

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 November 2006

Asia

Indian bank workers strike against privatisation

Nearly one million bank workers in India joined a one-day strike on October 26 against the government's proposed reforms, including privatisation, outsourcing of services, and the merging of 27 state-run banks. The government proposes to reduce its stake in state-owned banks from 51 percent to 33 percent, while the Reserve Bank has announced it plans to outsource some of its operations to the National Payment Corporation, a private company. The reforms will lead to sackings, branch closures, and curtailed banking services.

The strike, called by the United Forum of Bank Unions, affected 27 public sector banks, including the largest in the country, the State Bank of India, as well as private and foreign banks. Banking services came to a virtual standstill in the state of Tamil Nadu and the strike affected almost all of West Bengal and Kerala, with only a few private sector banks and ATMs in operation. Strikers demonstrated and held sit-down protests (*dharana*) and rallies in various cities across the country. In some areas, insurance workers and university teachers joined the rallies.

Chinese bank workers protest layoffs

On October 25, more than 100 former employees of the Industrial and Commercial Bank of China (ICBC) protested against their dismissal in front of the bank's Beijing headquarters. The workers carried placards reading, "We want our jobs back, return our right to live". They claim that the state-owned bank's management forced them to accept retrenchment as the bank was seeking a stock market listing.

The workers had protested outside the All-China Federation of Trade Unions building in the morning demanding assistance but they were dispersed by police. More than 200 former ICBC employees had planned to take part in the protest, but half were detained by local public security officers.

Indian childcare workers demonstrate

Hundreds of childcare (*anganwadi*) workers from centres across the Mysore district in the Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated on October 31. They are demanding the government provide a pension of 150,000 rupees (\$US3,341) as compensation to aged retired *anganwadi* workers and assistants, and grant present employees 30 days compensated medical leave.

The protestors marched from the town hall to the local municipality office where they submitted a memorandum addressed to Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy stating: "We are being exploited and the government has not come to our aid."

Hundreds of thousands of childcare workers are employed in an estimated 100,000 *anganwadi* centres across Karnataka. The demonstration was organised by the Karnataka State *Anganwadi* Workers and Assistants Federations' Mysore district unit.

Insurance workers protest over staffing

Over 300 employees of Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) of India in Salem, Tamil Nadu, staged a sit-down protest (*dharna*) in the city on October 28. The workers claim the number of policies handled by LIC

increased from 70 million in 1996 to 190 million in 2006, while staff numbers have fallen over the same period. They demanded LIC fill vacant posts and regularise the services of workers employed on a temporary basis. The protestors, members of the Insurance Corporation Employees' Union, also urged the company and government to fill the backlog of bank job vacancies reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.

State sector workers demonstrate for improved conditions

Workers at the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) in Udhamandalam, India, demonstrated in Ooty on October 27 for a 20 percent bonus and incentives in some rural areas.

They also demanded the government regularise the employment of TASMAC employees and reduce working hours. The protestors, members of the Nilgiris District TASMAC Employees Union, called for the reinstatement of workers sacked by the previous regime.

South Korea government threatens to prosecute teachers

More than 3,000 teachers, members of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU), walked off the job on October 29-30, in opposition to government plans to introduce performance-based pay and revise teachers' pensions.

The union plans further action, including a national strike on November 22, if the government does not drop its plans. The government has declared that any protests held during school hours are illegal and is threatening to prosecute teachers. It has also ordered each educational office to reject applications from union members to leave school early to attend the November protest.

Garment maker sacks Cambodian workers for striking

Garment producer Bright Sky Cambodia last week announced it will close its night shift and sack 1,000 workers. The company is retaliating against a workers strike on October 16 over short-term work contracts. Armed police brutally suppressed the strike. One 24-year-old female worker was seriously injured when she was shot in the back, and 16 workers were later rounded up and detained.

Many of the sacked workers were involved in the strike. The International Textile, Garment and Leather Workers' Federation has condemned the dismissals. A Federation spokesman said: "I understand that the underlying problem at Bright Sky is the fact that management has lied to workers about their six-month contracts, saying these would become permanent after a trial period. This has not happened."

Australia and the Pacific

Textile workers in Australia oppose individual contracts

Around 300 textile workers employed by carpet manufacturer Godfrey Hirst Australia demonstrated outside the company's factory in Tottenham, Melbourne, on November 4. They are opposing the company's decision to place the workforce on individual work agreements known as Australian Workplace Agreements (AWA), instead of a collective agreement.

The workers, members of the Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union (TCFU), claim that Godfrey Hirst, which recently took over the factory from Feltex, is using the federal government's new WorkChoices

industrial relations laws to attack working conditions. A spokesperson for the TCFU claimed that the workers were threatened with dismissal and the withholding of redundancy pay if they refused to sign AWAs.

Nurses strike over staffing shortages

More than 25 emergency nurses employed at the Launceston General Hospital (LGH) in Tasmania walked off the job for one hour on October 29 and 30 over staff shortages and nurse to patient ratios.

A spokesperson for the Australian Nursing Federation said rolling work stoppages will continue until the state Labor government provides extra funding for 15 extra emergency nurses. The government has not provided the necessary funding, despite previously agreeing to the employment of the extra nurses, in compliance with new national benchmarks.

At a rally held during the strike, nurses described how staff shortages had affected patients' treatment. In several cases, patients waiting to be assessed in LGH were left on trolleys in the corridor outside the accident and emergency department. The nurses explained how they are expected to work double shifts just to keep up with the number of patients requiring treatment.

ABC workers strike for pay increase

Melbourne staff at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) Radio 774 walked off the job on October 27. The walkout, by members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), was part of a national campaign of industrial action by ABC staff for a 16 percent wage increase, plus two additional increases of 5 percent, to bring pay in line with other public sector wage rates. Management has offered a 3.5 percent annual pay rise, linked to cuts in working conditions.

On October 26, an ABC TV cameraman stopped filming during a live evening news broadcast by reporter John Stewart at Sydney's Lakemba Mosque. The union confirmed that the action was part of its industrial campaign.

Teacher union cancels strike action

Threatened strike action in November by public school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has been called off following an agreement between the Australia Education Union (AEU) and the ACT Labor government.

The teachers are seeking a 12 percent wage rise over 3 years with no trade-offs, but the government has demanded they accept the closure of a number of schools and axing of at least 85 teaching positions. While the government claimed it had dropped previous demands for productivity trade-offs, the proposed job cuts would require teachers to spend more time in classrooms. Secondary teachers estimate that they would have to work an extra two hours a week.

In a bid to resolve the year-long dispute, the AEU has agreed to enter negotiations with the ACT government through private mediation. The negotiations will take place entirely within the framework of sacrificing conditions and increasing productivity in return for wage increases.

New Zealand TV staff walk off the job

On October 30, 120 Television New Zealand (TVNZ) workers, including presenters, technicians, security guards, and camera operators, walked off the job for one hour, disrupting the delivery of programs in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch. In Auckland, the strikers protested outside the TVNZ building in the city centre.

The workers, members of the Public Service Association (PSA) and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, are seeking a 5 percent pay increase, more than twice that offered by management. Employees also want additional annual leave and a single national agreement for TVNZ employees in Auckland and Wellington. Further strike action has been threatened.

Liquor workers strike for pay and improved redundancy

On October 31, workers at Independent Liquor in South Auckland, New Zealand, struck for nine hours and picketed the company's warehouse in Papakura. The workers, members of Unite Union, are campaigning for a

pay increase and improved redundancy package. They also protested management intimidation and harassment of union members. Of the 65 workers employed by the brewery, 38 are union members.

A Unite press release claims the workers are paid up to just \$NZ300 (\$US182), 10 percent less than industry rates. Shift allowance at Independent Liquor is \$15 compared to \$47 at other breweries and redundancy pay is only one-third of the industry rate.

Workers are demanding a speedy resolution of the issues because management recently announced the company is to be sold. Negotiations between the company and the union broke down in mid-October.

National Court to rule on PNG Telikom strike

This week over 700 PNG (Papua New Guinea) Telikom workers ended a strike ahead of a National Court ruling on the legality of the industrial action. The workers went on strike on October 23 after Telikom delayed implementing a collective work agreement.

The Communication Workers Union (CWU) and Telikom Engineering Association (TEA) are also calling for the removal of Telikom's CEO and newly appointed expatriate consultants. The court hearing was scheduled for November 1, but no decision has yet been announced.

PNG Waterboard union calls off strike

The PNG Waterboard Workers Union called off a planned sit-in strike on October 27 to take the dispute to the National Court. The union is claiming 3.5 million kina (\$US1.1 million) in unpaid entitlements from 1994, and an increase of workers' housing allowance. It is also seeking an interim ban on management buying new vehicles until the matter of workers' unpaid entitlements is resolved. A date for a court hearing is yet to be set.

Solomon Islands teachers end strike

On October 31, Solomon Islands teachers, members of the Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA), voted to end a two-day strike. The teachers had walked off the job following a deadlock in talks over better working conditions, pay increases, and an improved grading structure.

A SINTA spokesman said the government has agreed to pay the teachers according to a unified pay structure, and on November 2 they will receive a small pay rise with arrears to be paid next week. The government also agreed to discuss the implementation of a service scheme with pay increases and the introduction of clearly laid-out career structures.

Teachers receive just \$300 (\$US42.25) per fortnight. After coming to office in May this year the government of Prime Minister Manasseh Sogavare promised it would double teachers' salaries, but it has since claimed it does not have the funds to meet this commitment.



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