

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 November 2007

Asia

Korean workers and farmers clash with riot police

Thousands of workers, farmers and students protesting against the US-South Korean free trade agreement clashed with police in central Seoul on November 11. Around 23,000 riot police were mobilised to block a march of more than 20,000 demonstrators. Police used water cannon and fire extinguishers while protesters attempted to defend themselves with sticks and stones. Over 100 demonstrators were arrested while 50 suffered head injuries.

Protestors raised concerns that the free trade agreement would eliminate agricultural jobs and employment in other sectors. The demonstrators also called for fair treatment for non-regular workers and abolition of the National Security Law. The demonstration was organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions with rallies in South Gyeongsang, Daegu, North Gyeongsang and Chungcheong provinces.

Rail workers call strike

Korean Railway Workers' Union members and cargo handlers from the Korean Transport Workers' Union walked out on November 16. The strike came after 11 meetings between the unions and Korail over the past three months that failed to resolve wage and job claims. The National Labor Relations Commission claims the strike is illegal because arbitration is still proceeding.

According to the unions, Korail has repeatedly rejected demands for a 5 percent pay rise, reinstatement of 46 fired workers, withdrawal of planned layoffs and permanency for contract workers. The company has threatened to use managerial staff, retirees and some military personnel to run train services during the walkout with Korail president Lee Cheol declaring that he would "sternly" deal with striking workers.

Indian steel workers demonstrate over pay

Steel workers in Salem, in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu, demonstrated on November 12 to demand the

government merge 50 percent of the dearness allowance with basic pay and to provide interim monetary relief, pending a wage revision. Other demands include the filling of all public sector vacancies and the reduction of wage differentials between ordinary employees and officials. The workers are members of the Steel Plant Employees Union.

Sri Lankan ASMs picket over jobs and wages

Department of Railways assistant stationmasters (ASMs) picketed the Maradana Railway Station, Colombo's main railway complex, on November 12. They want job confirmation for 146 assistant stationmasters and an immediate salary increase.

Although some of the ASMs have been employed for more than 30 years their salary is just 7,000 rupees (\$US62). A meagre cost of living allowance of 375 rupees has also been cut, even though Sri Lankan President Rajapakse promised to provide funds in the recent budget for its continuation.

In a separate dispute, hospital workers in the port city of Trincomalee went on strike on November 15 in protest against a salary cut.

Australia and the Pacific

Victorian teachers vote to strike

More than 15,000 state school teachers in Victoria have overwhelmingly voted in a state-wide postal ballot for a series of strikes for a 30 percent pay increase over three years. A stop-work meeting is planned for November 21 with industrial action expected to continue next year with a 24-hour stoppage planned for February 14 and rolling regional four-hour stoppages throughout Term 1.

While Victorian state school teachers are the lowest paid in Australia, the Labor government has refused to increase a 3.25 percent per year pay offer. Australian Education Union state president Mary Bluett said the offer was inadequate because Victorian teachers on the top pay scale were paid about \$7,000 a year less than their New South Wales counterparts.

Queensland brewery strike enters second week

Union members at Fosters' brewery at Yatala in South Brisbane have entered the second week of rolling strikes. The 4-hour, four times a week, stoppages have cut beer production by 50,000 cartons and are in opposition to a company non-union wage agreement.

Fosters is using the Howard government's WorkChoices legislation to force employees onto Australian Workplace Agreements or individual contracts that allow employers to drastically cut conditions. The workers are due to vote on the company's latest offer next week.

Tasmanian nurses lift work bans during arbitration

About 250 public hospital nurses meeting in Hobart on November 12 lifted work bans for 48 hours to allow negotiations in the Tasmanian Industrial Relations Commission to go ahead. The bans, which have been imposed over the last four weeks, have closed 20 percent of the state's public hospital beds and stopped non-urgent elective surgery.

The nurses want a 6.7 percent pay rise, in line with the wage rates of interstate colleagues, the maintenance of current staffing ratios and to stop untrained people being used in nursing roles. The state government has refused to increase its original 3.5 percent pay offer and accept other claims by nurses.

Air NZ issues lockout notices

Air New Zealand has informed 107 Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members that they will be locked out from November 26 to December 6. Another 21 SFWU members in cargo will be locked out for two days on December 4.

Unionists were told by the airline that the only way to avoid the lock out was to accept a three-year work agreement and major attacks on working conditions.

The company wants to cut meal allowances and eliminate extra shift allowances and overtime rates, including double time for overtime performed after midnight and on weekends. Air NZ also wants a new pay scale and "flexible" roster arrangements that could cost the already low-paid workers up to \$20,000 a year. The proposed work agreement does not guarantee minimum working hours with some employees only given 20 hours a week or three hours a day.

The lockout threat follows a deal by rival airport services union, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), earlier this year which gave major concessions to the company. Following the deal, the airline pressured SFWU members to change over

to the EPMU.

Air NZ will apply to the Employment Relations Authority this week for penalties of up to \$2.69 million against the SFWU for alleged breaches of good faith, even though the union previously attempted to settle the dispute through the Department of Labour.

Air NZ notched up record profits last year of \$214 million. The NZ Labour government, which holds an 80 percent stake in the company, received \$150 million.

Statistics NZ staff escalate industrial action

Statistics NZ workers escalated industrial action this week with field interviewers refusing to send data used to compile the Food Price Index (FPI) and the Consumer Price Index (CPI). The ban will continue until the end of November.

A spokesman for the Public Service Association, which represents more than 540 Statistics NZ employees, said the department has refused to negotiate a pay increase.

Statistics NZ insists on paying field interviewers \$14 an hour, \$3.18 an hour less than office-based employees. Those on the top rate of \$16.50 an hour earn \$4.40 less.

French Polynesia hospital doctors' strike

French Polynesian hospital doctors walked out on November 12 and were joined two days later by private practice doctors. A media statement by the doctor's union said that members were fighting against "the rampant degradation of the (French) Polynesian hospital system and maintaining, for the benefit of residents, the level of health care that they are entitled to as citizens of a developed land".

The strike has hit services at the Territorial Hospital Center in Papeete, as well as smaller hospitals on Tahiti's peninsula, Raiatea in the Leeward Islands, Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands, and Tubuai in the Austral Islands.

In a separate dispute, security and fire service employees at Tahiti's main international airport went on strike on November 12 over pay and conditions. Workers from Tahiti's main harbour took solidarity strike action two days later.



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