

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 December 2006

## **Sri Lankan telecom workers strike**

More than 6,000 Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers began a national strike on November 23 for a 30 percent salary increase, a 3,000-rupee (\$US 27) allowance and the resolution of salary anomalies resulting from the privatisation of the Department of Post and Telecommunication which began in 1991.

Other demands include an improved promotion scheme, guaranteed job security and an end to contract hiring. Workers picketed company offices across the country, banned overtime work and imposed a work-to-rule several days before the walkout.

Union leaders called off the strike on November 27, after accepting a 17.5 percent pay increase from the company. Many SLT workers told *World Socialist Web Site*, however, that they were not satisfied with the increase or that none of their other demands had been met.

## **Plantation workers demand pay rise**

Around 500,000 tea and rubber plantation workers throughout Sri Lanka began a go-slow on November 22 for a pay increase. The workers want a 135-rupee rise to lift their daily pay rate to 300 rupees (\$US2.7) and the doubling of daily allowances which currently stand at 50 rupees.

Plantation workers in many estates have held protests since October in support of their claims. Major unions such as the Ceylon Workers Congress, the Upcountry Plantation Front and the Plantation Workers Liberation Front are now involved in the dispute. Many leaders of these unions are ministers in the current Sri Lankan government.

## **Sri Lankan state sector employees fight for wages**

State sector employees in several public enterprises took industrial action in support of pay increases last November. On November 21, engineering staff at the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board began a “non-cooperation” boycott of all discussions with management, refusing to attend committee meetings that deal with tendering and they have banned overtime.

On November 22, auditors, inland-revenue workers, Department of Census and Statistics employees and graduate workers picketed the Department of Public Administration. They took action after rejecting a government-appointed salary committee recommendation that would have resulted in a pay cut for some workers.

On November 28, railway track and bridge inspectors suspended all additional duties and demanded the abolition of salary anomalies. The railway workers allege that they are not being paid in accordance with their educational standards.

## **Indian teachers demand pension and gratuity**

Hundreds of teachers and other employees at government-aided private schools protested in Tam Taram on November 27. They are opposing the Punjab state government’s refusal to restore pensions and gratuity payments withdrawn in May 2003.

The protestors rallied at Sri Guru Arjun Dev Secondary School and then marched through the town. Speakers condemned the state government and warned of further action if employees’ demands were not met.

In a separate dispute, central government employees in Himachal Pradesh held a daylong sit-down protest in Shimla. The workers were demanding a 1,000-rupee interim relief payment and the implementation of pay commission recommendations.

## **Indian village council workers protest**

Andhra Pradesh Village Council (Panchayat) workers, including many women, held a sit-down protest and surrounded the Collectorate building in Nizamabad on November 27.

The workers want immediate implementation of a 10-point charter of claims, including a provident fund for permanent and contract workers, minimum wage rates for part-time workers, payment of all salary arrears, job security and paid holiday leave for watermen.

## **Pakistani railway workers demand revised pay scales**

Pakistan Railways workers demonstrated at the Karachi Cantonment Station on November 28 demanding a revision of pay scales, overtime payment for working extra hours and an increase in running allowance. The rail employees are members of the Workers Federation (PRWF) and the Loco Running Association.

## **Indonesian workers protest for minimum wage rise**

About 1,000 factory workers from industrial complexes in Cimahi protested outside the West Java Governor’s Office in Bandung on November 23 for a minimum monthly wage of 880,664 rupiah (\$US95.72).

The workers rejected a joint recommendation by the government, employers and unions which only provided a minimum wage of 840,000 rupiah. The protest is the latest in a series of actions rejecting the official recommendation.

## **Filipino university workers defy court order**

Unionised employees at the University of San Agustin (USA) are defying an order by the Iloilo City Council to end a 540-day protest at the university gates and remove “unsafe” banners and other items from the footpath. Over 330 workers struck in September 2003 claiming that the university owed them a share of tuition fees totalling more than 38 million pesos (\$US706,320).

Labor Secretary Patria Sto Thomas declared the strike illegal on “technical grounds”. This decision was upheld by the Court of Appeals and when employees returned to work the university sacked 17 union officials. The USA Employees Union appealed the lower court decision.

In April 2006, the Supreme Court upheld the original court decision claiming that the university was correct in refusing to pay workers’ claims because it had insufficient funds. The main demand of the

protest now is for the reinstatement of the sacked union officials.

### **Workers' protest attacked outside Australian embassy**

On November 30, security guards, supported by police, attacked a workers' demonstration outside the Australian embassy in the RCBE Plaza building in Makati City in the Philippines. The protest was called by the Kilusang May Uno (KMU) in solidarity with mass protests by workers in Australia against the Howard government draconian industrial relations laws, WorkChoices.

Police and security guards armed with batons and shields, and some carrying AK47 assault rifles, beat up protestors and attempted to push them off the pavement into the path of oncoming traffic.

The protest was allowed to continue with workers chanting "WorkChoice is no choice" and "Repeal WorkChoices". A spokesman for KMU said: "We are particularly shocked that private security guards, working indirectly under the responsibility of the Australian embassy tried to suppress our action".

### **Auto parts workers demand entitlements**

Auto parts workers at Ajax Fasteners in Braeside, Melbourne are continuing their sit-in at the factory's canteen for the payment of all outstanding entitlements. The 200 workers were stood down without pay after the company closed operations on November 29. Termination notices are now pending. The failed company, which makes nuts and bolts for Ford and Holden, claims that it cannot pay severance pay and other entitlements totally around \$12 million.

Ajax was supposed to continue operating until March next year under a "rescue package" worked out in August by the company administrators, major car firms and the unions. Holden and Ford, however, withdrew funding after major shareholder Allen Capital put Ajax into receivership this week over a \$4.5 million debt.

The Australian Workers Union has no intention of mounting a campaign to defend jobs and is seeking a deal that will assist in an orderly closure of the plant. The collapse of Ajax follows decisions by Ford and Holden to reduce production at its Victorian plants and cut several hundred jobs.

### **New Zealand lab workers strike**

Over 1,200 laboratory workers employed by 16 District Hospital Boards (DHBs) across the New Zealand struck on November 29, following a breakdown in pay negotiations.

The Medical Laboratory Workers Union (MLWU) members want a 5 percent per annum pay increase and a starting salary of \$45,000 (\$US28,840). The DHBs refuse to budge from their original offer of 5.5 percent over two years.

The strike is already impacting on hospital services, particularly surgical operations which have been put back one week. MLWU president Stewart Smith has denied media reports claiming that the union was prepared to reach a settlement "guided by the consumer price index".

### **New Zealand food workers picket**

More than 100 workers at food manufacturer Griffins Papakura in Auckland, picketed the factory on November 28. Workers took action when collective bargaining negotiations with the company's new owners Pacific Equity Partnership—an Australian conglomerate—became deadlocked. The management is demanding the removal of a provision from the current agreement giving an extra week annual leave for long-serving employees.

A regional spokesperson for the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) said workers were also unhappy with the company's pay offer. They are seeking a pay increase on a par with the offer made by the company to workers in Wellington. The offer to the Auckland

employees is at least 50 percent less. SFWU members have endorsed a proposal for further industrial action, including overtime bans, work stoppages and pickets.

### **New Zealand hospital workers to strike**

Nearly 3,000 hospital support workers employed by District Health Boards across the country will strike on December 13 in support of a single national multi-employer agreement (MECA). The Service and Food Workers Union has tried to get the DHBs to discuss the issue over the past six months. The SFWU wants a MECA that delivers a standard wage above current levels.

Union advocate Shane Vugler said hospital service workers were now worse off than in 1990 when they were paid 45 percent above the minimum wage. That margin has vanished and many service workers are being paid just \$10.25 an hour.

Vugler claims that the DHBs refusal to negotiate breaches their legal obligation under the Employment relations Act.

### **Council workers step up industrial action**

On November 28, the Southern Local Government Officers' Union, representing 1,000 workers at the Christchurch City Council gave notice of a 24-hour strike for December 14. The action is in addition to a three-hour strike already planned for December 8. A meeting of about 600 union members rejected the council's latest pay offer and endorsed increased industrial action prior to Christmas.

The offer gives junior officers a lump sum of 3 percent in the first year and base rate increases of 2.5 and 2 percent for the next two years. Under the deal, new recruits will be paid between 2.6 percent and 8 percent below existing employees.

### **Fiji goldminers strike over unsafe work roster**

More than 400 workers at the Vatukoula gold mine walked off the job on November 27 to protest a new "continuous work" roster that they claim is unsafe. Emperor Gold Mine management imposed the new roster, which is designed to speed up production, claiming it was necessary to "rescue the mine from debt".

Fiji Mine Workers Union general secretary Satish Chandra said that under the new roster workers would be forced to resume shifts with inadequate rest breaks. Union officials, management and Ministry of Labour officials are currently meeting to discuss the issue.

### **PNG security workers sue for entitlements**

On November 23, around 700 former employees of Protect Security Limited began legal action to force the company to disclose pay deduction records. The workers claim the company had been deducting 5 percent of their wages as contributions to the National Superannuation Fund (Nasfund). However, when they received their final payout it did not contain a refund of the Nasfund entitlements.

A spokesman for the group said that the company was also supposed to deposit the equivalent of 7 percent of workers' wages into Nasfund but had failed to do so. The company is refusing to comment on the issue.



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