

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 October 2005

Asia

Citibank Korea employees vote to strike

Union members at the recently formed Citibank Korea Inc voted on October 1 for industrial action in support of pay increases. They also want a special bonus equivalent to 10 percent of the bank's pre-tax profit and a pay rise for non-regular workers. They will strike next month if these demands are not met.

Workers also voted not to do any extra work resulting from the merger between the US banking giant's Korean unit and KorAm Bank, previously South Korea's seventh-largest lender. Workers throughout last year campaigned against the merger and for guaranteed job security and no-loss of benefits.

Police break-up strikes in China

News has emerged that about 10,000 Chinese workers at several Japanese companies in Dalian, a major industrial city and port on the northeast coast of China, were forced to end a series of strikes between late July and August after city authorities called in the police. Workers walked off the job for several days at each company, including Canon, Mitsubishi, Toshiba and Toto, to demand higher pay or better conditions in the companies' dining halls and living quarters.

Chinese workers in Dubai strike for correct pay

About 80 Chinese construction workers in Dubai went on strike on September 29 and about 200 rallied outside the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs the following day. The workers claim that they were not paid the amount agreed by a Chinese recruiting agent for construction company Ahmad Al Shamsi. They were promised 1,800 dirham (\$US500) per month but are being paid only 400 dirham. The Dubai-based company agreed to pay all outstanding money after a meeting with labour officials and the police.

Philippines teachers bypass union

Over 10,000 teachers in the Philippines have bypassed their union (the Alliance of Concerned Teachers) and paid 150 pesos (\$US2.72) each to a legal group to secure pay owing to them by the government since 1989. The legal group will file claims before the Office of the Solicitor General.

After the passage of the Salary Standardisation Law (SSL) in 1989 the government stopped paying the Cost of Living Allowance (COLA). However, employees at the Philippines Ports Authority challenged the legitimacy of SSL and on September 6 the Supreme Court ruled in their favour, stating that all government employees should be entitled to backdated COLA.

Filipino sailors stranded at sea

Four Filipino sailors have been stranded on a tugboat anchored two kilometres off the coast of Bahrain since March. They are unable to leave the vessel due to a legal dispute between its Dubai-based owner Filipino Richard V. Jorge and a charter company.

The ship's cook suffered a heart attack onboard on June 3 and died the next day in hospital. The vessel's air-conditioner has failed and the men are forced to sleep on deck. They are owed back pay from October last year and are relying on the Bahrain International Seafarers Society for

humanitarian aid.

All four sailors have completed their contracts onboard the vessel M/V Audry but there is no sign of replacements or repatriation. The crew were allowed ashore to approach Philippines Embassy officials in May but officials waited until October 2 to submit a formal request to the Bahraini authorities to let the sailors dock the boat. There has been no reply as yet.

Blockade at Indonesian mine site

On September 28, over 500 people—community members and former mine workers—blockaded the PT Inco mine site in Sorowako, Indonesia in the face of intimidation by police and hired thugs. Police detained several people. The blockade follows demonstrations and a weeklong sit-in and hunger strike at the Inco regional office in Makassar.

The protestors are demanding a meeting with PT Inco to discuss a three decade-old dispute over land acquisition by the company while former employees want the company to fulfil labour obligations and severance pay. The mining company began operations in 1975 and has not compensated the local community for land acquisitions.

Indian childcare workers protest

Childcare workers (Anganwari) in Ludhiana, Punjab held a daylong sit-down protest outside the government-run Girls Senior Secondary School in Jawahar Nagar on October 3. It was organised by the Anganwari Workers Union and the Anganwari Maha Sangh. The Congress Punjab state government's education minister H.D. Johar was launching a new scheme for pre-nursery education at the school. Workers fear that the new scheme will threaten jobs.

In a separate dispute, childcare workers protested at the Mahatma Gandhi statue outside the Visakhapatnam municipal corporation's main office in Andhra Pradesh to demand regularisation of jobs and a reduction in working hours.

Teachers and principals fight for permanency

On October 3, teachers from 122 Morarji Desai residential schools in India's southern state of Karnataka demonstrated in Gulbarga in front of the deputy commissioner of education's office. They were demanding the state government honor promises made in April to give 685 teachers and principals permanency.

The teachers and principals were initially appointed on a temporary basis for four years but were terminated within a year. They were then reappointed to the same posts, again on a temporary basis. This pattern has continued over the past four years, making it impossible for them to attain the continuity of service needed to qualify for permanency.

The teachers' unions have given the government until October 15 to meet their demands or they will begin an indefinite protest outside the Karnataka chief minister's official residence in Bangalore—the state capital.

Motor workers demand profit-linked bonus

More than 6,000 workers at Tata Motors in Jamshedpur—an Indian industrial city named after the founder of the Tata business empire—held a one-day strike on October 1 to demand a profit-linked bonus scheme. It was the first strike at the plant in 40 years. Arun Singh, vice-president of

the workers' union, warned: "This is a token strike and if the management does not meet our demand we may extend it".

Indian laboratory technicians protest

Health department laboratory technicians held a sit-down protest outside the Civil Surgeon's office in Ludhiana, India on October 3. They want the government to rectify salary anomalies and provide a monthly 600-rupee risk allowance.

Other demands include introduction of a three-year degree and two-year diploma course in medical laboratory technology in medical colleges and a share of laboratory income, in line with a scheme for doctors and radiographers. They are also seeking permanency and annual promotions for contractual laboratory technicians.

Sri Lankan port workers protest assault

Security section employees, along with other workers from the Ports Authority, picketed No 4 gate at the Colombo Port on September 29. They were protesting the assault of a security guard by a naval officer. The assault occurred when the on-duty security guard attempted to carry out a check on a person accompanying the naval officer.

Bangladesh airline workers strike

About 5,500 staff and 150 pilots at Biman Bangladesh Air Lines, the country's national flag carrier, struck on September 26 for 11 demands, including a 220 percent pay rise. More than 3,000 striking workers chanting slogans picketed the airline's headquarters in Balaka, Dhaka.

The strikers called for the company to withdraw a "retirement" order served on Bangladesh Airlines Pilots Association president Captain Nasim and the removal of the flight operations director for negligence. Workers allege that Nasim was dismissed for discussing corrupt practices by some of Biman's executives.

The strike grounded Biman domestic or international flights at all of the country's seven airports and the baggage of about 1,000 passengers from overseas airlines at Zia International Airport was not unloaded. Services at airports, including telecommunication, electricity and water, were suspended during the 11-hour strike.

Australia and the Pacific

Teachers in dispute over new pay agreement

Teachers in New South Wales, Australia are threatening industrial action to demand a two-tiered salary increase of between 8 to 13 percent as part of a three-year agreement. The current agreement, which covers the state's 50,000 public school teachers, is due to expire at the end of the year.

Under a union-proposed agreement, salaries for teachers with 10 years service or more would be set at \$75,000 with teachers' base salaries increased from \$46,000 to \$50,000 a year.

The NSW Teachers Federation is negotiating with the Department of Education but recently-appointed Labor Premier Morris Iemma has already indicated that the government will not offer any more than 3 percent per tier, claiming it faces a larger than expected budget deficit.

Australian refinery workers end safety strike

Striking maintenance workers at QNI's Yabulu refinery, 25 kilometres northwest of Townsville in northern Queensland, returned to work on October 4 after management agreed to address a series of safety issues. These include improved emergency sirens, shaded areas at emergency marshalling points and more two-way radios. Management also agreed to update the evacuation procedure for the site and provide a new plan within a fortnight. The present procedure has not been changed in 30 years.

A new safety committee has also been formed and the company has agreed to provide training for safety officers and fire wardens. The QNI Yabulu refinery is part of BHP-Billiton Stainless Steels and processes nickel and cobalt.

Social Security agency attempts to intimidate workers

Management at Centrelink, the federal government's social security agency, has banned employees using agency computers to access the

Community and Public Sector Union's (CPSU) website or to email union delegates. The union is currently in dispute with the agency over a new national work agreement and holding rolling stoppages during October.

A CPSU spokesperson claimed management had also threatened some union delegates and that some new staff were being forced to sign individual workplace agreements. Centrelink justified its CPSU email and website ban, claiming that the union was "inciting" staff to industrial action.

In a separate dispute, public sector emergency service workers in Victoria have voted to take industrial action over the state Labor government's plans to merge their superannuation scheme with another. The dispute involves ambulance officers and fire department and police emergency staff. Bans have been placed on overtime and revenue collecting.

New Zealand social workers strike over work agreement

More than 2,000 Child, Youth and Family (CYF) workers, together with 500 staff from rest homes and aged care hospitals throughout New Zealand walked off the job on September 30 in support of a pay rise. They picketed and rallied at CYF centres in Invercargill, Kaitia, Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and other provincial centres.

Public Service Association (PSA) president Richard Wagstaff said workers rejected the pay rates offered by management as well as the structure of the present performance-based pay system. The current offer had been discussed for several weeks but the CYF department had failed to make a significant improvement. "The department may well consider it to be a generous offer but social workers have not been paid a rise since 2001 and support staff have not had one since 2003."

A CYF official claimed that the strike was "unnecessary" because the department had initiated mediation with the PSA to have the strike notices withdrawn. The union said it was keen to return to negotiations but so far CYF has not proposed a date.

New Zealand university staff accept modified pay offer

Academics and general staff at the University of Waikato and Auckland ratified a new collective agreement late last month. Waikato University management improved its initial offer of a 3 percent salary increase from June 1, adding a further 1.5 percent from the beginning of October. The Auckland University offered a 4.5 percent increase and a payment of \$300 for union members.

Hospital workers strike for pay rise

About 45 trades and stores workers at Bay of Plenty (BOP) public hospitals in New Zealand went on strike for two days on October 4. The workers, who are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, want a 5 percent pay rise but the BOP District Health Board has offered just 3 percent. A union spokesman said further industrial action could not be ruled out.

New Zealand timber workers strike indefinitely

Striking employees from New Zealand's largest pulp and paper conglomerate Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) voted on September 30 to strike indefinitely in support of a 5 percent pay rise. About 30 strikers holding placards saying "CHH=CHEAP" and "5 percent in 05", held a protest rally in Whangarei on October 3.

Workers also rallied at CHH sites in Marsden Point and Dargaville. Several other CHH plants have been hit by pay strikes. The company claims it can only afford 3 percent and wants each unit to negotiate separately.

Private aged-care workers to strike for pay increase

Nearly 600 staff from 20 rest homes and hospitals owned by Guardian Healthcare Group in New Zealand went on strike for 24 hours on October 6 in support of a pay rise. They are members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation. The latest strike follows a nationwide six-hour strike and protest rally in Auckland's Aotea Square last week. Busloads of strikers had also

picketed the company's head quarters and various workplaces around the North and South Islands.

The union is seeking an hourly pay rate of \$11 to \$14 for caregivers and \$17.60 to \$23.50 for registered nurses. Guardian staff did not receive any flow-on from recent pay increases to public hospital nurses. The SFWU said care workers were among the lowest paid in the health sector and were now being asked to pay for their uniforms.

Fijian union officials face strike arrest

Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) union officials are being threatened with legal action by Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck if union members take industrial action after a 28-day strike notice expires at midnight on October 6.

Zinck issued the warning after FEA management failed to turn up for a meeting with the FEA Workers Association on October 5, fuelling speculation that there would be strike action. Zinck claims that the union had failed to report the dispute and that a strike would be illegal. FEA unions want a cost of living adjustment owed from last year and are demanding the company stop approaching employees to negotiate individual contracts.

PNG nurses return to work

More than 250 nurses at Nonga Base Hospital and government-run health centres in East New Britain (a province of Papua New Guinea) held a sit-in protest on September 29. They were protesting the national government's refusal to honour a promise to improve employment conditions and adjust workers' salaries after their positions were re-classified in 2000. The government said these issues would be addressed by August 1 after a national nurses strike in June.

The nurses ended the current strike on September 30, after the provincial administrator Aquila Tubal agreed to take up the issues with the departments of health and personnel management in Waigani.

Vanuatu unions accept minimum wage adjustment

Vanuatu unions have accepted a government offer to increase the minimum wage by 25 percent, from \$US160 to \$200 per month. This is the first minimum wage increase since 1995. The unions endorsed the agreement on October 4, despite their own survey revealing in 2000 that the minimum needed by an average family living in Vanuatu's capital Port Vila was \$600 a month.

Police maintain ban on union march

Vanuatu National Workers Union secretary Ephraim Kalsakau has appealed to Prime Minister Ham Lini after police denied three permit applications for a street demonstration. Kalsakau met the prime minister on September 30 to discuss union concerns over the sacking of 26 union members by Air Vanuatu for participating in a five-hour strike on August 22.

Lini claimed that he would not block the demonstration if he could not resolve the dispute after talking with government officials and shareholders. He did not, however, make any suggestion that the sacked workers be reinstated.

Samoan doctors strike enters fourth week

Samoan government doctors are continuing strike action to demand a higher starting salary and in defiance of government strikebreaking. The doctors walked out on September 10 and are only attending emergency cases.

The Prime Minister's office issued a statement on October 4 confirming that 20 New Zealand doctors would soon arrive in Apia, the country's capital. Health Minister Mulitalo Siafausa Vue later contradicted this statement, claiming that the government was attempting to get United Nations volunteers to "help out" during the strike. The government has flatly refused to negotiate a new wage deal for doctors but has established a commission of inquiry. It is due to issue a report around mid-October.



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