

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 December 2007

Sri Lankan postal and health workers strike

In separate disputes, around 19,000 postal workers and 20,000 health employees at 20 Sri Lankan hospitals went on strike on November 27. The postal workers want a new Post Master General and the reactivation of a committee to investigate corruption. They fear that rampant corruption could lead to the bankruptcy of the department and thus facilitate its privatisation.

The strike disrupted the mail delivery system, with the Central Mail Exchange in Colombo and divisional sorting centres almost deserted. Administrative officers, post masters, delivery men and clerical workers were involved in the walkout.

The health workers are demanding the removal of machines that record fingerprints to register arrival and departure times at workplaces. They also want the immediate payment of outstanding overtime and weekend pay.

The strike was widespread and included employees from the Castle Street Maternity Hospital, De Soyza Maternity Hospital and General Hospitals at Kalutara Nagoda, Badulla, Matara and Galle, Teaching Hospitals at Mahamodara and Galle, Peradeniya Children's Teaching Hospital, Base Hospitals at Hambantota, Mulleriyawa and Gampola, and the Chest Hospital at Welisara.

Sri Lankan power and municipality workers demand pay rise

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) power workers demonstrated on November 28 outside the CEB headquarters in Central Colombo. They want a salary increase promised by the government last October. Union officials suspended strike action at that time, after the government gave an assurance it would increase salaries. Workers have threatened strike action if the government promise is not honoured.

In a separate dispute, Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) contract workers remain out after going on strike on November 21 for a wage rise. Garbage is piling up in the several areas around Colombo, including Jinhupitiya. The workers are employed by a private company that has a contract with the CMC.

Sri Lankan plywood workers oppose factory closure

Around 450 workers demonstrated outside the Labour Secretariat in Galle and demanded re-opening of a plywood factory in Ginthota this week. The workers were locked out by the company and the factory closed on November 28 after workers demanded a general pay increase and refused to work on Sundays unless they received additional pay.

Employees were only paid around 3,500 rupees (\$US31) but wanted at least 5,000 rupees, which is the government-approved rate. Workers also claim that management sometimes forced female employees to work throughout the night. By law female workers cannot be kept back after 10 p.m. Around 100 females were employed at the factory.

Indian government workers protest over conditions

Government employees at the Tamil Nadu Rural Development Office protested in Tuticorin on November 26 in support of a charter of demands. They wore badges on their shirts displaying their demands.

The demands include a reduction in salary "disparity" between seniors

and juniors working in the same rank, settlement of seniority issues and the publication of district seniority lists to establish transparency in promotions. They also want the district administration to reinstate Illangudi, a part-time village assistant, who was recently dismissed for what workers claim were "trivial reasons".

In a separate dispute, Food Corporation of India (FCI) executive staff in the Krishna district unit in Andhra Pradesh held a sit-down protest outside the FCI district office on November 27 against privatisation measures implemented by management.

Indian broadcasting employees strike over pay

Over 350 administrative staff at Doordarshan Kendras and All India Radio broadcasting stations in Karnataka held a four-day pen-down strike from November 20 to demand the removal of salary anomalies between program and engineering staff in the two establishments.

Station staff representatives in Akashvani and Doordarshan also held a 72-hour relay-hunger strike in Delhi over the same demands. The workers are members of the Administrative Staff Association.

Indian power workers demand minimum wage

Contract workers at electrical sub-stations in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, held a sit-down protest outside the Circle of Eastern Power Distribution Company Limited (EPDCL) office near Jagadamba junction on November 26. They were demanding minimum wage rates and have accused contracting companies of exploiting their employees. The companies have contracts with EDPCL, which owns the sub-stations.

According to a May 31 ruling by the Labour Commissioner, the workers should be paid a minimum monthly wage of 4,394 rupees. Contracting companies, however, only pay half the amount. Workers claim that employers have threatened to sack them when they insist on being paid the minimum wage.

Other demands include the withdrawal of plans to cut contract staff, and the filling of vacancies for 80 junior and assistant line men positions with qualified contract workers. The protest was called by the Vidyut Contract Karmikula Sankshema Sangham.

Chinese workers strike over pay cuts

Thousands of workers at Alco Holdings Limited, a Hong Kong-owned electronics factory in the southern Chinese province of Guangdong, went on strike and protested outside the factory in Dongguan city on November 27. Riot police were called in after protesters sat in the middle of the road, causing a massive traffic jam.

The workers were protesting against the company deducting between 250 and 300 yuan (\$US34-40) from employees' wages for the provision of meals. The Labor Department has assigned officials to mediate in the dispute.

Tibetan teachers protest low pay

A protest by 200 Tibetan teachers outside the government office building in Rebkong in the province of Qinghai entered its third week on November 22.

The teachers are college graduates who are employed as temporary staff and only paid between 200 and 450 yuan (\$US30-54) a month. They want

pay parity with full-time teachers whose monthly wage is 2,000 yuan.

Nike workers strike in Vietnam

Over 10,000 workers at the TeaKwan Vina Company, a Nike shoe factory in the southern province of Dong Nai, struck on November 20 for improved pay and the provision of better lunchtime meals at the works' canteen. Workers at the South Korean-owned factory have written to management for months demanding a severance pay scheme, more sick days and holiday bonuses. The provincial Labour Federation is currently investigating the issues.

Philippines transport workers protest over sackings

About 270 former workers of Davao Integrated Transport Facilities Incorporated (Difti) protested outside the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) on November 23, calling on the department to take action on their case over dismissals before the end of the year.

Difti, a contractor of Dole-Stanfilco, suddenly closed its Davao operation on October 8 without any prior notice. The company is withholding the workers' entitlements in an attempt to force them to sign voluntary resignation papers. The workers claim the closure is illegal and are demanding their jobs back.

Victorian teacher officials to vote on further industrial action over pay

Over 100 regional councillors for the Australian Education Union (AEU) in Victoria voted on November 30 to vote for rolling four-hour stoppages during First Term next year. The future action is in addition to a planned 24-hour strike on February 14. The union represents more than 38,000 Victorian teachers who walked out for one day to attend a mass meeting on November 21 to launch their wage campaign.

Negotiations between the state Labor government and the AEU broke down this week after nine months of fruitless talks. The government has refused to budge on its offer of an annual 3.25 percent pay increase for three years. The teachers are demanding 10 percent annually.

Victorian teachers are among the lowest paid of Australian state school teachers—those on the top rate receive \$7,000 or 11 percent less per year than their counterparts in New South Wales—and more than 19 percent, or almost one in five, are on short-term employment contracts.

Industrial action by Qantas engineers looms

The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association applied to the Industrial Relations Commission this week for a ballot of its Qantas members on a proposal for industrial action over a new work agreement and an "adequate" pay rise.

The ballot will be completed by December 22 and Qantas could face industrial action starting in January if it fails to improve on the 3 percent pay offer it has made to aircraft engineers. The engineers are responsible for checking aircraft maintenance work and approving aircraft to fly.

The Association has dismissed the pay offer as "not quite good enough" but ruled out any action before Christmas. Industrial action will include overtime bans, bans on higher duties and stop-work meetings.

Air NZ lockdown notices withdrawn

Air New Zealand has withdrawn lockdown notices it issued to 120 check-in staff at Auckland International Airport pending further talks. Members of the Service and Food Workers Union, however, were to be locked out from midnight on November 26.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and management are due to resume negotiations this week. The company wants to cut pay and conditions. Air NZ said the three-day lockdown would go ahead if no settlement was reached.

New Zealand laundry workers hold fifth day of strike

A strike by 16 Invercargill commercial laundry workers entered its fifth day earlier this week. The workers went on strike and began picketing on November 20 after negotiations between the Service and Food Workers Union and Alsco NZ broke down. The workers are demanding better pay and a single collective agreement with their Alsco counterparts in

Dunedin.

A lockdown notice was withdrawn after the Employment Court gave a verbal decision restraining the action by interim injunction. Alsco has been attempting to force the workers to accept separate agreements for each site and meagre pay rises. Alsco NZ's CEO confirmed that the company threatened further lockdown notices.

Industrial action continues at Statistics NZ

Statistics New Zealand has had to postpone the publication of the November 2007 Food Price Index report due to industrial action. Bans by Public Service Association (PSA) members have prevented Statistics' analysts from accessing vital data needed to produce and publish the index at the originally scheduled dates.

A PSA spokesman said Statistics continued to ignore government bargaining parameters by refusing to allow the bulk of its staff to negotiate on pay and has rejected a PSA bargaining team proposal for a return to negotiations.

Key points in the PSA demands are a negotiated adjustment to pay rates for staff covered by the department's main collective agreement and a job evaluation for field interviewers who attend peoples' homes to gather information. They are paid up to \$4.40 an hour less than Statistics staff who interview by phone and want parity.

Office staff will continue an overtime ban that began on September 30. Field interviewers have decided to maintain a ban on submitting pricing data used to compile the Food Price Index and the Consumers Price Index that was due to end on November 30.

French Polynesia doctors' strike enters second week

A doctors' strike in French Polynesia continued this week and public hospitals are only providing emergency services. The doctors went on strike on November 12, demanding the government increase its public health budget to meet increasing demand. Negotiations on November 19 between the doctors' union and the government failed to resolve the issue.

The Health Ministry had earlier turned down union attempts to negotiate, stating that the government lacked the financial resources because of deficits at the French Polynesia Hospital Centre and the Caisse de Prévoyance Sociale (CPS)—Tahiti's public social welfare system.

After the CPS forecast a deficit of 3.755 billion French Pacific francs (\$US46.7 million) for 2008, the Health Ministry stated it was "not possible to accept for the moment the union's demands". The budget increase sought by doctors is estimated to cost 1.5 billion French Pacific francs (US\$18.6 million) annually.

Strike over arrest of New Caledonia union official

Members of the Union for Exploited and Kanak Workers (USTKE) in New Caledonia struck for 24 hours on November 21 following the arrest of union official Gerard Jodar. Jodar has been detained over two incidents of alleged violence. About 3,000 workers walked off the job and marched to the French High Commission building in Noumea.

The public prosecutor alleges that Jodar and four others had failed to respond to court summonses. It is also alleged that union members assaulted a court official outside a construction company that had been shut by a union blockade. The other incident relates to unionists allegedly assaulting two police officers during a visit to Noumea by the French overseas territories minister. USTKE has labelled the arrests as the "criminalisation" of union activities.



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