

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 October 2006

Asia

Cambodian garment worker shot by police

On October 16, scores of police armed with AK47's attacked a protest by garment workers at the Bright Sky factory in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. One 24 year-old female worker was seriously injured when she was shot in the back.

In the days following, police rounded up and detained 16 members of the Free Trade Union of Workers who were involved in the protest. A spokesman for the International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation (ITGLWF) said Bright Sky management had called in the police. He said the protest stemmed from a dispute over short-term work contracts.

The ITGLWF has demanded that Prime Minister Hun Sen and Minister of Labour Vong Soth order an inquiry into the incident and called for the immediate release of any detained trade union leaders. The government, however, has consistently backed the ruthless repression of any opposition to the shocking conditions and wages in Cambodia's garment industry.

Chinese sanitation workers strike over pay cut

More than 100 sanitation workers employed by Lanzhou City local government in China's Gansu province struck on October 16 against a reduction in wages. Some workers have already resigned over the issue and are seeking new jobs.

The normal monthly salary is 420 yuan but last month it was slashed to 360 yuan (\$US35). The minimum salary in the province is set at 430 yuan. The local labour bureau has assured the workers that their full wage entitlement will be restored after it conducts an investigation, but there are no guarantees this will happen. China's central government recently issued a directive that local governments could set wages "in light of their own financial situation".

Malaysian workers protest over overdue payments

Around 100 workers of the Rural Development Corporation (KPD) picketed in Kota Kinabula in Malaysia on October 18 demanding the payment of bonuses and salary increments owed to them since 2000. They were joined by workers from Keningau, Ranau, Kota Marudu and Klias.

A spokesman for the KPD Workers Union said the union had attempted to settle the matter through negotiations but nothing had been resolved. Appeals were also sent to the Labour Department and top government officials, including the prime

minister, calling on them to intervene, but no action had been taken.

Korean union calls off protracted strike

On October 15, union leaders called off a 72-day strike at Capro Corp, South Korea's sole producer of caprolactam, a raw material used in the manufacture of nylon. The strikers have been ordered back to work without achieving any of their demands. The strike began on August 3 after negotiations with the company for a 12.8 percent pay raise and an increase in compensation broke down. In response, the company imposed a lockout.

A union spokesman said union leaders decided to end the strike after "considering the difficult situations of both the company and unionists" and "urged the management to engage in talks with a positive attitude to seal a deal at the earliest time."

Capro's operations are in the south eastern city of Ulsan. The company manufactures about 240,000 tons of caprolactam annually, with about 88 percent of the product supplied to local nylon-making companies.

Bangladesh railway workers oppose privatisation

Train services across Bangladesh came to a halt on October 11 when railway workers went on strike for one day against the government's plan to privatise the state-owned Bangladesh Railways. The government of Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia has announced its intention to privatise the railways in order to reduce an annual loss of around \$15 million.

A spokesman for the Railway Sramik Karmachari Sangram Parishad (RSKSP) union said workers would take "bigger action if the government does not change its mind" and claimed that the losses were mainly due to corruption at management levels.

Bangladesh Railways is the country's second-biggest transportation carrier after road transport. It operates 230 passenger trains and 50 freight trains, moving some 42 million passengers and three million tonnes of cargo annually.

Indian day labourers demand job security

Hundreds of day labourers employed by the central government in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh protested on October 14 outside the Naval Dockyard in Visakhapatnam. The workers are mainly employed by the Eastern Naval Command, the Naval Dockyard, the Visakhapatnam Port Trust, Food

Corporation of India, the railways and the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant. They are demanding fulltime positions and the appointment of a committee, headed by a Supreme Court judge, to investigate their working conditions.

Around 100,000 people, the majority with 10 years service, continue to be employed as day labourers in Andhra Pradesh. They are paid a meagre monthly wage of between 1,200 rupees (\$US26) and 3,000 rupees.

Sri Lankan bank employees walk out

Thousands of state bank employees from the Bank of Ceylon, the Peoples Bank, the National Savings Bank, State Mortgage Bank and provincial development banks went on strike on October 12. They are seeking a number of conditions, including the provision of pensions and the introduction of a widow and orphan payment for the families of deceased state bank workers who were recruited after 1996. The strike brought customer services to a standstill.

Australia and the Pacific

Tasmanian nurses take action over staff shortages

The work bans imposed by nurses on October 13 at the North West Regional Hospital in Burnie over staff shortages remain in place. The nurses are demanding an additional 15 nursing staff and will not admit elective surgery patients until staffing levels are increased.

Nurses in Launceston and Latrobe are considering taking industrial action over the same issue. A spokesperson for the Nursing Federation said there is growing concern across the state over the lack of staff in public hospitals and warned that “elective surgery and wards and beds are going to be closed”.

A spokesman for the Tasmanian Labor government claimed there was no funding for extra staff and that hospitals should work within their budgets.

New Zealand newspaper workers resume strikes

Workers employed by the Fairfax-owned *Southland Times* newspaper in New Zealand resumed industrial action on October 12 after wage talks between the company and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) broke down. The workers had been working to rule and holding lightning strikes since early July but postponed the action last month while further talks were held.

Southland Times workers have some of the worst pay rates and conditions in the industry—a situation the recent negotiations failed to remedy. While refusing adequate pay increases, Fairfax paid \$700 million for internet auction site *Trade Me* earlier this year after announcing a 23 percent increase in its annual profits.

TVNZ staff threaten rolling strike action

More than 300 TVNZ staff are threatening industrial action that could lead to the disruption of major prime time television shows. However, the Public Service Association (PSA) and Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union have joined TVNZ in expressing the hope that strike action may averted by mediation that is likely to begin next week. Under a “protocol

agreement”, mediation must go forward before any industrial action is taken.

The workers are seeking a five percent pay increase, maintenance of their current leave entitlements, and a single national agreement across the Auckland and Wellington TVNZ centres. PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said negotiations had been going on for several weeks but were “getting nowhere”. TVNZ has only offered a 1.75 percent increase with an additional 1.75 percent available on “performance”.

Wagstaff said the cost of living had risen 6.9 percent over the past two years but salary increases had not kept pace.

Air NZ workers threaten strikes over job losses

Air New Zealand could face industrial action next week by workers opposed to proposed cost-cutting moves. Spanish-owned group Swissport has claimed it can slash the airlines’ costs by \$20 million per year if it takes over baggage and check-in work. While Swissport NZ said it would take on the staff made redundant, it indicated that reemployment would be influenced by attendance records and references.

While unions criticised Air NZ for “bullying” tactics as it moves to outsource jobs and cut 1,675 frontline staff, they offered the company more “flexible” work practices and cost-cutting with potential savings of \$9.7 million. Air NZ’s assessment, however, was the union scheme would save no more than \$1.2 million. Only after the proposal was rejected did the Service and Food Workers Union, representing 200 of the workers, announce it was considering industrial action.

Bank workers to vote on industrial action in Fiji

Unionised staff at the Australian and New Zealand (ANZ) Banking Group in Suva, Fiji, will vote on November 1 to decide whether to take industrial action over a restructure that could cost around 300 jobs at ANZ branches in Fiji and other Pacific Island countries.

The Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union said the restructure project involved the transfer of a wide range of the bank’s back office processing functions to its own subsidiary company, Quest Limited in Fiji. Quest has been relocated to the Kalabu tax-free zone on the outskirts of Suva which will save ANZ millions of dollars in taxes and customs. Workers currently performing back office duties are concerned that they will not be allowed to transfer from ANZ to Quest.



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