

# PNG unions scuttle national strike

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The Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress (TUC) has shut down a national three-day strike that erupted when workers in key industries walked out to protest the Skate government's 1999 budget.

Workers at a mass meeting in Port Moresby on November 27 voted for the strike when the TUC executive failed to show up at the meeting following a conference with government representatives. The union leaders had intended to put a no-strike recommendation to the meeting.

Strike action spread rapidly as workers in the power, maritime, mining, airline, banking and public sector industries stopped work or imposed bans that cut services and brought many industries to a standstill.

Power workers closed down the electricity supply between 8am and 5.30pm each day and switched off supplies to industries, government departments and institutions that had defaulted on payments to the electricity corporation. Parliament was only able to sit because the building has its own emergency generator.

Airline workers cut services and forced the removal of key government members from flights. Prime Minister Bill Skate was prevented from attending a mineral exploration conference in Australia. Air Niugini claims that it lost more than 3 million kina because of industrial action. Services in the country's hospitals had to be cut back when health workers took action.

After failing to push through a resolution at a mass meeting on Monday to end the strike, the TUC executive issued a directive on Wednesday to cease all industrial action. It claimed that the government had met 90 percent of its demands. However the key aspects of the budget that undermine workers' conditions remain intact.

These include the elimination of 7,000 public sector jobs, or 10 percent of the total public workforce, and the privatisation of a number of government industries

and departments. Newly-appointed Public Service Minister Peter Peipul said the 7,000 retrenchments would commence in January.

The government will continue to slash 325 million kina (\$US158 million) from recurrent spending and proceed with its plan to introduce a new Value Added Tax (VAT) that will drive up the price of food and other basic necessities.

The government has brushed aside a union demand that Skate sack his economic advisor, Pirouz Hamilton-Rad. It is also maintaining its handout of 1.5 million kina to selected MPs to spend in their electorates.

The government has agreed to form a committee to continue discussions with the unions on implementing the cuts and to study the impact of its consumption tax on living standards before introducing the tax next July.

Skate reiterated the government's intention to maintain a number of the 15 government statutory authorities, agencies and committees that had previously been targeted for elimination--an issue of deep concern to the union leaders, who serve on many of these bodies.

In issuing the TUC directive, the TUC general secretary John Paska warned strikers they would be abandoned to face any legal action taken by the government. Anyone who defied the TUC directive 'would be on his own,' he said.

Outlining a course of action for the government, Paska warned that the strikers could be charged with sedition. 'To overthrow the budget equates to overthrowing the government. They can be charged with sedition,' he said.

The PNG Chamber of Commerce had earlier called for legal action against strikers and for the government to 'penalise and deregister' unions that persisted with industrial action.

The TUC leaders have launched proceedings to expel TUC president Gasper Lapan, who is a Telikom

employee and president of the PNG Communication Workers Union. Sections of the communication union and parts of the Police Association resisted the TUC's return to work moves. They wanted the negotiations with the government to include an industrial lawyer, Lawrence Titimur, who was sacked by the TUC board last week. Titimur has since alleged that government funds have been used to destabilise the trade union movement.

Paska told the media that the strike had been ended 'in the best interests of the workers and the country'. The union leaders only utilised the threat of a strike in the first place to secure their own interests, which were threatened by aspects of the government's budget measures. Once the government gave the unions a participatory position in implementing the cuts the union bureaucracy was as anxious as the government to end the wildcat action.

By scuttling the strike, the union leadership has given the crisis-ridden Skate administration a breathing space. On the same day that the TWU issued its directive, Skate adjourned parliament for seven months to avoid a possible no-confidence motion in January.

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