

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 December 2005

Death toll continues to rise in China mine disaster

An explosion at the Dongfeng Coal Mine, near the town of Qitaihe in China's Heilongjiang province on November 28 has claimed the lives of 150 workers. So far, rescuers have retrieved 148 bodies but fear for the lives of the 33 miners still missing. Two female employees on the surface were also killed when coal dust in the mine ignited. If the death toll reaches 163, as rescuers expect, the disaster will rank as the fifth worst in china's history.

China's coalmines are notoriously unsafe and on average claim 5,000 lives each year. Labor organisations are concerned that despite government claims that it is addressing safety in mines, the rate of large-scale accidents is increasing. Three such accidents causing multiple deaths have already occurred this year.

Civil servants in the Philippines campaign for back-pay

Five unions representing government employees in the Philippines are planning a campaign to force the payment of cost of living adjustments (COLA) owing from between 1989 and 1999. The campaign is based on a Supreme Court ruling in September that all Philippines Port Authority staff employed since 1989 are entitled to COLA back payments. The unions claim the ruling should apply to all public sector workers.

The unions involved are COURAGE, ACT-Negros, ACT-BA, the National Federation of Teachers and Employees Union (NAFTEU) and the Alliance of Health Workers.

Meanwhile, about 1,000 administrative staff and professors at the University of the Philippines' (UP) various campuses picketed for five days from November 21 protesting over unpaid COLA. The strikers, members of the All-UP Workers Alliance (AUPWA), have been demanding payments owed since 2001. The university administration claims the recent Supreme Court ruling applies only to workers in government-owned and controlled corporations. The AUPWA will consult its members on the next step in its campaign including participation in a national rally scheduled for December 7.

Plantation workers remain sacked as unions reach settlement

Negotiators representing plantation workers at the Hacienda Luisita said this week they expect pickets at the plantation gates to be dismantled before the end of the year when minor issues in the protracted dispute are resolved. Hacienda Luisita Incorporated is yet to agree to union proposals regarding the harvesting of remaining sugarcane at the plantation and for financial assistance for crop production for each United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU) chapter.

A statement by ULWU on November 28 said the seven-point agreement included the payment of wages and benefits due to permanent, seasonal and casual workers, retirement packages for 15 terminated permanent workers and the rehiring of 52 other workers.

The outcome, however, is far short of the ULWU's original demands. In February this year the union, representing over 5,000 farm workers, offered to reduce its pay claim and lower the number of guaranteed working days it was seeking. It also cut the number of dismissed workers to be reinstated from 327 to just 73, including eight union officials.

On November 16 last year, twelve workers and two children were killed and two hundred strikers seriously injured when 1,000 police and military were sent by the central government to break a picket at the plantation. In September this year, unknown assailants gunned down the president of the Central Azucarera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU) Ricardo Ramos. The union had also participated in the strike and the killing is widely believed to be the work of the military.

Bank workers strike again over wages and conditions

Unionised workers at Citibank Korea in South Korea went on strike again for two days on December 1. The workers are demanding the same pay and conditions as other Citibank employees. Two-thirds of the workforce at Citibank Korea are former KorAm Bank employees.

Merger of the two banks last November resulted in one set of working conditions for former KorAm workers and another for the existing Citibank workers. The company has so far refused to raise the working conditions of the former KorAm employees.

Union officials claim that despite several negotiating meetings they have not been able to narrow differences with the company. The first strike on November 2 involved 2,900 workers and closed operations at one third of the company's 253 bank branches.

Indonesian workers protest for higher basic wage

Thousands of factory workers from several Java provinces took to the streets on November 23 demanding the government raise the minimum wage. In Bandung over 1,000 angry workers angry knocked over and trampled the main gate to the West Java governor's office.

The Bandung government set the minimal monthly wage for 2006 for its region at 710,000 rupiah (\$US71), well below the 780,000 rupiah demanded by workers. While other regional governments are yet to announce the minimal wage decision for their areas, they usually follow the benchmark set in Bandung.

Teachers and school workers continue sit-down protest

State-aided teachers and school workers in Punjab, India are continuing a sit-down protest begun on November 19. They are demanding the state government implement a September 27 High Court direction granting pension rights. The protesters are also calling for the lifting of a ban on new recruitment and the inclusion of 50 percent of their dearness allowance in basic pay.

Manipur retired workers protest for improved benefits

Retired workers have been on a relay hunger protest at Keishampat junction in Imphal, the Manipur state capital since from November 19. They want an increase in pensions and the dearness allowance. This week, the Manipur State Pensioners Union issued another statement condemning the state government and its chief minister Ibobi.

The pensioners are also demanding the Joint Administrative Council of the All Manipur Trade Union Congress and the All Manipur Government Employees Organisation step up support for their dispute.

Sri Lankan health workers protest allowance cuts

Health workers at the Balangoda Base Hospital in Balangoda, Sabaragamuwa province began a picketing campaign on November 26.

The workers, including medical officers, nurses, attendants, clerks and drivers, were demonstrating against overtime, special government holidays and weekly rest allowance cuts. The protestors have threatened to strike if the cuts are not reversed.

Pakistani doctors strike over occupational safety

Around 450 house officers (doctors) at the Civil Hospital in Karachi went on strike on November 20, following the death of Dr Yusra Afaq from hemorrhagic fever.

The doctors have been calling on hospital authorities to provide adequate facilities and precautionary apparatus, including gloves and masks, for some time. They will not resume duties until these measures are in place and an isolation ward for patients with viral fever is established.

A considerable number of viral fever patients have been admitted to Karachi hospitals during the recent period. According to the Aga Khan University Hospital, 41 patients with viral hemorrhagic fever were admitted to the hospital from October 2 to November 23.

Rail workers stood down

Pacific National freight stood down rail workers in Broken Hill and Parks in western New South Wales and at Port Augusta in South Australia this week. Management claimed that the 24-hour stand-down was caused by a rail dispute in Western Australia (WA) which brought intra-state freight to standstill. The workers are members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU).

The WA dispute is part of a national campaign by Pacific National freight drivers for a new work agreement, including a 17 percent pay rise over 3 years, with 2 percent paid into their superannuation fund. Management has dismissed the claim as "unreasonable".

University staff reject pay offer

About 400 staff at the University of Ballarat have rejected an 18 percent pay offer as part of a new wages and conditions agreement.

The National Tertiary Education Union is concerned that the package contains a proposal for 4 percent of the wage increase to be made contingent on the amount of federal government funding and additional revenue from international students.

New Zealand KFC staff to strike

Workers at Auckland's Balmoral KFC plan to strike for two hours on December 3 to protest low pay rates. Young workers earning as little as \$7.13 (\$US5) an hour were among those who voted to strike. A spokesman for the Unite union said a contract offer by owner Restaurant Brands did not include a pay rise or the removal of youth rates. The company's intends to spend millions upgrading 98 KFC stores nationwide.

The strike highlights the exploitation of youth workers whose pay rates are based solely on age. About 60 percent of Balmoral store staff are under 18 years. KFC pay the starting legal minimal rate of \$9.50 to workers 18-years-old or over. The hourly rate spirals downwards for younger workers with 15-year-olds, who are not covered by a legal minimal hourly rate, getting just \$7.13.

The strike follows industrial action last week by workers at 10 Starbucks outlets for a minimal wage of \$12 an hour regardless of age. Starbucks and KFC are owned by Restaurant Brands.

New Zealand Fairfax employees take action

Workers at 13 Fairfax-owned newspapers in Auckland and Wellington were involved in industrial action on November 29. Journalists and circulation workers picketed the Suburban Newspapers headquarters in Auckland as a strike at the chain's Wellington community newspapers entered its second day. The workers want a 5 percent pay rise, but the company has offered only 3.5 percent. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has announced that it is prepared to resume negotiations.

NZ kindergarten industrial action escalates

More than 1,500 kindergarten teachers at 40 locations across New Zealand stopped work for two hours this week to discuss possible strike action on December 8. Negotiations between NZ Educational Institute and the Education Ministry and the kindergarten associations broke down last week.

The union wants maximum contact hours guaranteed, recognition of head and senior teachers and of term breaks. Votes were due to be counted at the end of the week. The two-hour stoppages are the first industrial action by kindergarten teachers since 1996.

NZ Open Polytechnic tutors walk out

Academic staff at the Open Polytechnic of NZ (OPNZ) walked off the job last week after rejecting a revised pay offer. A spokesperson for the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education said that tutors were angry because a 2 percent pay offer was less than the inflation rate and would amount to a pay cut if accepted.

The offer contrasts with huge increases afforded the institution's CEO and with its \$4 million revenue for the last two financial years. OPNZ has been among the top performers financially in the sector, returning a surplus of 5.6 percent in 2004. It also has nearly \$14 million in investments and one of the highest student to academic-staff ratios. Further industrial action is likely to follow.

NZ rest home workers strike for pay

Nurses, caregivers, cooks and cleaners from Woodlands Rest Home near Nelson struck for 24 hours on November 23 protesting the breakdown of nine-month long pay negotiations. Support for the workers was evident amongst rest home residents and the wider community when they took to the streets and marched through the town of Motueka.

The workers are seeking a collective contract, including a 3 percent pay rise, five extra days sick leave and a service allowance. Caregiver Gloria Allan said she had received only \$2.43 an hour increase in nine years. "It's just not enough to live on for all the hard work we do. We deserve better and everyone knows it," she said. A workers' representative warned of more industrial action in aged care because the industry is desperately under funded and its staff underpaid.

PNG hospital workers protest for back pay

On November 28, 80 casual employees at the Mt Hagen General Hospital in the Western Highlands Province of Papua New Guinea held a sit-in protest. They were demanding the payment of an overdue entitlement of 650 kina (\$US217) and a consumer price index salary adjustment of 4 percent due in January last year.

A spokesman for the group said letters sent to the hospital's chief executive officer over the last ten months were never answered. The hospital's financial director promised workers he would take their grievance to the next board meeting on December 8. While employees returned to work, they have threatened further industrial action if the board fails to meet their demands.

Fiji nurses grievances unresolved

Fiji Nurses Association general secretary Kuini Lutua on November 24 threatened to call a second national nurses' strike over pay issues. She said nurses were concerned the government is challenging the award agreement reached through arbitration last August.

About 1,300 nurses ended a five-day nationwide strike in August after the government agreed to a memorandum of understanding, which included an increase in starting salaries for graduate nurses, a pledge not to seek refunds from 420 nurses who received over-payments and the settlement of other pay anomalies by October 2005.

The government has made deductions from nurses' pay for the days they were on strike and failed to honour the August memorandum. Nurses are demanding the MOU to be implemented by the end of the year.

Fiji hospitality workers get pay increase at a cost

Over 2,000 workers employed in Fiji's hospitality industry will receive across-the-board pay increases of 15 percent, paid in three instalments of

5 percent per annum and backdated from January this year. The union called off a planned strike scheduled for December 19.

The settlement between the Fiji Islands Hotel and Tourism Association (FIHTA) and the National Union of Hospitality, Catering and Tourism Industries Employees came after the union withdrew most of its demands, including the reinstatement of all 40 hospitality workers sacked during a four day strike in July. Only day shift workers will be rehired and those who failed to report to work for the afternoon and night shift will remain suspended.

The union also abandoned demands for introduction of a service charge on customers to replace tipping. Hotel operators praised the agreement and agreed to re-instate deducting union dues from workers' pay.

French Polynesian unions call general strike

French Polynesian President Oscar Temaru convened a meeting of unions this week in a last ditch attempt to avert an indefinite general strike due to begin on December 1. The unions were protesting social security fee increases that are part of package of government "reforms".

There is widespread opposition to the changes, including amongst government department heads. Centre for Pacific Studies (CPS) social security organisation head Marcel Ahini has threatened to resign if the government continues with its planned "reforms". He alleges the government wants to get control of CPS assets worth around \$US500,000.

Samoaans march in support of government doctors

Up to 1,500 people demonstrated in the Samoan capital of Apia last weekend in support of 23 doctors who resigned en-masse three weeks ago after being threatened with dismissal for refusing to end a nine-week strike.

The protesters marched to the prime minister's office and presented a petition to cabinet ministers and a representative of the prime minister. The ministers promised to discuss the issues in cabinet.

The doctors want a higher entry level for new recruits, a revised wage scale and better conditions. There is now an acute shortage of doctors and government hospitals are only able to treat emergency cases. Authorities are considering transporting over 500 patients to New Zealand for treatment.

New Caledonia nickel strike unresolved

SLN nickel in New Caledonia has failed to implement a tentative agreement signed on November 21 which was the basis for ending a five-week strike by Confederation of Workers Union of New Caledonia members. Employees are demanding the reinstatement of two sacked colleagues.

Blockades at Noumea port continue to prevent nickel ore reaching SLN's smelter and resulted in the company cutting working hours. New blockades at the territory's main fuel depots are also causing fuel shortage and disrupting traffic.

About 1,000 business owners marched to the French High Commissioner's office in Noumea on November 24 urging the government to forcibly remove the blockades. The workers, however, are determined to maintain their strike until their demand is met.

The French High Commissioner has called the party's together and talks are continuing.

Air Vanuatu pickets forced back to work

The Vanuatu Mobile Force and the island's police force this week broke up a picket by Air Vanuatu workers at the Port Vila airport. The National Workers Union general secretary Ephraim Kalsakau said the workers were physically threatened and forced back to work.

The pickets were established over the lack of progress in negotiations over reinstatement of 26 Air Vanuatu employees sacked for striking in August.

A Radio New Zealand International report from Port Vila said that the Vanuatu government was fearful that the union protest would encourage other groups to take their grievances to the streets. The union has not

stated if it will take any further action.



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