

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 December 2005

Philippines union official killed

Albert Terredano, 43, president of the DER Employees Association president was shot dead on his way to work by an unidentified assailant. He worked for the Department of Agrarian Reform in the Philippine's Abra district about 300 kilometres north of Manila. He served in several volunteer organisations working to ease the plight of poor farmers.

Terredano's killing brings the number of politically motivated execution-style killings this year to 150. Labour organisations have condemned the murders and hold the government of President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and the Armed Forces of the Philippines accountable for most of the deaths.

Government employees protest non-payment of COLA

Department of Budget Management (DBM) employees in the Philippine's city of Iloilo rallied at the DBM office on December 7. They were demanding payment of the cost of living allowance (COLA) owing for the ten-year period from 1989 to 1999.

Unions involved included the Department of Labor and Employment Region Six, the Employees Union, and the Confederation of Unity, Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees. A union spokesman said that if DBM failed to comply with their demand workers would implement a campaign of mass leave-taking.

More miners killed as death toll at Dongfeng rises

On December 2, a gas explosion killed 16 miners at the Zhonghe mine in Liupanshui city in China's southwest province of Guizhou. Last month another 16 miners were killed in a gas explosion at the Shagou colliery in the same city.

Meanwhile, rescuers at Sogiu coal mine in Henan province were working against the clock this week to save 42 miners trapped underground after the mine suddenly flooded with 3,000 cubic metres of water. Six of the 48 miners underground at the time managed to escape. The colliery's owner and manager have fled, fearing prosecution after ignoring orders to shut down the mine. The privately owned pit has been working without a license.

The death toll from the explosion at the state-owned Dongfeng coal mine in Heilongjiang has now reached 171, making it the fourth deadliest disaster since 1950. The explosion on November 27 resulted from the ignition of dangerously high levels of coal dust that had built up in the mine over the course of an entire week. Recently increased production levels created additional coal dust that the mine's ventilation system could not handle.

There were 242 miners working underground at the time. While 73 miners escaped the blast, 169 died underground and two others were killed at the mine's entrance. Two mine officials, alleged to have ignored warnings that coal dust levels were dangerously high, have been arrested and charged with dereliction of duty.

The official death toll in China's coalmines as of September this year stood at 4,266 resulting from 2,367 accidents. Many deaths at smaller or illegal mines are not reported, so the actual number killed is far higher.

Indonesian teachers strike over compulsory alms

Thousands of teachers in East Lambok regency struck on December 1, closing 400 schools to protest against a bylaw that allows a 2.5 percent compulsory deduction from their monthly salary. One of the strikers said that teachers would continue their action until the bylaw is revoked.

While there have been several protests by government workers since the bylaw took effect two years ago demands for its withdrawal have been ignored by the authorities.

Increasing fuel costs drive wage demands

On November 28, 500 labourers from Depok (24 kilometres south of Jakarta) protested outside the town's municipality building demanding an increase in the monthly wage from 681,000 rupiah (\$US68) to 824,532 rupiah.

Meanwhile, contract civil servants in Cirebon regency, 150 kilometres east of Jakarta, are protesting because salaries are well below the regional minimum wage. They are paid between 300,000 rupiah (\$US29) and 450,000 per month.

Contract civil worker Al Arief said he has been paid 450,000 rupiah monthly for the past five years but that family expenses were over 800,000 rupiah per month. He moonlights as a motorcycle taxi driver and sells second-hand goods with his brother to survive.

Since the government increased fuel prices by a massive 120 percent in October, workers in all sections of industry have stepped up campaigns for a better living wage. Increasing fuel costs have also contributed to job losses in industries trying to compete with Vietnam and China.

Sri Lankan rail workers overturn unjust action against colleagues

Railway workers at the Maligawatte railway depot in Colombo went on strike for two and half hours on December 5. They were protesting disciplinary action against some of their colleagues for arriving late one morning.

Newly appointed Railways Transport Petroleum and Petroleum Development minister A.H.M. Fowsi, who had made a surprise visit to the Maligawatte railway depot on the morning in question, allegedly ordered the workers to be disciplined. The strike ended after the depot management withdrew the threat.

Provincial agency workers protest over pay conditions

North Central Provincial Development Construction and Machinery Agency workers picketed the Anuradhapura-Puliyankulam work site for more than three hours on December 5. They carried placards and shouted slogans highlighting a number of entitlement irregularities, including late salary payments and the non-payment of overtime and travel allowances. The workers also believe that the agency, which was established in 1990 and currently employs 113 people, faces closure.

Indian bank workers protest

State Bank of Patiala workers in India's Punjab demonstrated outside the bank's Ludhiana regional office on December 1. They were opposing various work changes, including establishment of currency administration cells at various centres and the collection and acceptance of cash from other branches without first being counted. Employees believe they would be held responsible for any shortages and fake currency notes.

Management has refused to budge on the issue, even after workers went on strike on November 10. State Bank of Patiala Employees Federation officials have threatened to intensify the campaign including sit-down protests and further strikes.

Indian rail workers protest

About 1,200 workers at the Indian Railways car-shed at Mumbai Central began a "tool down" stop-work action on December 2 over the sudden death of their colleague, 46-year-old Hassan Sipte. They allege that his death was the result of negligence by the rail administration.

Sipte had been continuously vomiting and was taken to the Jagjivanram Railway Hospital in Mumbai Central on November 14 but died on November 30. His brother Hassan Tapan, a retired worker who was once employed at the same car-shed, said that while doctors had treated Sipte they has failed to diagnose his actual ailment.

Railway management accused the workers of obstructing production and threatened to take "necessary action".

Meanwhile, on December 4, three workers at the Jamalapur railway workshop in Bihar's Munger district were crushed to death when a train compartment fell on them. Two were killed instantly while the third died on the way to a local hospital. According to official sources, a hook on a crane lifting the train compartment broke. An investigation is underway.

Indian power workers protest privatisation

Thousands of workers at the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) held a daylong rally outside the company's offices in Patiala on December 2. They were opposing the PSEB's privatisation plans. Farmers from the area supported the protest.

The rally was told that the government moves to divide the Board into three wings would result in its privatisation and increased power costs. Management is also creating the conditions to shed jobs by outsourcing work.

Speakers at the rally also demanded the withdrawal of false disciplinary charges by management against several union delegates, saying they were aimed at intimidating the workforce.

Indian beedi workers

Beedi cigarette workers in the Indian state of Karnataka, protested outside the Central Excise Commissioner's office at Attavar in Mangalore on November 29 to demand improved conditions.

All India Beedi Workers' Federation officials submitted a memorandum addressed to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh urging that he bring all beedi workers under the Employees Provident Fund Act to ensure the payment of minimum wages.

The memorandum also called for beedi factories to provide six days work each week and that facilities provided by the Labour Welfare Department be extended to all beedi workers.

The protests were part of national campaign with other rallies in the district held in Moodbidri, B.C. Road and Belthangady. Udupi Zilla Beedi Workers' Union members also held a sit-down protest outside their local municipal office while others marched on the Kalpana municipal office.

Indian computer teachers strike for permanency

Computer teachers in Karnataka began an indefinite strike on December 1 and held a sit-down protest outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Shimoga. They are demanding confirmation of the services of over 2,000 computer teachers who are working in rural areas under the Mahiti Sindhu Program.

They urged the government to act on their demand immediately because most of the teachers appointed under the scheme will have crossed the age bar by the time permanent appointments are decided on December 31.

Punjab teachers demand more staff

Government teachers marched against the privatisation of Punjab state schools in the city of Amritsar on December 3. They also demanded the filling of about 35,000 vacant teaching posts, a program of regular recruitment and full-grade benefits for computer teachers recruited on

contract.

If the government fails to satisfy the demands, the teachers will step up the campaign. They are planning a rally at Patiala in January and also to boycott annual exams.

Strike ban imposed on construction workers

The West Australian Industrial Relations Commissioner Jack Gregor this week issued an order banning strikes by construction workers on building contractor Leighton-Kumagi's Perth city rail tunnel. The strike ban, which will remain in force until July 7 next year, has the full backing of the Howard government's Australian Building and Construction Commission.

According to press reports, Leighton-Kumagi sought the strike-ban order claiming that 46 days had been lost through industrial action during the 16-month project. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), however, contends that only 28 days were lost.

The order prohibits the CFMEU from encouraging workers to take industrial action unless it is protected under commonwealth workplace legislation, is authorised by the employer, or based on health and safety concerns that cannot be addressed by other means. Individual workers taking unauthorised strike action face fines of up to \$22,000 while the CFMEU, or any other union, can be fined up to \$110,000.

The CFMEU's WA branch has not announced plans to fight the bans and its secretary Kevin Reynolds said the union would pay any penalties incurred by the workers.

New Zealand casino workers walk out

More than 70 workers walked off the job at Hamilton's SkyCity-owned Riverside Casino on the evening of December 3 after earlier rejecting the employer's latest pay offer and voting to strike.

The workers are demanding pay parity with SkyCity in Auckland where wage rates are more than a dollar an hour more. Service and Food Workers Union members have been picketing the casino. Workers at the Dunedin casino, part owned by SkyCity, recently received a pay increase of between 8 and 12 percent over 14 months.

Auckland KFC workers protest low youth pay

Staff at an Auckland branch of KFC walked off the job on December 3 as part of a campaign against low wages for youth workers. More than 100 KFC employees picketed the fast food chain's Balmoral branch for two hours.

The union Unite says 60 percent of the outlet's workers are under-18 and earn as little as \$7.13 an hour. The strike was part of wider action against Restaurant Brands, which owns both KFC and Starbucks. The union is also in talks with McDonalds and Burger King over their youth pay rates.

New Zealand health workers vote for more strike action

After campaigning all year for a pay increase, workers employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) voted by an 80 percent majority to issue a three-day strike notice for the week prior to Christmas. Health workers based in Wellington, Nelson, Marlborough, West Coast and Canterbury have been seeking a pay catch-up of 30 percent to compensate for low pay rates going back to the 1990s.

About 500 members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) employed by the CDHB held a five-day strike in mid-September. Involved in the dispute are mental health nurses, dental therapists, occupational therapists, social workers, clerical workers, maintenance trades staff, and information services staff. Many of the workers' hourly pay rates start at \$9.70.

A NUPE spokesperson said that the CDHB had not made a pay offer despite 12 months of negotiations. Most of those who voted to strike at stop-work meetings last week are on contracts that expired on December 31 last year. They are angry over the government's unwillingness to fully fund significant pay rises.

New Zealand kindergarten teachers strike

About 1,650 New Zealand kindergarten teachers went on strike on December 8, forcing the closure of hundreds of kindergartens nationwide. The teachers voted to strike after negotiations over a new collective agreement collapsed.

A spokesperson for the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) representing the teachers said the strike had been caused by employer and government attempts to impose working conditions that would erode the quality of education provided to 45,000 kindergarten pupils.

The union wants maximum 26 contact hours per week for sessional centres, 27.5 for school-day and 30 for full-day kindergarten. They are also seeking guaranteed term breaks, in line with primary schools and a payment recognising the extra responsibilities of head and senior teachers. The government is demanding 30 contact hours a week at sessional and 35 at full-day kindergartens and “flexibility” on term breaks.

Thursday’s action was only the third national strike by kindergarten teachers in 120 years. The NZEI was careful to limit it to a token one-day strike, having earlier declared it would go straight back into mediation this week.

Leading union official arrested in New Caledonia

French police have arrested Sylvain Nea, leader of the Confederation of Workers Union of New Caledonia (CSTNC). He is charged with violating the French constitution by restricting freedom of movement and freedom to work and for causing damage to public roads. He was arrested in downtown Noumea this week, following the end of a prolonged strike that he led against SLN, the French-owned nickel miner and refiner. The company agreed to union demands to rehire two sacked employees.

Industrial action by CSTNC members and supporters included blockades of Noumea’s ports, the city’s main fuel depot and city streets. SLN management agreed to reinstate the two workers by February, when they will undergo paid training for nine months before returning to full employment.

Charges were brought against Nea by the president of the territory’s southern province Philippe Gomes. If convicted, Nea could face a prison sentence of several months.

PNG nurses threaten to strike

On November 30, government officials told a meeting of 100 nurses in Papua New Guinea’s capital Port Moresby that all conditions agreed by the government on June 29 would be implemented by the end of the year. The nurses have been waiting for six months for back pay and other conditions in a June Memorandum of Understanding.

Unconvinced by the government’s latest promise the nurses threatened to strike on December 5 unless payments begin. They are also seeking increased staffing levels, payment of travel warrants for 2004 and 2005, shift-loading, improved retrenchment package and wage increases.

To appease the nurses and prevent the strike, Deputy Secretary of the Department of Personnel Management told the meeting that money had been allocated to employ extra nurses before the end of 2005 and also in 2006 and reiterated that back-pay and wage increases will be paid, but were not due until December 31.

Meanwhile, the occupational health and safety division of the Department of Labour and Industry Relations (DLIR) on November 28 gave Port Moresby General Hospital, the country’s premier hospital, two months to address serious health and safety issues or face closure.

DLIR inspector Kelly Onne found the hospital was lacking personnel protective equipment, sanitary facilities and its electrical fittings were in disrepair. He said that the “working environment within the hospital is absolutely unsafe and unhealthy” and recommended medical examinations for nurses, caterers, laundry and incinerating staff.

Fiji Telco workers vote for strike

A meeting between the Telecommunications Employees Association and Fiji International Telecommunications management this week has failed to resolve a long-standing wages issue. The carrier is 49 percent

state-owned.

Association secretary Manasa Konataci said the dispute was over recommended salary adjustments that had not been implemented. He said both parties will make further submissions to the Labour Ministry but if talks remained deadlocked the union would serve a 28-day strike notice. On November 30, a majority of union members voted in a secret ballot for strike action giving the Association a mandate to call industrial action.

At the same time, the Fiji government has decided not to drop its High Court challenge over an arbitration ruling granting all state public servants a 3 percent cost of living adjustment (COLA) backdated to January 2004. Payouts, totalling \$30 million (\$US17.65 million) will be made by the Public Service Commission to all public servants, including nurses and teachers.

Airline sacks another 19 employees

On December 4, Air Vanuatu dismissed 19 more employees, amid escalating tension between the national carrier and the airline workers’ union over the sacking of 26 unionists who were involved in a strike on September 4. Like the earlier dismissals, management gave no reason for laying off the 19 workers.

The new round of sackings come just days after the government sanctioned the use of police and paramilitary forces to break up the union’s picket at the Port Vila airport. Air Vanuata’s lawyers warned the dismissed workers not to “trespass” on the airline’s premises or they would be prosecuted.



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