

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Northern Luzon Command (NOLCOM) army officers stationed at the 6,000-hectare Hacienda Luicita sugar plantation arrested ten protesters, including a ten-year-old boy, on November 14 for allegedly carrying firearms and explosives to a picket line. Those arrested were later handed over to the Philippines National Police.

Several labour groups belonging to the Workers' Alliance in Region 3 (WAR3) and its general secretary Angie Ladera accused the army of planting the arms and explosives. She claimed that NOLCOM was attempting to create the conditions to justify an increase its numbers at the plantation.

Labour groups also believe that NOLCOM has been involved in the murder of 19 labour activists in and around the plantation over the last three months. The latest was on October 25 when unidentified assailants gunned down Central Azucarera de Tarlac union leader Ricardo Ramos.

A series of explosions at the No. 101 Chemical Plant in Jilin City in northeastern China on November 13 killed one worker and injured 70. Five employees remain missing and 20 have been hospitalised. About 10,000 residents were evacuated when a tower storing benzene burst into flames, sending toxic fumes across nearby residential districts.

On November 11, police arrested more than 6,000 casual and contract workers from the government-owned Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB). The workers were demonstrating and blockading roads to demand permanency or their employment regularised. Those arrested were released that evening.

About 22,000 contract workers are employed at TNEB on a casual and contractual basis and there are 20,000 vacant permanent-helpers positions that the company refuses to fill. So far, TNEB has appointed only 2,500 helpers who are paid 2,500 rupees (\$US50) per month.

A relay hunger strike by casual workers employed by the Manipur state government in northeast India entered its 16th day on November 11. An association representing the casual workers said that even though its members had between 5 to 15 years service, the government had refused to make them permanent. The hiring of large numbers of casual workers is part of the cost-cutting "neo-liberal" measures—such as zero budgeting and downsizing—being implemented by Indian state governments as they compete with each other to attract investment.

A protest by Manipur State Pensioners' Union members, who joined the government workers action at the Keishampat junction

in the state's capital Imphal, is also continuing. The pensioners have issued a charter of demands, including an increase in their Dearness Relief Allowance. The pensioners' union issued a statement deploring the "callous and irresponsible" attitude of the Manipur state government and said that even the small amount paid to pensioners was "repeatedly delayed by the banks and the state treasury".

Train drivers and other workers involved in manning locomotives at the federal government-owned Indian Railways held a day-long strike, followed by a torchlight demonstration outside the Central Railway Station in Chennai, the Tamil Nadu state capital, on November 10. They are members of the running-staff wing of the Southern Railway Mazdoor Union (SRMU).

They were demanding management reject Running Allowance Committee recommendations that allow management to appoint retired locomotive employees as temporary staff. Under conditions of continuing rail disasters, regular employees believe this will pave the way for even more accidents.

The SRMU claims the government is attempting to implement the recommendations before the All-India Railway Workers Federation meets in Mumbai next week to discuss the issue. The union warned the Railway Board that workers would take action without prior notice if it makes any such attempt.

State Bank of Patiala employees in the Punjab struck for one day on November 10 over a management decision to impose work changes without consultation. The striking workers marched and rallied outside the bank's regional office Ludhiana.

Employees oppose a management plan to establish currency administration cells at different centres and object to instructions that they should collect and accept cash from other branches without it first being counted. The bank workers believe they will be held responsible for any shortages and fake currency notes and are threatening indefinite strike action if the issues are not resolved.

On November 10, electricity meter readers and bill collectors in the south Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated outside Gescom corporate office in Gulbarga. They were protesting against the government's conversion of the former Karnataka State Electricity Board into the Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Limited (KPTCL). They regard the move, which involves the formation of five separate electricity supply companies or "escoms", as a step towards privatisation.

Gescom, which is one the five escoms, employed around 1,000 meter readers and bill collectors about 18 months ago on a contract

basis. The contracts, which are renewed every six months, contain stringent work regulations.

The workers are demanding retention of employment without the imposition of stricter work requirements, an increase in the monthly honorarium allowance to 5,000 rupees (\$US100) and a traveling allowance.

On November 11, Bangladeshi journalists staged a series of sit-down protests in major cities across the country in protest against government attacks on free speech.

The sit-down was followed by rallies where speakers accused the government of “undemocratic” and “fascistic” behavior for forcing the cancellation of the journalist unions’ national convention against repression. The protestors are members of the Bangladesh Federal Union of Journalists (BFUJ) and Dhaka Union of Journalists (DUJ).

Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers demonstrated in central Colombo for an hour on November 8 to demand reinstatement of the Joint Organisation of Telecom Trade Unions (JOTTU) president Anura Perera. Workers claim that Perera was suspended because the JOTTU complained to the government’s Presidential Investigating Unit over corruption and irregularities in SLT.

Engine room artificers, boatswains, tugboat crews and quartermasters in the harbour master section (navigation branch) of the Sri Lanka Port Authority began an overtime boycott on November 12. They are demanding a pay increase to address salary anomalies.

The Ports Authority declared the workers’ action illegal under the emergency regulations and threatened punishment and the Sri Lankan navy was called on to perform all overtime refused by the workers. Union leaders later called off the action declaring management had agreed to address the pay issue.

About 600 linesmen and maintenance workers at state-owned electricity provider Western Power in Western Australia will begin weekly 24-hour stoppages early next week if their pay demands are not met. The workers, members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union, will also impose work-to-rule and ban any duties above their pay classifications. They will also extend existing bans on after-hours work.

Australian Services Union members at the generating company could also place work bans in a campaign for a 25.5 percent pay rise over three years. Western Power workers are amongst the lowest paid electricity workers in the country with linesman and maintenance staff paid as little as \$A19 (\$US14) an hour.

Chemical manufacturer Orica agreed this week to improve safety at its construction site in Gladstone, Queensland following discussions with site delegates and occupational health and safety committee representatives. The 300 workers on site went on strike the previous week after some were exposed to nitric acid fumes due to lack of warning procedures.

An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union spokesman said there had been six safety incidents within two months at the site that required some workers to be hospitalised. Other issues included, inadequate training in the use of safety equipment and the need for an on-site rescue crew.

Ferry workers in Hokianga may take further industrial action if Impact Services Ltd does not meet their demands for better pay

and safer working conditions. The workers refused to collect fares for three days during the previous week as part of their campaign for a five percent pay increase, two hours pay per night if on standby and improved security conditions when handling money.

Over 370 former employees of Saipan-based garment manufacturer Sako Corporation have been told by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) that they have virtually no hope of obtaining the \$US1 million in damages awarded to them by the US District Court in September.

Sako closed down operations on the small Pacific island in March sacking the employees without paying back pay and other entitlements and leaving non-resident workers stranded on the island. The court ordered Sako to hand over to the EEOC enough assets to satisfy the \$1 million compensation ruling. Sako, however, had already sold its equipment and cleaned out its accounts. The EEOC reported there were no longer any assets that could be seized.

Almost 100 of the workers have been offered employment at another garment factory while the CNMI Department of Labor has given the non-resident workers 45 days to find jobs before being repatriated.

Public hospital doctors in Samoa resigned en-masse on November 15, after Prime Minister Tiulaepa Sailele ordered them to end a two-month strike and accept a Commission of Inquiry recommendation on their case or be dismissed.

The doctors wanted a salary increase for new recruits, salary adjustments across the board and improved conditions. While the government has accepted the inquiry recommendation to improve doctors’ working conditions it has refused approve any wage increase. Prime Minister Sailele said that the mass resignations would not force a salary rise.

CST union members at SLN, a subsidiary of French metals company Eramet, are defying New Caledonia court orders to remove a four-week long blockade of company mines. The protests are preventing ore reaching the SLN’s nickel smelter in Noumea. CST members are demanding the reinstatement of four sacked colleagues.

A Noumea court ruled last week that the union would be fined \$US1,000 for each day the protests continued.

A union umbrella group supporting the strike blocked several roads in the New Caledonian capital on November 14 causing major traffic jams. Union official Sylvain Nea said that the strike and blockade would be maintained until those who were dismissed are allowed to return to work.



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