile, workers at the CHH LVL plant in Whangarei struck for seven days this week.

New Zealand healthcare workers to strike

Strikes by 500 caregivers and nursing staff employed by Guardian Healthcare (GHG) at 21 locations have begun after mediation failed to settle a pay dispute. The workers, members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union, struck for six hours on September 30, with another 24-hour strike scheduled for October 6.

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Pay rates and conditions are lower at GHG than at many other providers. The union is claiming a minimum hourly rate for caregivers of between $11 and $14. Workers in public hospitals earn up to 20 percent more than their counterparts in aged care.

Fiji mine workers picket over sick leave

Production at the Emperor Gold Mining Company at Vatukoula in Fiji was brought to a halt this week after more than 500 dayshift miners stopped work and picketed the mine over the company's sick leave policy. The company had issued a final memorandum, warning that workers taking more than 10 days sick leave would be sacked.

The Mine Workers Union (MWU) said the company's decision breached union proposals that workers attend a medical review board after they exceed their 10 days sick leave. Employees are also opposed to a company policy of locking plant gates after 7.45 a.m., which prevents latecomers working. Management claimed it was simply enforcing a previous agreement with the MWU to cut absenteeism. The MWU wants the Ministry of Labour to resolve the dispute.

Samoan doctors strike continues

Doctors from Samoa's main public hospital vowed this week to maintain their indefinite strike. The 32 doctors have been on strike for three weeks over longstanding grievances over pay rates and working conditions. The Samoan Medical Association said doctors have no plans to return to work until their demands are met.

The doctors last week defied a directive from the Health Ministry to return to work. A doctors' spokeswoman said they would not be intimidated and the strike would continue until the government offered better salaries for entry level and long-serving doctors.

A backlog of operations and appointments is building up at the main public hospital with specialist clinical sessions and many non-urgent operations postponed. The government has set up a commission of inquiry to look into the doctors' grievances. It is due to report back on October 7.

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