

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 October 2009

Thai rail workers end strike

State Railways of Thailand (SRT) passenger and cargo services between southern Thailand and Bangkok resumed this week after train drivers ended a five-day strike over restructuring and safety. The drivers are opposed to a proposed restructure that divides the SRT into three subsidiaries: track maintenance, train operations and assets management, insisting it will be a first step toward privatisation.

Drivers are also protesting the lack of maintenance on locomotives and the sacking of a driver involved in a fatal derailment in Prachuap Khiri Khan early this month in which seven passengers died and 88 were injured. As a part of their industrial action, drivers refused to man 36 locomotives they claimed were unsafe due to lack of maintenance, saying their actions were to prevent a repeat of the October derailment.

On the safety issue, drivers have gained the support of the State Enterprise Labour Relations Confederation (SELRC), an umbrella group of the 43 state enterprise unions. The SELRC and SRT union drew up a charter of demands, and the SELRC said that if they are not met by October 26 it will call an assembly to discuss possible strike action at state enterprises.

The charter of demands calls for the government to order the SRT to repair all trains within a month, and insists that SRT executives must take responsibility if there are accidents before the repairs are complete. Other demands include that SRT train drivers on southern routes do not have to work if the trains have not been completely repaired and that SRT not use retired drivers and SRT engineering students to drive the trains.

Hong Kong: Indonesian domestic workers protest

Hundreds of Indonesian domestic workers marched to the Indonesian consulate in Causeway Bay, Hong Kong on October 18 to denounce the “irregular and illegal” employment agency fees being charged each time they sign a new contract. Under the labour law, the maximum commission agencies can charge is 10 percent of the salary for the first month of employment.

The current standard pay for domestic helpers is \$3,580 (\$US464) a month. However, workers claim agencies are getting around the law by not issuing receipts, and charging hundreds of percent higher. In a recent survey of over 1,000 domestic workers, 59 percent said they paid from \$1,000 to \$4,000, while 15 percent paid between \$11,000 and \$15,000.

The workers, however, cannot expect to get a sympathetic hearing from the Indonesian government. It has decreed that first-time helpers from Indonesia must pay \$21,000 to recruitment agencies—equivalent to about six months’ salary.

Indian auto workers strike

Industrial activity in Haryana’s Gurgaon-Manesar auto-parts manufacturing belt in Gurgaon city came to a halt on October 20 when 100,000 workers from 60 factories walked off the job to protest the death of a colleague. Ajit Yadav died three days earlier in a clash involving 3,500 striking workers and company thugs and scabs during a pay dispute at Rico Auto Industries. Workers from Sona Koyo Steering Systems, Hero Honda Motors, Bajaj Motors and Lumax Industries joined Rico workers in a sit-down protest outside Rico and demonstrations in the streets.

Rico workers have been negotiating with management since August, seeking an annual salary increase of 10,000 rupees plus freedom to form a union. Sixteen workers have been suspended during the dispute.

Protestors submitted a memorandum to Gurgaon city’s additional deputy commissioner, seeking compensation of 5 million rupees (\$US104,600) for Yadav’s family, police action against those guilty of Yadav’s death and a job for one member from Yadav’s family. Satbir Singh of the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) said the company should also recognise the union and pay 500,000 rupees to each of the 40 workers injured in the clash with management.

Workers rejected a company offer to pay Yadav’s family compensation of 500,000 rupees and provide a job for Yadav’s wife. The Gurgaon Police Commissioner said he had called for ten companies from the Haryana Armed Forces and India Reserved Battalion “to tackle the situation”.

Indian uranium unions call general strike

Four striking unions, representing 4,400 workers of the Uranium Corporation of India Limited (UCIL), called for a dawn-to-dusk bandh (general strike that includes small businesses) on October 21 in the village of Jadugora, Jharkandabout.

The bandh, which evoked a total response, was called by the Jadugora Labour Union, Uranium Kamgar Union, Uranium Mazdoor Sangh and Singhbhum Uranium Mazdoor Union on the 14th day of an ongoing indefinite strike in support of a wage rise, which has been overdue since April 2008.

The unions are demanding a five-year agreement with the management for a 27 percent pay rise, a dearness allowance and two extra increments in a year. In talks last Friday, UCIL increased its original offer from 18 percent to 23 percent, but without extras.

Bangladeshi garment workers walk out

On October 21, garment workers at several factories in Malibagh, Dhaka walked off the job and set up barricades on the Pragati Sarani road to protest over unpaid wages. Police dispersed the protesters after one hour.

Sri Lankan petroleum workers take industrial action

More than 1,000 workers at the state-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CRC) began industrial action on October 22 to push for a pay rise and a 5,000 rupee (\$US43.50) interim allowance. Action includes work-to-rule and a ban on overtime work for Saturday and Sunday. A day earlier, workers demonstrated in front of the CRC petroleum storage facilities at Kolonnawa on the outskirts of Colombo.

Petroleum workers get a pay increase every three years and their next one was due in January this year. However, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse imposed a pay freeze for all public workers from 2006. Last month the petroleum minister promised the workers an interim allowance with arrears from January, but the promise has not materialised. Workers are threatening strike action if their demands are not met soon.

Health administrative workers demonstrate

About 3,000 assistant administrative employees of the Sri Lanka health service demonstrated at the Kandy and Colombo general hospitals on October 20 to mark their opposition to the government's proposal to integrate their jobs with the government administrative service.

According to workers, the proposed integration would lead to confusion and reduce working benefits like promotions and salary increments. Workers warned the government that if the proposal was implemented they would resort to further class actions that would include other employees of the sector.

Filipino farmers and plantation workers protest over poverty

Thousands of peasant farmers and plantation workers converged on cities in four different areas in Negros Occidental in the Philippines on October 21 to protest against increasing poverty and the lack of land reform. Rallies were held in the cities of Bacolod, Kabankalan, San Carlos and Guihulngan. At a rally the previous day in Cagayan de Oro, farmers pelted fruit and vegetables at life-size photos of President Gloria Arroyo.

According to Salil Shetty, director of the United Nations Millennium Campaign, one in three Filipinos lives on \$US1 a day, five million children remain out of school and 93 newborn babies and 11 mothers die each day. The latest government data shows that poverty rose from 30 percent of the population in 2003 to 33 percent in 2006.

The rallies were organised by Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW) and other affiliated groups. Jose Benemerito Jr., secretary general of the farmers' group Kasama, said seven out of 10 farmers all over the country were still landless and "worse, hungry". Benemerito described the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program Extension with Reforms (CARPER) as "the worst of all land reform programs" since the time of President Marcos.

WA public school support staff vote for industrial action

Support staff, including education assistants, cleaners and gardeners, employed at public schools throughout Western Australia voted this week to begin a campaign of industrial action in order to secure a pay rise and permanency for workers on fixed-term contracts.

Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union members have rejected the state Liberal government's offer of 8 percent over three years, or 2.5 percent annually, saying it would add only 44 cents an hour to their pay. The union has proposed a 20 percent rise over three years.

No industrial action has been announced as yet, nor any details as to what action is planned. The state government has indicated that it will take the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand hospital workers protest pay freeze

More than 2,700 hospital workers, including orderlies, cleaners, kitchen workers and security guards, held stopwork meetings and set up pickets outside 35 hospitals on October 16. Service and Food Workers Union members are protesting a pay freeze imposed by the government on all health sector employees. The workers have voted to hold a further mass work stoppage of up to 24 hours next month, which according to the union will involve as many public sector and publicly funded workers as possible.

Workers involved in last week's protests have a starting pay rate of just \$14.62 (\$US10.51) an hour.

Ministry of Justice workers escalate industrial action

This week, more than 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the New Zealand Ministry of Justice escalated work-to-rule industrial action begun on October 14 and have begun taking their breaks at the same time, forcing temporary midday closures of Whakatane and Te Awamutu District Courts and Rangiora court. PSA members, including security officers, library staff, reception workers, building maintenance staff and messengers, are protesting a government proposal to freeze wages and cut redundancy entitlements in a new work agreement. The union has been in negotiations with the ministry since two previous collective agreements expired on June 30.

According to PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff, the Ministry of Justice workers are paid on average 6.3 percent below the median pay rate for public servants and are denied the right to collectively negotiate their contracts. The ministry wants to freeze wages until July 2010 and then implement performance-based pay increases. The PSA said it would organise strike action next week if the government did not withdraw its proposed wage freeze.

Plastic packaging workers strike over wage freeze

On October 21, 130 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at the plastic packaging manufacturer Cryovac Sealed Air in Porirua began industrial action over the company's attempt to

impose a wage freeze, despite making a \$6 million profit in the first seven months of this year. The industrial action includes work-to-rule, an overtime ban and a refusal to provide cover for absent staff. The union said action would continue until further notice and escalation was not ruled out.

Like the government, New Zealand employers are citing the current economic crisis to justify freezing wages, but the cost of living rose by 1.7 percent over the past year.

Brewery workers strike over wages

Some 44 production staff at the Mainland Brewery in Timara (owned by Dominion Brewery- DB) struck for four days from October 19 and picketed the plant holding placards saying, "No wage freeze". A further two staff walked out at DB's Monteith's Brewery in Greymouth.

Negotiations for a new work agreement, which began in May between the company and the EPMU and Service and Food Workers Union, have stalled with the company wanting to freeze wages. The unions propose a 4.5 percent wage increase. According to the unions, DB posted a profit of \$29 million for the last financial year and has cut staff by 10 percent.

Metal workers strike

About 165 workers at MCK Metals in New Plymouth held a one-day strike on Tuesday. The EPMU members are protesting a pay increase offer of 2.25 percent and a proposal to cut redundancy entitlements for new workers by 34 weeks. The union has been in negotiations with MCK for over two months for a new contract.

Dunedin electrical workers strike

Seventeen EPMU members employed by Dunedin City Council subsidiary Delta Utility Services held a 24-hour strike on October 20 and picketed Delta's offices and the City Council buildings. According to the EPMU, which represents 27 Delta workers, the company wants to reduce sick leave pay and holiday pay as well as reduce maximum redundancy entitlements from 52 weeks to 26 weeks for new hires.

PNG air traffic controllers' strike cancelled

A planned strike by members of the Papua New Guinea Air Traffic Controllers Union was called off on October 16 after PNG Air Services Limited said it would return to negotiations. Air traffic controllers want better employment and salary conditions, outstanding entitlements to be paid and two sidelined officers to be reinstated. They are also demanding a review of the organisational structure and representation on the PNGASL board.





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