

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 October 2005

Asia

South Korean dump truck drivers strike

About 6,000 unionised dump truck drivers in South Korea went on strike on October 13 to demand the government subsidise fuel costs and improve working conditions. They are also calling for a better job status, labor rights and other benefits for owner-drivers on contract to cargo companies. This is the second strike by the drivers in the past five months.

Police issued a series of provocative statements even before the drivers' industrial action began, warning that they would take "stern action" against so-called "illegal activities". South Korean police are infamous for violently attacking workers protests.

The drivers' union is affiliated with the Korea Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions, an affiliate of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions.

Teachers in Sri Lanka's North and East protest

Teachers in Sri Lanka's war-ravaged North and East regions began a sick note campaign on October 5 over 25 demands. They want services reestablished at schools in High Security Zones occupied by the Sri Lankan military, the removal of army bunkers near school buildings, Eastern University's Vaunia campus to be made a separate institution and all education service vacancies filled. They are threatening to take indefinite strike action on October 24 if their demands are not granted.

In a separate dispute, hundreds of teacher trainers and acting principles picketed the education ministry in Battaramulla on the outskirts of Colombo on October 6, which is world teachers' day. They want a proper teacher trainer service established and acting principals given fulltime positions.

Sri Lankan free trade zone workers strike

A strike by 500 factory workers from the Biyagama Free Trade Zone (FTZ), about 25 kilometres from Colombo, has entered its second week. The workers walked out on October 4 to demand reinstatement of a colleague who was arbitrarily suspended.

The factory, which is owned by Pakistani investors, produces rubber gloves for the international market. The strikers are maintaining a round-the-clock picket at the FTZ entrance. According to reports, management has boycotted meetings called by the Labour Department to discuss the dispute.

Health workers protest for job security

On October 10, contract and casual health workers marched from Colombo National Hospital to Temple Trees, the prime minister's residence in the city, to demand the government confirm their jobs.

Armed riot police, accompanied by trucks with water cannons, blocked the march about 300 metres from the residence, allowing only a small delegation of workers to present a memorandum. The marchers held a sit-down protest condemning police interference.

Sri Lankan veterinary officers impose work bans

Veterinary officers in Sri Lanka's North Central province imposed work bans on October 10 to demand outstanding holiday pay, an end to salary anomalies, the provision of staff quarters and a language proficiency and

hardship allowance for officers in remote areas.

The bans have blocked the issuing of animal health certificates, implementation of animal husbandry development projects and supervisory and coordination activities. Keerthi Kumara, State Veterinary Officers Union North Central branch secretary, has warned that the officers will strike on November 1 if their demands are not met.

Junior doctors strike in Madhya Pradesh

A strike by junior doctors at five government medical colleges and a dental college in the Indian state of Madhya Pradesh has entered its second week, paralysing health services in major cities across the state. The doctors, who are also holding a hunger protest, walked out on October 3 over five demands, including a reduction in college fees and for a pay rise.

The strike has affected many hospitals, with Hamidia Hospital management discharging all indoor patients and suspending new admissions.

Contract power workers demand permanency

More than 300 contract workers at the state-owned Srisailem Left Bank Power Station in Hyderabad, in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, held a sit-down protest on October 7 to secure permanency. They have been employed at the underground hydro power station for 12 years.

Indian coop workers want improved benefits

Cooperative workers held a fasting protest outside the legislative assembly in Pondicherry in southern India on October 6 to demand recognition as government employees, establishment of a welfare board and the removal of salary structure anomalies.

Government school lecturers employed on hourly basis also began a sit-down protest at the assembly on the same day to demand permanency.

Indonesian workers demand increase in minimum wage

Hundreds of members of the West Java Nusantara Workers Union protested outside the city hall and provincial council building in Bandung, Indonesia on October 12. They are campaigning for a 100 percent rise in the minimum wage and called on Governor Danny Setiawan to establish a new minimum standard.

The union contends that the current minimum wage does not match cost of living increases and says that workers need an extra 642,000 rupiah (\$US64.2) per month. Current minimum wages in West Java officially range from 601,000 to 635,000 rupiah with many workers forced to borrow money to pay for basic needs.

Hong Kong Disney workers want better conditions

The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions met with Honk Kong Disneyland management Don Robinson on October 5 to discuss 167 complaints from Disney staff. The complaints are over the extremely long working hours, inadequate overtime rates and chaotic shifts of between 11 and 13 hours a day. Frontline staff, who are on their feet most of the day, say their breaks are insufficient. None of the Disney employees are unionised.

On October 11, former Hong Kong Disneyland employee Gavin Quertin scaled the roof of the theme park's Space Mountain attraction and

threatened to commit suicide to protest his dismissal. He was eventually removed by police. Quertin claimed he was arbitrarily sacked following arguments with co-workers.

Philippines union leader arrested

Philippines mining union leader Vincent Dalem was arrested on October 3 and charged with robbery with violence and intimidation after a police officer accused him of theft. Dalem was one of 19 union officials sacked by the Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company for leading a three-month dispute.

The police officer claimed that Delam stole his mobile phone during a scuffle as police tried to break up a protest rally on July 23 at the Lepanto mine gate. The union has denied the charges, declaring that it would have been impossible to steal the phone because Delam, along with other workers, was being hit with police batons at the time. Delam was granted bail on 150,000 pesos (\$US2,687).

Australia and the Pacific

James Hardie employees defend conditions

More than 240 workers at James Hardie (JH) in Brisbane, Queensland walked out on October 13 after negotiations over workplace agreements stalled. They are opposing the company's attempt to establish separate agreements; one for staff employed at JH's building products plant at Carole Park, west of Brisbane, and another for those at its pipe manufacturing facility at Meander, east of the city.

The Australian Workers Union, which covers the JH employees, said that the separate agreements will inevitably "erode [workers'] bargaining power". It warned that the company had indicated that it plans to cut penalty rates by up to 30 percent.

Western Power workers impose bans

Linesmen employed by Western Power in Perth and throughout Western Australia voted to impose bans, including on wet weather work, late last week. The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union members have taken the health and safety action as part of their campaign for higher wages and a new enterprise agreement.

The linesmen are concerned about the danger of working with electricity in rainy conditions and warned that the wet weather gear supplied by the company is inadequate and dangerous.

Social workers to protest

The Community and Public Sector Union has called a rally of public sector social workers in Perth, Western Australia on November 2, over inadequate staffing levels and poor resources in their respective departments. Employees are particularly concerned about the lack of staff and resources at the Department for Community Development.

The social workers want workloads reduced and an increase in staffing levels, including the employment of at least 50 permanent child protection workers. They have demanded that the new employees be properly trained before being sent into the field.

New Zealand social workers step up pay campaign

More than 2,000 social workers and support staff from the New Zealand Department of Child Youth and Family began further industrial action this week. Public Service Association members at the department's 55 offices, call centres and residences had earlier struck for 24 hours.

A two-hour walkout on October 13 will be followed by 24-hour action on October 20 and a 48-hour strike on October 26. Bans have been placed on overtime and after-hours work. The workers are also withholding data and information.

Most of the staff have not had a pay increase since 2001. Social workers will be receiving 20 percent less than other health sector workers when a recently negotiated new pay deal for the latter is ratified.

NZ employer calls police into pay dispute

A pay dispute at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) laminated veneer plant in Whangarei has deepened. More than 40 police with paddy wagons confronted a delegation of workers and union officials when they arrived

for negotiations at the plant on October 11. About 200 workers have been on strike since September 23, after negotiations for a collective employment agreement stalled.

Last week about 100 strikers marched to the CHH head office in Auckland. The company refused to meet them, but gave the union a letter stating that management wanted to resume talks immediately. The company, however, demanded an immediate return to work before negotiations could begin.

The workers' claims include a 5 percent pay rise this year and shift and meal allowances. They have been offered a two-year agreement with a 3 percent rise this year and another 3 percent next year, contingent on them giving up a six-year long-service leave provision.

Manufacturing workers suspended

A strike at Southward Engineering in Wellington has entered its fourth week. The 36 workers are seeking a 5 percent pay increase and have been suspended. Six other employees who were stood down for refusing to do the work of their suspended colleagues have been temporarily reinstated while the Employment Court reviews the legality of the management's action. The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union has agreed to enter mediation over the dispute.

NZ casino workers strike

Casino employees at Sky Riverside in Hamilton walked off the job on October 6 over stalled pay negotiations. Members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), they are demanding pay parity with Sky City Auckland casino workers who earn an average \$2 an hour more. Negotiations over eight days have failed to produce a settlement with the employer refusing to budge on the issue of pay parity.

The SFWU has a collective agreement with Sky City Auckland and is negotiating the first such agreement at Sky Riverside. Sky City also owns casinos in Adelaide and Darwin.

Fiji power unions call off strike

On October 7, unions representing over 400 employees at the Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) cancelled a planned national strike following a meeting with management. The Fiji Electricity Allied Workers Union (FEAWU) and the Fiji Electricity Workers Association (FEWA) signed a memorandum of understanding with FEA which included wage increases sought by the unions.

Not all issues, however, have been resolved. The FEWA will continue talks in arbitration and the FEWA will hold direct negotiations with FEA management.

PNG teachers boycott classes

Teachers in the Papua New Guinea province of West New Britain began boycotting classes on October 10. The teachers are protesting outstanding leave fares dating back to 2000. PNG Teachers Association president Charles Loke said the amount owing was 270,000 kina (\$US90,000).

The teachers said they would maintain the boycott until the issue is resolved. If the dispute continues 10,000 students could sit exams next week unsupervised.

Garment workers face job losses

About 400 garment workers at Express Manufacturing in Saipan (capital of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands—CNMI) were told on September 29 that the factory would close by December. The announcement came on the same day that another garment factory Winners Corp., announced that it would shut by year's end. The company employs 350 people.

Four local garment factories closed this year, citing new trade rules and loss of US markets to manufacturers based in countries with even lower wages. Some employees believe that the companies could be moving to Vietnam where wages are cheaper than in Saipan.

The CNMI garment industry employed 22,000 workers in early 2005 but over 3,000 jobs have been slashed since then.

No end in site for Samoan doctors

The month-long Samoan public doctors' strike is expected to continue for another four weeks after the deadline for a report back from a government commission of inquiry into the doctors' grievances was extended from October 7 to October 21. The striking doctors are surviving on donations from family and friends.

The doctors want improved wage rates and an entry-level salary of \$US11,000. The government is refusing to increase its July 1 offer of \$US 9,314, rising to \$10,930 by July 2007.

Mine workers protest sackings

Mine workers in New Caledonia are blockading three mines owned by SLN, a subsidiary of Eramet, a French metals company. The workers, members of the CST union, are protesting the sacking of four of their colleagues. Eramet is threatening to fire anyone participating the blockade.



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