# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

**25 November 2006**

**Asia**

**Indian porters strike for pay increase**

Porters at the Agricultural Produce Market Committee (APMC) yard at Amargol in Hubli in the Indian state of Karnataka began an indefinite strike on November 20. The workers, who do backbreaking work shifting produce, are demanding improved wages.

Loading and unloading at the yard is at a standstill—thousands of bags of onions and other produce have not been moved. The workers are members of the APMC Yard Labours Association. The union said the wages of porters had remained unchanged for many years.

**Factory workers demand outstanding entitlements**

On November 20, workers from the closed New Government Electric Factory (NGEF) held a sit-down protest at the Mahatma Gandhi in Bangalore, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka. They were demanding back wages and other benefits owing since the plant factory closed in December 2002.

All 122 workers were sacked after refusing to take "voluntary" retirement. Seven have since died, having suffered severe hardships, while the remainder are deeply in debt.

The NGEF Employees Union, representing the sacked workers, presented a memorandum to the Chief Minister's office threatening a broader campaign if payment were not made by the end of November.

**Lignite workers continue strike**

A strike by contract workers at Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the Indian state of Tamilnadu entered its fourth day on November 18. The strike has cut power generation to around 1900 MW, as against the normal capacity of 2,490 MW.

Over 13,000 contract workers employed by the NLC 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.

The contract workers have been demanding an 8.33 percent festival bonus for the past four years but each year the advance given by the company is later deducted from their next pay.

Regular workers of the corporation are threatening to walk out in support of the strikers and are presently boycotting the company's canteen and wearing black badges as a symbol of solidarity. The strike was called by the Joint Action Council, which consists of seven trade unions.

**Power workers protest against retrenchment**

Around 80 power workers at Base Power in Heggsanahalli in the Indian state of Karnataka held a daylong sit-down protest at the Deputy Commissioner's office in Raichur on November 16. They were protesting the retrenchment of 75 workers from the privately-owned power-generating company. The workers are members of the Hyderabad-Karnataka Janandolana Kendra.

Base Power has been operating Heggsanahalli for four years. It employs local people as auxiliary staff and in the annual maintenance of the power plant. A few months back the workers lodged a complaint with the Labor Department in Raichur over the lack of facilities such as safety shoes, gloves and helmets. They also claimed they were not given a provident fund or a weekly holiday payment and that the company was violating the Minimum Wage Act.

In retaliation, the company has not paid wages for the past one-and-a-half months and retrenched the 75 workers without notice. It also brought in groups of workers from Tamilnadu and Orissa, in violation of state labour laws, to carry out annual maintenance work.

In a memorandum submitted to Deputy Commissioner Tushar Girinath, the workers demanded the company withdraw the retrenchments and release pending wage arrears. Workers also demanded a minimum wage of 3,000 rupees ($US67) a month, the provision of provident funds, weekly and general holidays and a bonus for the past four years.

**Pakistani dock workers demonstrate against job cuts**

Dock workers holding banners and placards, protested at the Merewether Tower in Karachi on November 20 against the government's move to hand over port work to a reduced number of shipping companies. Workers contend that the move will lead to around 4,000 job losses.

The demonstration was organised by the Dock Labor Board. Speakers at the protest rally held after the demonstration said workers who had over 35 years service were being terminated and the Board was preparing to implement other anti-worker measures. The workers are demanding that the Board drop its plans and rule out forced retirements.

**Sri Lankan municipal workers protest sackings**

Around 150 workers demonstrated in front of the Badulla Municipality Council on November 18 against the retrenchment of 75 casual and contract workers.

Those retrenched all have between six and seven years service. The sackings will impact sharply on municipality services, including garbage collections. The protestors handed a petition to the governor of the Uva Provincial Council and threatened to broaden the struggle if the sacked workers were not reinstated.

**Hospital workers on sick note campaign**

Around 3,000 workers in state hospitals in Sri Lanka reported in sick and did not attend work for one day on November 23. The industrial action included pharmacists, laboratory technicians, X-ray technicians, medical laboratory technicians, physiotherapists and occupational therapists.

Their main demands are the abolition of salary anomalies among grades and a meaningful salary increase. Other demands include the implementation of promotional schemes approved by the Ministry of Public Administration and an allowance for interns.

Workers picketed the Health Ministry at noon. Only emergency service workers were exempted from the sick note campaign.

**Police disperse protesting Chinese transport workers**

On November 15, police attacked 1,000 workers at the state-owned Qingyan City Automobile Transport Company in China to clear them from the company office building. The workers were protesting the loss of their jobs and unfair compensation payments. Around 1,448 workers were

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dismissed after the government sold off the company's assets to a private company.

The company offered workers compensation of 800 yuan ($US100) for each year of employment. However, when went to collect their entitlements from the bank they were told there were no funds available. The company has now resumed negotiations but there is no settlement in sight.

**Thousands strike in South Korea against labour reform bill**

Tens of thousands of workers went on strike and attended rallies across South Korea on November 22 against the government's labour reform bill.

Participants in the rallies included farmers, teachers, metal workers and street vendors. Rallies were held in 12 cities, with some of the largest demonstrations in Seoul where more than 13,000 participated. In Kwangju around 10,000 turned out.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, the peak union body that called the nationwide strike, claimed that 200,000 unionised workers took part in the demonstrations. The KCTU is planning four-hour strikes daily until November 29 when another full strike will be called.

The government mobilised more than 7,700 riot police. Protestors retaliated against police attacks with rocks and steel pipes.

During the morning more than 600 farmers blockaded a section of the Honam Expressway, causing massive traffic disruptions. Around 13,000 teachers from the Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union unofficially took a day's leave to protest at plans to introduce a teacher assessments and a graded bonus system.

The KCTU also called for the scraping of free trade talks between South Korea and the US.

**Australia and the Pacific**

**Australian engineering workers oppose cuts**

Forty eight workers at Mechanical Engineering in the La Trobe Valley, Victoria are continuing to picket the plant after being locked out six weeks ago for refusing to accept an agreement that cuts their pay and many conditions.

The company imposed the lockout when the workers notified it they intended to take limited industrial action to force the management to negotiate on a new work agreement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union has been attempting to negotiate an agreement since the old one expired in March.

On March 31, the company posted a notice in the workplace declaring the old agreement terminated and claiming a new agreement was in place.

According to the union, the company is attempting to cut apprentices' pay, reduce redundancy pay to the minimum, remove paid meal breaks for shift workers, reduce annual leave pay for shift workers, cancel all rostered days off and cut annual leave to two weeks.

**New Zealand radiographers end strike**

About 260 radiographers at six district health boards (DHBs) ended a ten-day strike on November 20 but the dispute over pay parity remains unresolved. The radiographers went on strike on November 10, seeking pay parity with about 1,000 colleagues at eight other DHBs.

Dr Deborah Powell, a spokesperson for the Association of Professional and Executive Employees, said no further strikes were planned but did not rule out future industrial action. During the strike, DHBs across the country settled a dispute with junior doctors, awarding a 5.8 percent pay rise.

**Strike planned by medical laboratory staff**

More than 1,200 medical laboratory workers at 16 DHB community laboratories and six blood service centres are planning to strike for one week on November 29 after pay talks stalled. The laboratories involved are the New Zealand Blood Service (NZBS), DHBs nationwide, Tairawhiti in Gisborne, Wellington Pathology, Medlab South and Southern Community Laboratories.

DHBs and the NZBS refuse to budge from an earlier offer to increase medical laboratory workers' salaries by 1.5 percent for year one and 2.5 percent in the second year. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union is seeking a 5.4 percent increase.

**TVNZ staff continue lightning strikes**

About 300 Television New Zealand (TVNZ) workers walked off the job on November 20, forcing the state-owned broadcaster to cancel some programs. The walkout was the 16th such action by workers since October 29 in support of a 5 percent pay increase, plus an extra week annual leave.

Unions representing the workers, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Public Service Association, rejected management's initial offer of a 2.25 percent pay rise with additional increases based on performance. TVNZ is refusing to negotiate a better deal.

**Nurses at PNG hospital maintain strike**

About 100 nurses at the Modilon General Hospital in Madang, Papua New Guinea (PNG) are continuing a strike that began with a sit-in protest on November 13. The hospital has hired casual nurses in an attempt to counter the strike and keep services going.

The nurses are protesting over management's long delay in implementing an audit report into the nurses' award that provided the basis for an increase in entitlements.

**PNG academics ignore court order to end strike**

On November 17, the National Court in Waigani, PNG ordered academic staff at the University of Technology (Unitech) to end a prolonged strike and return to normal duties. The court also ordered the National Academic Staff Association (NASA) to pay the university's court costs.

However, the academics decided not to return to work immediately. Meanwhile NASA is seeking a meeting with the university's governing council to demand an official investigation into the university's administration. The union has also referred the court judgement to the Industrial Registrar for a legal opinion.

The academics struck on November 6 for domestic-market allowance parity with colleagues in the University of PNG. They are also protesting delays in the payment of entitlements and are demanding job security and the provision of training. The academics are concerned about the alleged misappropriation of superannuation funds and the mismanagement of staff savings and loan society funds.

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