

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 November 2006

Indian lignite workers strike for pay

Over 13,000 contract workers employed by the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the Indian state of Tamilnadu struck on November 14. They are demanding the introduction of minimum pay rates and protesting against the deduction of a bonus paid on the eve of last month's Deepavali festival from this month's salary. The strike may affect NLC services such as power generation in the state.

The Joint Action Council (JAC), consisting of seven trade unions, organised the strike. A JAC spokesman said that for the past four years, contract workers had been demanding an 8.33 percent festival bonus. Each year it has been deducted from their next pay by their employers, even though the Assistant Labour Commissioner had guaranteed in 2002 that it would not.

In a separate dispute, 2,000 workers in 350 carpet-weaving units in the Bhavani, Jambai, Thalawaipet, Ammapet areas of Erode, Tamilnadu, began an indefinite strike on November 13 demanding wage rises and an increase in allowances. Owners of the carpet units confirmed that the strike had affected the daily production of carpets worth 1,500,000 rupees (\$US33,333).

Pakistani shipyard workers on hunger strike

A hunger strike by shipyard workers at the Karachi Shipyard in Pakistan entered its fourth day on November 10. The action is organised by the Karachi Shipyard Solidarity Committee (KSSC) and is being held to protest against the privatisation of the yard and the banning of trade union activities.

Addressing workers at the Karachi Press Club (KPC), trade union activist Nasir Mansoor demanded that privatisation stop immediately. Nasir pointed out that the right to participate actively in trade unions is supposedly protected under the Pakistan constitution.

Sri Lankan sugar factory workers on hunger strike

On November 10, ten workers in the Pelwatte Sugar Factory in the rural Moneragala District in southern Sri Lanka began a hunger strike on the roof of the complex. They are demanding the confirmation of employment for 183 casual workers. The management has confirmed only 33

to date.

The casual workers are also demanding that they get the same rights as the permanent workforce after confirmation. The ten protestors vowed to continue their hunger strike until the demands are fulfilled.

In a separate campaign, graduate workers picketed in front of the Fort Railway Station in central Colombo on November 9 demanding an increase in their salary. They have threatened to broaden the campaign as funding for pay increases was not included in the government's budget.

Foreign maids in Hong Kong protest

About 700 foreign maids marched in downtown Hong Kong on November 12 urging the government to abolish a policy that gives them just two weeks to find a new employer if they leave their jobs. The maids, from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, carried placards reading "Scrap the two week rule" and "Stop underpayment".

Employers are using the two-week rule to force maids to accept lower wages and abusive conditions. Agencies use the rule to charge maids high fees to renew contracts or find another job.

The minimum monthly wage for foreign maids working in Hong Kong is \$HK3,400 (\$US435) but protesters said many are only getting an average of \$1,500.

Korean unionists oppose government's new labour laws

A four-hour strike was called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) on November 15 to protest against the government's proposed changes to labour laws that would allow discrimination against temporary and part-time workers.

More than 150,000 workers participated in the strike, including workers from Hyundai Motors and its affiliate Kia Motors. The KCTU has threatened to launch an indefinite strike on November 22 if the government refuses to negotiate on the new laws.

Tasmanian timber workers protest threat to jobs

This week, 120 timber workers from the Auspine company in north-east Tasmania protested at the Burnie wharf against

the export of unprocessed pine logs to South Korea.

A spokesman for the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union said that from January 1, 2007, there was no guaranteed supply of logs to Auspine's Scottsdale mills and 300 jobs could be lost.

Negotiations for a new log supply agreement between Auspine and softwood plantation suppliers broke down three weeks ago.

Sydney bus drivers stop work over intimidation

About 40 bus drivers at the WestBus company at the company's Bonnyrigg depot west of Sydney went on strike on November 15 over the threatening behavior of local management towards drivers and their union representative.

During a July meeting of three drivers and a union official, a manager attempted to intimidate workers by relating how he "dealt" with unions while in the armed forces of an African country. He told them he would place a live bullet on the table and threaten, "This is for you."

This week, a Transport Workers Union job delegate reported that he had seen another manager with a replica pistol tucked into his belt. "It was silver in colour with a dark handle," the delegate said. A spokesman for the company attempted to downplay the incident, claiming the manager carried the replica pistol as part of an "office game".

New Zealand radiographers reject latest pay offer

Over 250 radiographers employed at five District Hospital Boards (DHBs) have been on strike since November 9. The radiographers are seeking pay parity. Currently they are being paid up to \$6,000 (\$US3,840) less than their colleagues in 14 other DHBs.

The Radiographers Union rejected an offer made by the DHBs that they would give a pay rise by July next year but only on the condition that there would be no further claims before 2008. A spokesperson for the radiographers said the offer fell far short of parity in most pay categories.

Frustrated TVNZ staff strike for 24 hours

On November 13, TV New Zealand (TVNZ) staff went on strike for 24 hours. For the past two weeks the workers have been staging short-duration strikes in support of a 5 percent wage claim.

TVNZ management have offered a 2.5 percent wage increase along with further increases based on performances. The offer has been rejected by the Public Service Association (PSA) and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU).

PNG nurses protest over entitlements

About 100 nurses at the Mubilon Hospital in Madang, Papua New Guinea, held a sit-in protest at the hospital on November 13. They are demanding a meeting with the hospital's chief executive officer over entitlements.

The dispute is over the long delay by management in implementing an audit report into the nurses' award, which provides the basis for an increase in entitlements. CEO, Dr Jethro Usurup, refused to meet the protesters and the issue remains unresolved.

University staff escalate strike action

Academic staff at the University of Technology (Unitech) in Papua New Guinea are still on strike. The strikers, mainly senior lecturers, are refusing to negotiate with the administration and will not return to mark examination papers and select enrolments for the 2007 academic year.

The academics went on strike on November 6 for the payment of outstanding domestic market allowance (DMA). They also accuse the university administration of misappropriating superannuation funds and other funds in the staff savings and loan society. Unitech and the academics union have been ordered by the Industrial Registrar to settle the dispute in court.

Fiji air traffic controllers end industrial action

Fiji air traffic controllers at Fiji's Nadi International Airport ended all industrial action on November 15 after Strategic Air Services Limited (SASL) agreed to re-employ six sacked union members. The workers, members of the Air Traffic Management Association of Fiji (ATMAF), were sacked on November 10 after the association approached SASL management over a log-of-claims and staff grievance.

ATMAF members, mostly air traffic controllers, booked in on sick leave following the sackings, forcing management to undertake traffic control duties.

On November 15, SASL management agreed to enter negotiations on the ATMAF log-of-claims. The association is seeking settlement on issues dating back over seven years, including overtime pay, shift allowance and salary upgrades and a cost-of-living allowance (COLA) payout. The workers also want settlement to a six-month long grievance over the non-payment of state contributions into their superannuation.



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