Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Korean government intensifies attacks on striking rail workers

Seoul police on November 30 raided the head office of the Korean Railway Workers Union (KRWU) to arrest 15 union leaders on charges of instigating what the Lee Myung-bak government has called an illegal nationwide strike that is disrupting the state-run Korea Railroad Corporation's (KORAIL) operations. The union leaders had fled the offices before police arrived and are hiding.

KORAIL filed complaints against 182 unionists for alleged "interfering with business", claiming the strike has caused about 4.7 billion won ($US4 million) worth of operational damage to the company. Despite KORAIL's use of non-union workers, retired train drivers and military engineers to try to keep services running, passenger services dropped by 60 percent and 70 percent of freight trains remain idle. The independent truckers' union is refusing to transport KORAIL cargo affected by the strike.

Around 16,000 KRWU members began strike action on November 26 to protest KORAIL's cancellation of their collective agreement. During negotiations for a new agreement, KORAIL annulled the existing one, because the parties could not narrow their differences, particularly over the reinstatement of fired workers. KORAIL wants the union to agree to the company's downsizing plan, wage cuts and reduction of welfare programs.

KORAIL's walkout during negotiations reflects the Lee government's intention to increase attacks on Korean workers' wages and conditions. In August, riot police were used to crush a strike at embattled Ssangyong Motor Company over a massive layoff plan. In the end, union leaders dropped their key demands. Emboldened by the government's Ssangyong victory, KORAIL chief executive Huh Joon-young, a former national police chief, said management was not going to give in to "unreasonable" union practices. "We're going to make sure we teach the union a lesson this time," he told the media.

Lee government continues attack on public sector unions

At the same time that police stormed the KORAIL union's offices, Seoul's Yeongdeungpo Police Station was dispatching some 40 police officers to conduct a search and seizure raid on the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU) office in Yeongdeungpo. Police alleged that around 600 government employees had participated in a November 8 Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) rally and that suspected violations of the State Public Official Acts were discovered there, including the distribution of printed materials critical of the government. It is a criminal offence in Korea for government employees to criticise the government. The police raid was on the same day the KGEU filed its notice of union establishment.

Last week, the government shut down all 59 regional offices of the KGEU as part of the administration's clampdown on unionised civil servants. Last month, the Lee administration labelled the KGEU an "illegitimate entity" after it aligned itself with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The government has stopped deducting union dues from the pay of 50,200 KGEU members.

On the day of the police raids on KGEU and KRWU offices, the state-run Korea Labor Institute (KLI) implemented a lockout against 51 striking employees. Members of the Korean Union of Public Sector Research and Professional Workers struck on September 21 to protest the institute's unilateral dissolution of its collective agreement. Union official Lee Gwang-o said that both parties were close to a final agreement when suddenly management cut off contact and implemented a lockout.

Korean workers protest new industrial laws

On November 29, hundreds of Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) members held a joint demonstration in front of the Government Complex Building in Gwacheon City, Gyeonggi Province to protest new labour laws they claim will weaken the unions.

The Lee government wants to implement the laws next year, which will allow multiple unions in workplaces, but only one union will be given the power to negotiate. The laws, which were passed in 1997 but never implemented, also ban companies from paying wages to full-time union representatives. On November 7, around 50,000 unionised workers rallied

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in Seoul followed by 16,000 the next day, over the labour laws.

Thai government seeks eviction order against protesting garment workers

Thailand's Ministry of Labour this week began court proceedings to remove protesting garment workers from the ground floor of its headquarters. Laid-off employees from the Bang Phli factory of clothing manufacturer Body Fashion, which produces lingerie and swimwear under the Triumph brand, have been occupying the ground floor of the Ministry of Labour in Bangkok since mid October to protest the sacking of 1,960 workers in July.

Thailand's labour minister is refusing to talk with the laid-off workers, so around 200 Triumph Labour Union members have set up a protest garment factory in the ministry building and are producing underwear to sell to Ministry of Labour workers and to the public.

In June, Triumph began eliminating over 3,700 jobs from its plants in Thailand and the Philippines as part of a company restructure. After shutting the Bang Phli factory, the company moved to another province where workers are paid 180 baht ($US5.30) per day compared to the 333 baht paid at Bang Phli. Workers are demanding the company reinstate them or pay fair compensation.

Bangladeshi garment workers walk out

Hundreds of garment workers of the Envoy Group at Jamgorah, Ashulia walked out of the factory on November 28, carrying furniture which they used to barricade the main road in front off the factory for over two hours. Workers took action after factory authorities decided to pay salaries for just 15 days of November. Police intervened and arrested two protestors and forced the workers back to work without the full month's pay.

On the same day, police intervened in a demonstration by 600 unpaid workers of Amco Fashions who barricaded the Darussalam Road for about an hour demanding salaries and Eid (festival) bonuses. Factory owners even refused to pay 15 days' salary for November, in violation of a government directive.

Indian port workers on a flash strike

Port workers at the iron ore berth at Chennai port launched an indefinite strike on November 30, to protest the Chennai Port Trust's decision to transfer 160 employees from the berth to other sections. Loading operations at the berth came to a complete standstill. After 12 hours of the strike, Port Trust management cancelled the transfer orders and the strike came to an end.

Indian AIDS control workers on strike

Around 6,000 employees of the Maharashtra State AIDS Control Society (MSACS) launched an indefinite strike from December 1, complaining they have been working for 12 years on contract and want permanency. Workers are also demanding to be considered at par with central government employees and given all the facilities of central employees.

The MSACS employees union estimates the strike will affect 6,000 people treated daily at the state's 604 Integrated Counselling and Testing Centres.

Uttar Pradesh university teachers resume industrial action

Teachers from across Uttar Pradesh, under the aegis of Lucknow University Teachers Association (LUTA) and Lucknow University Associated College Teachers Association (LUACTA), this week attended stop-work meetings demanding full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission. Permanent faculty teachers did not resume duty and went on "mass casual leave'".

In August, teachers called off industrial action after Lucknow University agreed to pay revised salaries at par with the commission's recommendation. However, the state government has refused to calculate back pay to January 1, 2006 as recommended by the commission. Teachers have resolved to hold a protest at the state assembly in Lucknow on December 14.

Indian construction workers end strike

Nearly 2,000 construction workers on the Supermax project at Haldia Petrochemicals (HPL) near Kolkata, West Bengal ended a four-day strike on November 24 after the HPL Contractors Workers Union accepted a new collective agreement. Workers will receive a 104 percent rise in the first year of the agreement, followed by 21 percent the second year and a further 20 percent the third year. In the first instalment, the average monthly wage of 3,000 rupees ($US68) will increase to 6,000 rupees, backdated five months.

During the strike, 20 workers were injured when police baton-charged a picket line during a confrontation between striking workers and scabs who tried to forcibly break the picket. Workers accused political leaders of trying to sabotage their strike by mobilising INTTUC member (the Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress) who were not HPL

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employees.

Sri Lankan hospital workers on strike

Over 60 medical staff, including doctors and nurses, attached to the Intensive Care Unit (ICU) of the Karapitiya teaching hospital near Galle, downed tools on December 1 over the failure of authorities to provide face masks to protect them from the A-H1N1 virus. A striking doctor told the press that there were three patients diagnosed with the A-H1N1 virus receiving treatment at the ICU. Workers said only five masks had been issued.

Australian food processing workers locked out

Some 70 Heinz Baby Foods workers have been locked out of the Echuca, Victoria factory from December 2 after implementing work bans over a new work agreement. Operations have ceased at the factory, which produces baby food and cans of baked beans and spaghetti. Australian Workers Union (AWU) members are protesting shift changes in a proposed work agreement that will reduce shifts from 12 to 8 hours, leaving workers $7,500 worse off a year.

While Heinz management said it was willing to hold further talks, it indicated it was standing firm, maintaining it had put together a competitive package for an agreement.

Geelong nurses impose work bans

Australian Nursing Federation members employed by the City of Greater Geelong in regional Victoria implemented work bans commencing November 30 after a breakdown in pay negotiations. Nurses want pay parity with neighbouring Surf Coast councils, which they claim are paying $5,000 a year above Geelong City pay rates. Bans include not making home visits or answering phone calls.

Meanwhile, around 450 Australian Services Union (ASU) members who are locked in a pay dispute against the City of Greater Geelong said they will maintain work bans enforced on November 21. ASU members also want pay parity with employees at neighbouring councils.

The ASU has rejected the city's latest offer of a flat across-the-board pay increase over two years, claiming the offer gets lower paid workers to the 10 per cent wage increase they are seeking but continues to leave higher paid staff without parity to neighbouring councils.

Australia Post workers vote on industrial action

A ballot for industrial action by 18,000 Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) members in a dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement with Australia Post closed on December 4. The result will be announced next week. As well as a wage increase, the union is seeking protection of full-time jobs and penalty shifts, an improved dispute resolution clause and an end to the use of company paid doctors, whom the union claims are forcing employees back to work even when they are still sick or injured.

The union intends to impose limited bans to "limit public inconvenience". CEPU national president Ed Husic said bans would include not checking if mail is stamped, which he claims could affect revenues of $35 million ($US30.5 million). The union has been in negotiations with Australia Post for over 20 months.

NSW miners walk out

Over 200 mineworkers at Xstrata's Tahmoor coal mine in New South Wales walked off the job on November 30 and held a protest meeting as part of their campaign for improved job security and safety conditions. Fourteen months of talks between the Construction, Mining, Forestry and Energy Union (CFMEU) and Xstrata stalled last week, with the company wanting to remove key clauses from the existing collective agreement that requires minimum manning levels and pay parity between contractors and permanent employees for the same work.

The union has accused Xstrata of wanting to impose similar agreements at all its mines to those at the company's Ulan and Oaky Creek mines, where permanent employees have been replaced by underpaid contractors.

Xstrata is hoping to axe 280 positions from its New South Wales workforce in a planned restructure. In September 100 miners at Xstrata's United Collieries in the Hunter Valley struck for four days for a security clause in a new work agreement after being told the mine would close in March next year. Xstrata is a Swiss global mining group with operations in Australia, South Africa, Spain, Germany, Argentina and the UK. It employs approximately 24,000 people world-wide.

WA construction workers on strike

Around 2,000 construction workers building Woodside Petroleum's $12 billion Pluto liquefied natural gas project in Western Australia, have gone on strike to protest changes to mainland housing arrangements. The Rudd Labor government has threatened legal action against the strikers.

The Pluto workers are housed at the Gap Ridge Village at Karratha, in the Pilbara region, about 1,600 kilometres north of Perth. Workers are protesting against new accommodation arrangements that would see them

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change units every month instead of getting permanent self-contained units in which they can secure personal belongings while away on the job. Woodside claims the change is necessary in order to maximise housing use.

Queensland child care workers protest

Childcare workers seeking improved staff-to-child ratios lobbied Queensland Premier Anna Bligh at a community cabinet meeting in Brisbane's southwest on November 29. Protesters brandished placards and chanted "childcare workers deserve better". Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members want the current 1:4 staff-to-children ratio for children up to two-years-old reduced to 1:3 by 2020, and ratio reductions for all other ages.

Bans lifted at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

The ban by RMIT University workers on processing students' end-of-year results was lifted this week after the university and the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) struck a deal on a new workplace agreement. The university has agreed to pay a salary increase of 16.5 per cent over three years. Negotiators will finalise the new agreement in the coming days.

A ban on processing student results remains in place at Melbourne University, where staff voted last month to begin industrial action in a bid to pressure the university into negotiating a new agreement. The NTEU began negotiating for separate new work agreements at about 30 universities across Australia over 18 months ago.

New Zealand retail workers vote to strike

Around 2,000 National Distribution Union (NDU) members at retail giant The Warehouse voted this week at stop-work meetings in Wellington and Auckland to strike, hold protests at stores and distribute leaflets to the public to push for a new work agreement. NDU members at the Botany Downs store struck on December 2, to be followed by stop-work meetings at other centres. Some 800 members of the company union are legally barred from taking industrial action.

Workers earlier rejected a proposed contract which would tie wage increases to the rate of inflation for the next three years, but included a raft of restructuring proposals called "Project Invigorate", which would allow the company to increase work shifts to 10 hours a day or 50 hours a week during peak periods without consultation. NDU organiser Sam Oosterman claimed the company is following a trend toward increased flexibility, casualisation and part-time hours and away from full employment.

Ministry of Justice workers resume industrial action

Around 1,800 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the New Zealand Ministry of Justice struck for two hours on November 30 and resumed work-to-rule industrial action after talks between the ministry and the union broke down. The latest action is the fifth strike since workers began industrial action in October over a government proposal to freeze wages until July 2010 and then implement performance-based pay increases. The union has been in negotiations with the ministry since two previous collective agreements expired on June 30.

Last week, the PSA rejected a ministry offer of a $750 lump sum payment. According to the union, 1,200 court registry officers are paid 9.25 percent below the median pay rate for public servants. Preparing for a sell-out, PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff has indicated he is willing to trade conditions for a pay increase. He said the union is prepared to offset the cost of a pay rise by helping the ministry to find "ways of working more efficiently, identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity."

NZ aged care workers to strike

Around 700 nurses, healthcare assistants and support staff at 15 Presbyterian Support Central (PSC) sites in the lower North Island will strike for up to 24 hours between December 6 and 11. Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) members have rejected a recent pay offer that included an increase of just 25 cents an hour. The unions have accused PSC management of employing staff from an outside agency to cover hard-to-fill weekend shifts, at a higher pay rate.

The starting rate for PSC workers is $12.97 an hour, just above the $12.50 minimum wage, while the top rate is only $14.53 an hour.

Solid Energy miners return to work

Miners and maintenance staff at the New Zealand government-owned Solid Energy (SE) coal mines have returned to work, ending strike action which began on October 29. The strikes, by around 800 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members, had affected mines at Rotowaro and Huntly East in the North Island, and Stockton and Spring Creek in Buller and the West Coast.

Huntly East miners voted on Monday to accept a pay offer of 8.5 percent. They had previously demanded 13.5 percent. Workers at the remaining three mines voted to accept a national collective agreement

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which included a pay raise of 2 percent in the first year and 3 percent in the second year, as well as a $2,000 lump sum.

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