

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 September 2002

Philippines canning workers strike

Over 600 workers at the Miramar Fish Canning Company in Zamboanga City have been on strike for two weeks to force the company to comply with a new work contract. The workers have not received work benefits and incentive payments agreed to over 12 months ago.

Miramar Workers Union president said the strike action was called after negotiations with management failed to resolve some 23 issues. He made it clear that the union would compromise to end the strike.

Indonesian workers rally against government legislation

Several thousand workers rallied outside Indonesia's House of Representatives in Jakarta on September 24 against two planned industrial laws. Police used water cannons against workers as they tried to break through police lines at the parliament gates.

The bills, on "labour protection" and "industrial dispute settlement", are aimed at cutting workers' rights and making it easier for companies to layoff employees. Employers have also rejected the bills, claiming they do not go far enough. They want the legislation revised to impose harsher restrictions on strikes and to cut redundancy entitlements.

Thai car workers demand cap on contractor numbers

Car workers from 20 auto plants in Thailand are petitioning the government to demand contract labour employment be restricted to no more than 30 percent of the workforce. Thai Auto Industry Labour Federation Chairman Vivat Phansra said that contract labour was "like a form of slavery" because contract workers have "no job security and no welfare".

Workers have called for work stoppages if the car companies refuse to negotiate on the issue. They also want contract workers to be given the same benefits as those on permanent hire. The use of contractors is also increasing in other industries, such as garment manufacturing.

Pakistani municipal workers on strike

About 800 workers at the Larkana Municipal Council in Pakistan have been on strike for more than five days to demand payment of overdue salaries and the immediate

release of three detained fellow workers. Workers have established roadblocks and are occupying council premises. A spokesman for the municipal employees said the strike would continue until their demands were met.

Sri Lankan tax officers picket head office

Inland revenue officers have begun a campaign against the government's decision to merge the Inland Revenue, Customs and Exercise departments to form the new Inland Revenue Authority.

Employees picketed Inland Revenue offices in central Colombo on September 16 and put up posters denouncing the merger plans. According to union leaders, the government wants to cut the workforce and contract most of the new authority's operations to private companies.

Sri Lankan hotel workers campaign for salary increase

Hotel workers picketed the Ceylon Tourist Board in Colombo on September 17 as part of a campaign for a 15-point log of claims. Their main demand is for an 8,000-rupee (\$US80) monthly wage. The campaign is being organised by the Inter Company Workers Union.

Building workers protest safety breaches in Western Australia

About 1,500 building workers in Perth, Western Australian stopped work for one day on September 24 to protest against continuing safety breaches on worksites. The protest follows the death of 47-year-old Desmond Kelsh, who was crushed when a concrete fabricated "tilt up" panel fell on him. Two other workers were injured in the accident, with one requiring hospital treatment.

According to building unions, the WorkSafe authority rarely conducts safety inspections on building sites unless there have been injuries or deaths. Frank Allen, whose son died in 1996 in a building site fall, has made a plea for more government inspectors, random workplace monitoring and harsher penalties for negligence in the industry.

Victorian fire fighters rally for better wages and conditions

Around 800 professional fire fighters demonstrated in Melbourne on September 23 and met to discuss industrial action for a new workplace agreement outstanding since

June. Their demands include introduction of a new career structure and a pay increase. The fire fighters say a wage rise is justified because workloads have increased following the elimination of 400 jobs.

Gillette workers strike over wages and conditions

About 70 workers at shaving goods manufacturer Gillette began indefinite strike action in Melbourne on September 24. The workers are subcontracted by trucking company Linfox to work in Gillette's distribution centre in the outer eastern suburb of Scoresby.

The strikers want a new workplace agreement and say they will not return to work until Linfox agrees to their demands. A union spokesman said Linfox should understand that "they can't apply transport industry conditions to what is essentially a warehouse."

Academics oppose sacking of union president

Academics and staff at the University of Queensland (UQ) rallied at St Lucia campus on September 26 in opposition to the university's decision to sack union president Professor George Lafferty. The academics are members of the National Tertiary Education Union. Calls have been made for a boycott of UQ by visiting national and international academics.

The academics believe that Professor Lafferty has been dismissed for speaking out against the introduction of full upfront fees in Australian universities. Speaking to the local media, Professor Lafferty said: "Academics are facing a dark age of governance in which staff and other people would work in a climate of fear, being afraid to voice opinions. This university will be regarded as a pariah."

Building workers demanded improved conditions

More than 600 building workers stopped work and marched through Brisbane on September 25 in support of a new work agreement. They are demanding a 15 percent pay rise, a 36-hour week and an increase in employers' contributions to their superannuation fund. The present work agreement is due to expire in January next year.

New Zealand nurses vote to strike over pay

Nurses in Rotorua, Taupo, Whakatane and Hamilton will join those from other northern district health boards in rolling afternoon strikes from October 1 to October 24, following a breakdown in pay talks. The nurses, from five different health boards, are also demanding a single employment agreement. The boards involved are Lakeland Health, Bay of Plenty, Waikato, Northland and Tairāwhiti.

The nurses voted 92 percent in favour of the strike action. A representative for the NZ Nurses' Organisation said nurses needed better pay and conditions and a unified career structure in order to attract staff. The union has asked for mediation sessions to be scheduled for early October.

New Zealand phonebet operators protest over pay

Phonebet operators protested outside the TAB's Petone headquarters on September 23, in an ongoing dispute over pay. About 500 operators are employed nationally by the agency to take telephone bets for various race meetings. The protest followed a series of bans in which workers refused to take calls for two-minute periods just before the cut-off point for placing bets.

At the centre of the dispute is a pay disparity between fulltime and so-called "non-core" operators. The non-core workers are paid \$1.41 less per hour than their fulltime colleagues, who receive about \$13 an hour. Phonebet staff have not had a pay increase since 1992 when they were awarded \$1.75 more an hour. Their employment contract lapsed in July.

Strikes continue at Otago University

Over 700 Otago University academic staff held stop-work meetings, set up picket lines and began rolling strikes on September 23 in an ongoing dispute over pay. While the university's general staff were not involved in the stoppages some joined picket lines. The academics are also considering withholding exam marks, effectively preventing graduations.

Two Collective Employment Agreements are presently under negotiation, one covering general staff and the other academics. The general staff were seeking an eight percent pay rise but voted last week by a narrow margin to allow a three percent offer to go for formal ratification next week. Academic staff overwhelmingly rejected the same offer. A spokesman said that the general staff vote was not high enough to ratify the offer.

The vice chancellor has blamed budget cuts by successive governments for the university's inability to offer more money.

PNG unions threaten action over delayed pay and layoffs

Papua New Guinea public sector unions gave the government seven days to end cost cutting in the public sector on September 24. Fourteen unions signed a petition opposing government proposals to delay the payment of workers' allowances until mid 2003, end recruitment and reduce staff levels.

The Mount Hagen City Authority workforce has not been paid for three months due to government budget shortfalls. Most of the city's 130 workers have been sacked and only essential services are being provided.



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