

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 November 2005

Protesting farm workers massacred by army

Philippines Armed Forces members killed at least nine farm workers on November 21 at the Barangay San Agustin plantation, in Palo, Layte. Many more were injured and taken to hospital after soldiers strafed the tent where protesting workers had assembled.

The protestors held a peaceful vigil the night before to protest the landlord's refusal to implement the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program (CARP). This program mandates the issuing of certificates of ownership for individual plots to be distributed amongst farm workers.

A spokesman for the infantry battalion that carried out the killings claimed that the protesters were members of the National Peoples Army (NPA) and had opened fire first. But local spokesman Sarur Ocampo said that the protestors were unarmed members of a group called Bayan Muna (People First) and would have all benefited from the land distribution.

A Bayan Muna spokesman said that the army knew the protestors were not NPA members and that the planned protests had already been reported on the local radio station. While local authorities are still investigating no spent shells have been found in the demonstrators' tent and not a single soldier was injured.

After the massacre troops went to the Bayan Muna office in town looking for those who had escaped the shooting.

Workers in Indonesia demand higher pay

About 500 workers from the Cimahi industrial zone in Bandung, 130kilometres southeast of Jakarta, protested on November 17 outside the Cimahi regency council. They want the industrial zone administration to increase wages from 601,000 rupiah (\$US60) a month to 819,000 rupiah. They claim that higher fuel prices are making it harder for them to survive.

Indian university workers demand permanency

On November 18, workers from the Karnataka State Open University (KSOU) demonstrated in Mysore, the second city in the south Indian state. They want the KSOU to make all temporary workers permanent and a graded pay scale introduced and backdated to October 1 this year.

The temporary workers, who have been employed by KSOU since it opened in 1996, do more than 90 percent of the administrative work at the university and receive only meagre wages. The KSOU Temporary Employees' Association said its members serviced the needs of 100,000 students and helped the university earn a 600-million rupee income. A KSOU Registrar press release claimed that "technical difficulties" hindered the university granting permanency.

Indian hospital workers oppose privatisation

More than 5,000 workers employed in the cleaning, security and administration departments of federal hospitals in New Delhi went on strike on November 18. The group 3 and 4 category workers were opposing federal-government moves towards privatisation.

While the government called in emergency staff to break the strike, long queues still formed at federal government health scheme hospitals (CGHS) such as, Safdarjung, Ram Manohar Lohia and Lady Harding hospitals.

One striker claimed the government had hired private security personnel and some cleaners. "This would definitely affect us as we may lose our job in the near future. We have been serving the hospitals for years and want the government to listen to our concerns," he said.

Motor industry workers strike continues

An indefinite strike by 2,500 workers at Motor Industries Corporation (MICO) in Nashik, Maharashtra is continuing. The workers have been out since November 14 demanding a wage hike and confirmation of the jobs of 472 employees.

The company has turned to the state government and courts to help break the strike. The Deputy Labour Commissioner has accepted MICO's application claiming that the strike is illegal. The company is also appealing to the Industrial Court to take action to end the strike.

MICO is the flagship company of Bosch Group in India and a hub for exports to Germany and Korea. Its Nashik plant was established in 1972.

Manipur retired workers step up protests

India's Manipur state government is refusing to concede a three-point charter of demands to pensioners despite their 25-day sit down protest. The former state employees have now begun an around the clock relay hunger protest at Keishampat Junction in Imphal, the state capital.

The Manipur State Pensioners Union has said that the protest would continue until the government met its demands. This includes an increase in pensioners' Dearness Relief Allowance to bring it in line with that paid in neighboring states.

A union statement decried the "indifferent attitude of the government to the grievances of its retired employees", declaring that "vividly reflects the incompetence and inefficiency of those in power". The union has accused the government of "denying the constitutional rights of its retired employees".

Visually impaired teachers demand positions

Blind teachers in Karnataka protested outside the Government School for the Blind in Mysore on November 21. They are want trained blind teachers appointed as resource persons at the village councils, resource centres and in regular schools.

They want all posts reserved for handicapped people to be filled immediately and point out that several posts for the visually challenged are currently vacant. They are also seeking the appointment of visually challenged persons to D group posts in all 27 municipalities and village councils across the state. Federal and state governments have ignored their long-standing demands.

A number of students from the Helen Keller Blind Teachers' Training Centre joined the protest with support from the Rehabilitation Society of the Visually Challenged and Akhila Karnataka Andhara Kriya Samithi. The latter organisation also decided to observe International Handicapped Day on December 3 as a black day.

Factory workers in investment promotion zones strike

A strike by 84 workers at Coco Lands Ltd in the Gampaha District investment promotion zone in Sri Lanka entered its third week on November 16. The company exports coconut cream.

The workers went on strike after the Inter Company Union branch chairman Ranadeva De Silva was suspended on November 1. They are demanding his reinstatement, recognition of the union, confirmation of employment for casual workers who complete six months service and a 1,000 rupee (\$US10) increase in the monthly salary. Union members imposed bans on overtime and any extension of work shifts after the company discontinued the services of 49 casual workers.

In a separate dispute, workers at the Postrar Company in the Malwatte investment promotion zone in Thihariya went on strike on November 21 to demand the payment of overdue salaries. The workers also allege that the company has not paid employee provident funds for several years.

Health workers strike

Public and private health sector workers in Queensland walked off the job on November 24 to demand action over the state's ailing health system. Pathology workers, biomedical technicians and radiation health officers participated in the strike.

The state Labor government has failed to act on the results of an investigation by consultant Peter Forster into Queensland's troubled public health system. The review found that \$1.5 billion was needed to overcome a range of problems, including the provision of better student supervision and increased training.

In a separate dispute, members of the Queensland Nurses' Union at the Pindara and John Flynn private hospitals on Queensland's Gold Coast stopped work for two hours. The nurses are protesting over extended overtime, double shifts and the unfair use of on-call provisions. They are also demanding a new work agreement with improved working conditions and wages equal to public sector nurses.

New Zealand Starbucks stores hit by strikes

Fast food workers across Auckland walked off the job on November 23 to join a strike by Starbuck workers on the city's café strip in Karangahape Road. The citywide walkout erupted after it became known that managers would be brought in to cover the shifts of the striking Starbucks workers.

More than 30 employees walked out at 10 Auckland Starbucks stores and joined KFC, Pizza Hut and McDonalds employees and around 150 other supporters outside the Karangahape Road Starbuck outlet. The Starbuck workers continued their solidarity action despite being threatened with dismissal and given an hour to return to work.

The strike at Karangahape Road was called as part of a campaign over the poor working conditions and pay of minimum wage workers. Starbucks workers start on \$NZ10 an hour just fifty cents above the minimum wage. Workers' hours are not guaranteed and can be cut at the discretion of management from 40 to 20 hours. Workers are seeking a \$2 an hour increase.

A spokesman for the *supersizemypay.com* campaign said the workers are paid a poverty wage with no guaranteed hours despite the company making record yearly profits. The web site's campaign over poverty wages will be taken to the Grey Lynn festival and the Auckland Christmas Parade this weekend.

New Zealand quarantine officers plan strike

The union representing 500 New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) quarantine officers at international airports and ports have threatened to strike for 24 hours on December 2. The walkout will affect all international travel, shipping companies and importers.

The Public Service Association said it has been in negotiations over pay with MAF since March without any resolution. MAF is offering pay rises of up to 3.5 percent dependent on individual cases but the officers want a larger, across-the-board rise. The two sides entered mediation this week but if agreement is not reached, the strike will go ahead.

New Zealand kindergarten teachers vote on national strike

New Zealand kindergarten teachers attended stopwork meetings this week to consider a union proposal for a national day-long strike on

December 8. Talks between the NZ Educational Institute and the Education Ministry over an attack on the working conditions of 1,630 kindergarten teachers who care for 45,000 pre-school children have broken down.

The Ministry of Education, NZ Kindergartens Inc., and the Federation of Free Kindergartens are parties to the contract negotiations. They are refusing to recognise term breaks as provided for in schools while demanding an increase in contact time. They are also refusing to pay head and senior kindergarten teachers in accordance with recent pay parity agreements with schoolteachers.

Government funding changes mean employers will be able to keep their kindergartens open for 52 weeks a year. Most kindergarten teachers work with up to 90 children and families every day. Teachers claim that kindergarten terms should not exceed 11 weeks and the teaching year should not exceed 42 weeks.

The teachers are also expected to work a minimum of 40 hours per week. Of this, 25 hours is contact time but employers want this increased to 35 hours a week in full-day kindergartens and 30 hours a week in sessional centres. Teachers say that contact time should not exceed 26 hours in sessional kindergartens and 30 hours in full day kindergartens.

Papua New Guinea security guards strike

Security guards employed by Protect Security in PNG protested outside the company's Port Moresby office on November 23 to demand a one kina hourly wage increase (\$US0.33) to lift the hourly rate to two kina. They also want an overtime allowance for extra work and proper meals.

The workers said they are striking because each time they approached management on the issues they were told not to complain and then threatened with disciplinary action.

Another worker killed at the Emperor mine

Mine worker Sharveen Prasad, 22, was killed 600 metres underground on November 17 at the partially state-owned Emperor Gold Mining Company mine in Vatukoula, Fiji. Prasad suffered massive head injuries when an iron pipe crashed down the shaft in which he was working.

This is the second death at the mine this year. Another miner was crushed to death by a large rock that fell from the shaft roof. Two miners were killed last year in similar circumstances.

In an attempt to play-down the mine's bad safety record Lands and Mining Resources Minister Saminose Tikionasau made the preposterous claim in parliament this week that it was safe because "of the 1,689 accidents at the mine to date, only eight have resulted in deaths." The Emperor mine is exempt from Fiji's occupational health and safety laws.

The Mine Workers Union of Fiji did not call industrial action after the latest death, claiming that in the past, when the union gave notice to strike, the government declared it illegal and threatened the union with legal action.

New Caledonia nickel company re-hires sacked workers

Striking workers at New Caledonia's SLN nickel company have ended a four-week blockade of SLN's mines and its smelter, after the company agreed to reinstate two sacked workers. A tentative agreement between the company and the CSTNC union was signed at the French High Commission on November 21 after industrial action was increased over the last ten days to include blockades of city streets in Noumea, the capital.

Samoan doctors look for alternate work

The 25 government doctors who resigned en-masse on November 15 after their nine-week-long strike failed to resolve issues over pay and working conditions are providing free clinic services while they seek alternate employment. Doctors who are currently occupying government housing have been given four weeks to move out.

The doctors resigned when Samoan Prime Minister Tuilaepa Sailel threatened them with the sack if they did not return to work. For the past nine weeks, government hospitals have only been able to treat emergency

cases. It is estimated that following the doctors' resignations more than 500 patients will have to be sent to New Zealand for hospital treatment.

Supporters of the doctors have planned a public demonstration and march on the Government Building next week to demand the government re-hire the doctors and meet their demands.

Panel rules in favour of Solomon Islands plantation workers

The 16-month long strike by 1,000 plantation workers at Russell Islands Plantations Limited (RIPEL) on the Solomon Islands could be over by the end of the year, following a ruling by the Trade Disputes Panel on November 16. The panel supported the workers' demand for the removal of RIPEL's general manager, who they alleged mistreated them.

Australian investor and part owner of RIPEL International Comtrade Shipping Company had ignored repeated requests from other company partners for the dismissal of the general manager. Local partners in RIPEL are the Solomon Islands government, the Central Province, landowners and plantation workers.

Following the panel's ruling the government announced that it would be seeking a new foreign investor to reopen the rundown plantation.

French Polynesian social workers on strike

Over 100 French Polynesian social workers in Papeete, Tahiti walked off the job on November 22 after being snubbed by the Assembly Minister and when a meeting with the Solidarity Minister Patricia Jennings failed to resolve a staffing issue. Union representative Claudine Laugrost said, "The only person who came to talk to us was the minister's chief of staff who wanted to take the names of those on strike. It's incredible."

The workers want 51 new jobs created to ease the workload on the department's 200 staff. Laugrost said the social workers were handling twice the number of cases as their counterparts in France.

Unions in French Polynesia call for general strike

Six unions in French Polynesia are threatening to call a general strike next week over the government's fiscal reforms. The unions claim that the reforms are aimed at undermining the Centre for Pacific Studies (CPS) social security fund and are an attempt by the government to get its hands on the CPS's \$US500 million assets.



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