

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 November 2005

Asia

Army involved in murder of Philippines union leader

Police investigating the murder of union leader Ricardo Ramos on September 26 have named two soldiers from the Philippines Army 7th Infantry Division as “probable suspects”. Witnesses said that the two soldiers were seen in the neighbourhood looking for Ramos a few days before he was gunned down in his backyard.

Ramos was president of the Central Azucarera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU) and played a key role in the 11-month dispute at the Hacienda Luitita plantation and sugar mill, owned by the family of former President Corazon Aquino. Witnesses said the murderer was wearing army camouflage.

Twelve workers and two children were killed and 200 seriously injured on November 16 last year when 1,000 police and military were mobilised to break up a picket at the plantation.

Ramos was shot while celebrating the end of the dispute along with other union delegates. His murder is the latest in a series of high-profile killings of left activists which human rights advocates say is part of a military-backed campaign aimed at silencing government critics and quelling dissent.

Francisco Rivera, an activist with the Bayan Muna (Nation First) party, and two close friends were gunned down recently while jogging. Diosdado Fortuna, Nestlé union president and chairman of the regional branch of Kilusang Mayo Uno (May First Movement), was murdered in September while on his way home from a picket at the Swiss-based company.

According to the Manila-based group Alliance for the Advancement of Human Rights, there have been more than 116 political murders in the Philippines this year, all of them still unsolved.

To minimise popular dissent over Ramos’s murder President Gloria Arroyo ordered a Philippines National Police inquiry. Meanwhile, chief police investigator Senior Superintendent Perfecto Palad requested the removal of 18 army troops from the area, following complaints from local residents and witnesses that the soldiers were intimidating them.

Korean bank workers strike for pay increase

About 2,000 KorAm Bank Union members at Citibank Korea went on strike for 24 hours on November 2. The action closed down services at a third of the bank’s 253 branches. Citibank Korea was established last November in a merger between US financial giant Citigroup’s South Korean unit and KorAm, then South Korea’s seventh largest lender.

On November 3, bank workers placed bans on selling investment and insurance. They have banned processing household loan applications since October 24. KorAm Bank Union vice chairman Lee Yong-ha warned the industrial action could be stepped up “unless the bank shows some attitude changes”.

The union, which represents about half the Citibank workforce, is seeking a 9.4 percent increase in workers’ monthly wages, performance-based incentives and a better retirement package. It claims that no progress has been made in wage negotiations since they began in mid-

August.

The remainder of Citibank’s staff, who are covered by a separate union and work agreement, did not join the strike.

Protest in Taiwan over beating of migrant workers

On October 27, migrant workers and human rights groups in Taiwan protested outside the Council of Labor Affairs (CLA) to demand that it make public its investigation into the beating of four Filipino workers as they were being deported in early August.

The men were previously employed at the Formosa Plastics Group plant in Maliao, Yunlin County. Civil rights groups allege that the four were assaulted because they led a strike on July 14 and 15 over the working conditions in Formosa Plastics’ Maliao plant and illegal pay deductions. The CLA, however, is claiming that because the beatings occurred as the men were being taken to the airport for deportation to the Philippines, it is unable to determine who was responsible.

Nine Chinese workers killed by gas leak

Nine workers died on October 26 when gas leaked from a power converter at the Shoudu Iron and Steel Group plant in Beijing. The three female and six male employees were found unconscious on the floor near the converter, which produces gas to heat the plant. They all died later in hospital. The company is one of the largest steel makers in China.

Miners killed in Philippines cave-in

At least 18 Filipino miners were killed on October 26 in an explosion at a gold mine at Mount Diwalwal, in the Compostela Valley. JB Mining operated the shaft.

JB management has refused to allow provincial officials, a doctor or law enforcement officers to enter the mine to establish the cause of the explosion or the numbers killed and injured. A survivor claimed that about 50 miners were working at the time of the blast and that the men were trapped more than 850 metres underground. On November 1, rescuers reported they were prevented from reaching any potential survivors because of toxic fumes.

Indian construction workers demand improved conditions

Construction workers demonstrated on October 31 outside government offices in Salem, in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, to demand improvements in their conditions. Their demands included a 2,500-rupee bonus (\$US50) to compensate for days when there is no work and the provision of rent-free housing. They also called for increased staffing in the State Construction Workers Welfare Board to ensure that registrations, renewals and payment of welfare entitlements are carried out efficiently.

Mini-taxi workers protest attack on union leader

Mini-taxi workers demonstrated outside the press club in the Hyderabad market area on October 25 to protest over the assault on the Mini-Taxi Workers Union president Waqar Hyder. The union claims that Hyder was shot at when he exchanged “hot words” with extortionists. Union general secretary Mohammad Naqi said extortionists often demanded money from taxi drivers. Even though a complaint over the assault was lodged at the local police station, the accused have not been arrested. Drivers are demanding the immediate arrest of the assailants.

Two workers die in pit collapse

Two labourers were buried on October 26 when a pit collapsed as they were laying drainage lines in Vadodara, in the western Indian state of Gujarat. The two men, 50-year-old Ramesh Patel, and 30-year-old Lalabhai, were eventually pulled from the pit by the fire brigade but they were pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital.

The Vadodara Municipal Council has attempted to deflect blame for the accident, claiming that the private contractor who had been awarded the job had sole responsibility for safety. C.R. Kharsan, the deputy municipal commissioner, stated: "We will have to go through the contract details, but usually no action is taken against the contractor." The most the deceased men's families can expect in compensation is that the employer will pay for their funeral and make a one-off payment.

In another incident, Ravinder Kumar, a 28-year-old worker at a sewerage treatment plant in Raipur Kalan, a village near Chandigarh, died after falling into a five-metre ditch while repairing a pipe on October 25. The police have accused his Mumbai-based employer, Chemical Process Equipment Private Limited, of failing to provide safe working conditions and of negligence causing death.

Three die in factory explosion in Pakistan

Three workers, Mohammad Qasim, Arshad and Kashif, were killed in an explosion at a powder-milk manufacturing factory in Sheikhpura, Pakistan, on October 30. They were doing welding work when a gas cylinder exploded. Seven other workers were injured by the blast and some are reported to be in a critical condition. The explosion blew the factory roof off. Police are charging the factory owner.

Australia and the Pacific

Sydney confectionery workers to strike over wages

About 20 members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) at the Ferrero confectionery plant in Lithgow, west of Sydney, are taking further industrial action. Employees had previously walked off the job for two days in October over a new wages and conditions agreement. The workers voted this week to reject a 3.5 percent annual rise for the next three years and gave 72 hours notice they would strike on November 3 for a week.

Western Australian electricity workers threaten strike over contractors

Electricity workers at the state-owned energy utility Western Power, in Western Australia, have threatened to strike if the company employs contractors for some of its core in-house work. The threat follows revelations in a leaked letter of Western Power's intention to use contractors to deal with a "work overload".

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) described Western Power's plan as "privatisation by stealth". A CEPU spokesperson told the press that "workers are absolutely prepared to take industrial action over this".

Building workers could face fines for attending rally

A recent statement by the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) commissioner John Lloyd raises the possibility that building workers who attend the upcoming November 15 rally against the Howard government's new industrial relations laws may face individual fines of up to \$22,000.

The Howard government-appointed official told the press at the end of October that the ABCC would investigate the possibility of fining workers if it received a complaint from their employer. Building workers are expected to attend the November 15 nationwide action and in many cases it will lead to the closure of building sites. According to the ABCC, employers could claim that the action was "industrially motivated".

Lloyd warned that the ABCC investigates all complaints made to it. "The November 15 action will be investigated. Prosecution action would be taken where it was judged to be warranted," he said.

New Zealand plastics workers strike over pay

Fifty-six workers from O'Brien Plastics in Auckland went on strike last

week after the company refused to pay the industry standard pay increase of 5 percent, with another 3.5 percent to 4 percent in 15 months' time. Workers are resisting the company's attempt to abandon the plastics industry multi-employer collective agreement that it has been party to for some years. O'Brien Plastics manufactures electrical components and farm equipment.

Air NZ engineers protest job losses

Air New Zealand aircraft engineers and their families turned out on October 29 to protest the impending closure of the national carrier's heavy engineering facility in Auckland. The closure of the facility, which services long haul aircraft, will cost 600 jobs. The protest at Auckland International Airport was timed to coincide with the arrival of the company's first new-generation Boeing B777 OKA aircraft.

Air NZ recently announced plans to send all heavy maintenance work overseas. It claims that the lower maintenance requirement on new planes in their first few years of service is one reason for the move. The company is also losing work from overseas airlines to larger and cheaper servicing centres in Europe and Asia.

While promoting the demonstration at the airport, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has no plans to fight the sackings, which are due to start before Christmas. It has promised only to seek "consultation" with the company over the job losses.

New Zealand welfare agency workers strike over pay

Over 300 Child Youth and Family (CYF) staff participated in a two-day nationwide strike last week in support of a pay claim. Workers picketed the newly-opened Youth Justice Facility at Rolleston, near Christchurch. Striking CYF staff in Wellington demonstrated outside parliament and those in Auckland and Hawkes Bay rallied outside their workplaces.

Last-ditch mediation failed to avert the strike. Social workers in CYF have been offered less than those in the health sectors, while administrative and clerical workers have been made an offer that does not match the rate of inflation. A union spokesperson said frontline workers earning between \$10.60 and \$12.60 were being offered rises of just 3 percent, at a time when public sector CEOs are getting salary increases of 15 percent. The inflation rate is running at 3.4 percent.

Stranded workers to be repatriated from Nauru

Over 1,000 Kiribati and Tuvuluan workers and their families will soon be repatriated after being stranded on Nauru for several years. The workers were previously employed in Nauru's once thriving phosphate industry, which has virtually closed down. Many of the workers from the other Pacific Islands are owed large sums in unpaid wages and have not had sufficient funds to pay for their passage home. The Taiwanese delegation at the recent Pacific Forum in Port Moresby agreed to pay the repatriation expenses.

Phosphate mining has rendered a large percentage of the land on Nauru unusable and destroyed native plants and wildlife habitation. The tiny island state is now impoverished. Although the government placed a percentage of mining royalties in long-term investments to prepare for when the phosphate reserves became exhausted, a large part of the returns were used as collateral for loans. Other investments were unsuccessful.

Samoan doctors remain on strike

Striking doctors in the Samoan public health system will remain on strike after an unfavourable report by the government's commission of enquiry into their grievances. The doctors, who are seeking an increase in the commencing salary of new applicants and improved working conditions, said the report was vague on whether their demands would be met. They will now wait for a ruling from cabinet on the report's recommendations.

PNG nurses end strike

Nurses at the Nonga Base Hospital in the Papua New Guinean province of East New Britain returned to work on October 30, ending a 12-day strike. Their decision to end the dispute followed the temporary stand-

down of the hospital's chief executive and chairman of the board by Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann. The nurses had demanded that the executive positions be reclassified and that the hospital board and management be removed.

Fiji hotel workers lodge strike notice

The Fiji Hotel and Catering Workers Union lodged a 28-day strike notice on October 30 with the Ministry of Labour. Union general secretary Timaco Naivaluwaqa said talks are continuing with hoteliers to solve an impasse over pay issues and the failure of the hotels to deduct union dues from employees' pay.

Saipan workers stand to lose unpaid wages

Former workers at garment manufacturer La Mode on the island of Saipan, in the Northern Mariana Group, stand to lose a significant portion of the money that is still owing to them after the company declared itself bankrupt. Last July, 121 workers sued La Mode in Saipan's federal court for alleged illegal termination of employment, unpaid wages and overtime, and illegal wage deductions. Some 300 workers are owed \$US340,000 in unpaid wages alone. The Labor department collected \$329,000 from La Mode but does not expect to get the remaining money.



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