

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 November 2005

## Government workers strike in Uttar Pradesh

More than 400,000 state government workers began a two-day strike in Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, on November 8. They are demanding the Samajwadi Party state government honour assurances it made to workers' representatives on January 10 and March 13 this year. The government promised to make 50 percent of workers' Dearness Allowance (DA) part of basic salary effective from April 1, 2004, and not from April 1, 2005 as it later decided.

Strikers have accused the government of trying to divide them by transferring militants in various departments to the neighboring state of Uttaranchal.

## Pensioners join government employees' protest campaign

Causal workers employed in various government departments in the northeast Indian state of Manipur are continuing a relay hunger strike at the Keishampat junction in the state capital Imphal. The protest entered its third week on November 9 and involves workers from the education, fisheries, revenue, horticulture and soil conservation, power, agriculture, commerce and industry ministries.

The hunger strike is part of a campaign begun by government workers on October 19 to demand the regularisation of their employment.

The protestors were joined by members of the Manipur State Pensioners' Union on October 24, who want their Dearness Relief Allowance increased to that of neighboring states. A pensioners' union's press statement claimed that while Chief Minister Okram Ibobi Singh had ignored their demands, his government had increased legislative assembly members pay to 50,000 rupees (\$US1,000) from August this year.

## Media workers rally for new pay board

Newspaper and news agency workers in India's Punjab state observed November 7 as a "black day". Wearing black badges they rallied outside of the *Tribune* newspaper office in the state capital Chandigarh. They are demanding a new wage board and interim relief for news agency workers.

A delegation from the All-India Newspaper Employees Confederation submitted a memorandum with their demands to the Punjab state governor to be forwarded to Indian Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and the Labour and Employment Minister Shri K. Chandrasekhar Rao.

Union leaders claim that many newspapers had still not implemented the recommendations of the previous Manisana Wage Board and that a new wage board was a constitutional right.

## University workers protest

Temporary employees at India's Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) protested outside of the university's head office at Manasagangotri on November 5 to demand graded pay scales and the regularisation of their services.

Having called off an earlier strike in October, following promises by the KSOU officials that their demands would be met, the employees are now threatening to ban office work unless the issues are resolved.

## Sri Lankan development assistants demand teaching jobs

Development assistants in Sri Lankan national schools picketed the Fort railway station in central Colombo on October 30 to demand their

appointment as teachers. Around 2,400 teaching graduates were recruited as development assistants a few months ago.

After picketing for about an hour the workers marched to the Ministry of Finance. When police blocked the march, four workers went ahead to present a memorandum of their demands to the ministry. They have accused the authorities of using them as teachers during the day and watchmen at night.

## Riot police disperse protest march

More than 3,000 workers at a factory of Italian sofa maker DeCoro in Shenzhen, China took to the streets on November 2, after 10 of their colleagues were beaten by their Italian supervisors during a dispute over pay cuts. During the protest angry workers marched from the factory in Pingshan Industrial Zone to a major highway shouting, "Stop violence, restore justice and protect our human rights". Riot police armed with shields and clubs later dispersed the workers.

The beatings occurred after the sacking of ten workers in October for confronting management over pay cuts. When the sacked workers tried to re-enter the factory on November 1, they were surrounded and assaulted by five foreign supervisors. Three of the workers were hospitalised.

## Factory fire kills six in Zhejiang

Six workers at the Kejainshun Shoe Plant were killed when the factory caught fire on November 2 in Wenzhou, a leading manufacturing base in China's eastern Zhejiang Province. A fire brigade spokesman said that a high density of flammable gas released by combustible shoemaking materials and poor ventilation in the workshop probably was to blame for the blaze.

The factory was operating without a license so doors and windows were kept locked at all times making it extremely difficult for workers to escape the fumes and fire. Three other workers were hospitalised.

## Filipino mining unions to sue over retrenchments

Over 100 mine workers at the Lapanto Consolidated Mining Company (LCMC) have been told they are to be retrenched by mid-December. LCMC management claimed the company was running at a loss. It blamed "high" wages and a three-month strike by 1,600 workers at the mine for the financial problems.

However, regional spokesman for mining union Kilusang Mayo Uno (KLU), James Tulipa, said that the retrenchments were a retaliatory action by the company against those workers who participated in the strike. He said management were recruiting workers on contract and at the same time retrenching union activists. He claimed that the company was ignoring a Supreme Court ruling that seniority must apply when retrenching workers. Lepanto Employees Union president Christopher Bautista said the union would file charges against the company for illegal dismissal.

## Power station workers strike

Workers employed by coal handler MPA at the Millmerran power station near Toowoomba in Queensland went on strike on November 9 after contract negotiations stalled. The 28 electricians, labourers, and metal workers no longer want to be employed on individual Australian

Work Place Agreements (AWA) and are demanding a collective bargaining agreement.

Under the AWAs, working hours have been increased to 42 hours a week, well above the standard 38 and 36-hour week currently applicable to workers under award conditions. Shell and Bechtel have a controlling share in the \$1.5 billion Millmerran power station.

#### **Construction workers walk out**

More than 400 construction workers on the Perth to Mandurah Rail Project being built by the Leighton Kumagai consortium in Western Australia walked off the job for 48 hours after a Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) official was ordered off the site.

The official was attempting to speak to six subcontractors working on the project.

Management claimed that the union official had failed to comply with restrictive new right-of-entry laws introduced by the Howard Government's Australian Building and Construction Commission.

After learning of the eviction, the construction workers called a mass meeting and voted to strike in defense of the union's right of entry.

#### **Train drivers call snap strike**

Train drivers in Perth, Western Australia called a snap strike on the morning of November 9 and held a stop-work meeting to discuss a new workplace agreement offer by the Public Transport Authority (PTA) which undermines working conditions.

The three-hour stoppage effectively closed down the rail network in the metropolitan area. The drivers decided to walkout after PTA refused to allow them to hold a sanctioned stop-work meeting scheduled for November 11. Further action over the issues may be taken.

#### **New Zealand paper-mill workers strike**

Over 270 production workers at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH)-owned Kingleith pulp and paper mill near Tokoroa in New Zealand struck for 48 hours on November 7 over an inadequate pay offer and company plans to cut holidays.

The workers have been offered a 4 percent pay rise this year, with another 3 percent next year. An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) spokesman said that with the average pay rise this year being 5 percent and with inflation heading to 3.5 percent, the offer was "not good enough". The company also wants to reduce shift workers' annual leave by a week.

The EPMU boasts that the last enterprise agreement it negotiated two years ago had allowed the company to boost productivity by 35 percent. Despite this, the union is restricting its wage demand to just 5 percent with no loss of conditions. It claims this would be "a fair settlement".

#### **New Zealand health workers settle pay talks**

Nurses employed by the Nurse Maude Association in Canterbury have settled a long-running pay dispute. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), representing 200 staff at Nurse Maude, has been involved in negotiations since April. NZNO members have now voted to accept a backdated 3 percent pay rise offer as part of a deal which runs until next April. The NZNO says it will continue lobbying the government over the issue of pay parity for non-District Health Board (DHB) nurses such as Nurse Maude's staff.

Meanwhile, the NZNO is calling for recently received 2005-06 government funding for DHBs to be made available for wage increases in the aged-care sector. DHBs have offered 3 percent to aged-care providers with an additional 1 percent for holiday pay. According to the NZNO, some profitable providers can afford to pay more and the certainty of the funding means they could offer 4 to 5 percent increases now.

#### **New Zealand special education staff accept pay deal**

New Zealand special education staff in schools and early childhood education centres voted last week to accept a new collective agreement with pay rises of up to 18 percent. The agreement covers 700 special education field staff working for the Ministry of Education. Workers

recently attended 30 meetings organised throughout the country by the NZ Educational Institute where 77 percent voted to accept the new agreement.

The key elements are a new salary scale with increases in base pay rates of between 9.7 percent and 10.9 percent phased in over three years, transferal to a new pay scale leading to pay rises ranging to 18 percent, a new general maximum pay step of \$67,800 and a new maximum pay step for psychologists of \$74,500.

Those covered by the agreement include, psychologists, physiotherapists, special education advisors, speech language therapists, occupational therapists, early intervention teachers, advisers on deaf students and those who work with Maori students. Their students have a wide range of physical, behavioral and special educational needs.

#### **More industrial action at Fairfax NZ**

Workers at the Fairfax-owned *Hutt News* in Wellington walked out last week in protest over the company's sudden refusal to allow children into the workplace. The company had revoked a long-standing practice of staff on overtime being able to bring their children into the office. Workers are still engaged in an on-going pay dispute with the company which has seen strike action over the past two months at all the Fairfax community newspapers in the Wellington region.

#### **Fiji health workers strike**

Fiji Corporate Services staff in Suva walked off the job on November 4 protesting unhealthy conditions in their office. Union spokesman Joli Seruiratu said they were fed up with frequent electricity cuts to the building due to overloaded circuits. The building also had poor air conditioning and an overflowing sewerage system that was flooding the child healthcare clinic on the ground floor. Management has ignored repeated complaints by workers.

#### **New Caledonia miners maintain blockades**

Miners employed by SLN, a subsidiary of French metals company Eramet, are maintaining a three-week long blockade of three of the company's mines. The workers, members of the CST union, are protesting the sacking of four colleagues.

With only three weeks' of reserves left at the SLN smelter in Noumea, which uses Eramet ore, the company has drastically reduced output to avoid a catastrophic shutdown. Eramet is threatening to sack everyone employed at the blockaded mines.

#### **Samoan cabinet says no pay increase for doctors**

The Samoan cabinet is supporting a Commission of Inquiry recommendation not to raise the starting salary of government doctors, but agrees that benefits and working conditions should be improved.

Thirty government doctors have been on strike for over two months calling for higher wages and better working conditions. They are scheduled to respond to the cabinet's decision on November 10.

#### **French Polynesia hospital strike averted**

Twenty-four hours after hospital workers in Tahiti, Raiter and the Marqueses islands issued the government with a 7-day strike notice, Health Minister Pierre Frebault signed an accord with the union, details of which are not yet known.

Dozens of health workers had marched to the president's palace on November 6 to press their demand for better working conditions but Prime Minister Oscar Temaru would not commit the government to any more funding, declaring that savings had to be made.



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