

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

31 July 1999

## **Thai power workers oppose privatisation**

After a two-month truce imposed by the unions, power workers in Thailand have resumed their campaign against government attempts to privatise the industry. The sell-off includes the giant Ratchaburi power plant that is due to be completed soon.

The unions suspended protest action when the government agreed to the establishment of a tripartite review panel consisting of union, management and the government representatives “to consider all options”.

Over 400 workers demonstrated outside the headquarters of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) this week when they learned that the management had refused to consider the views of the workforce.

Early in July the management and unions conducted an opinion poll prior to scheduling a vote by employees on the privatisation plan. The survey revealed that over 80 percent of the workforce opposed the sell-off. Faced with the results, the management decided to ignore the survey and cancel the ballot.

The workers are threatening to hold further demonstrations early in August.

## **Taiwanese workers strike over jobs and benefits**

Some 30,000 workers took part in a demonstration organised by the Chinese Federation of Labour through the streets of Taipei on Thursday to the parliament and the health department building. Outside the cabinet building, which was heavily guarded with barbed wire and several hundred police, some demonstrators threw eggs and rotten oranges.

The protest was held against a planned new healthcare scheme, which will place further financial burdens on workers. Demonstrators from all over the island called on the government to provide better benefits and lower mandatory contributions to its pension and insurance scheme. Speakers also called for measures to reduce unemployment.

## **Korean broadcasting unions end strike**

The leaders of the National Broadcasting Labor Union and the National Federation of Media Labor Unions in South Korea announced on Monday they would call off a 13-day strike at the country's major broadcasting networks.

Hundreds of union members went on an indefinite strike on July 13 in protest at the lack of broadcasting independence in the government's proposed integrated broadcasting law.

Workers fear that the new law will bolster state control over broadcasting stations. They are demanding a guarantee of full independence of the broadcasting commission, personnel hearings for appointing a president and executives to broadcasting companies, and a limitation on stock possession by commercial broadcasting companies.

The two unions ended the strike without any concrete agreement to the demands from the government. According to a union spokesman, representatives of the ruling National Congress for New Politics had promised to “do their best” to get the unions' demands accepted by the forthcoming special session of the National Assembly.

## **Sri Lankan workers picket health ministry**

Workers from the Threeposha factory picketed in front of the Ministry of Health and the Ceylon Tobacco Company in Colombo on July 20. The 250-strong picket was part of a campaign to win a 15 percent salary increase, an increase in the night shift allowance, and the provision of uniforms and other hygienic facilities.

Threeposha factory, situated in Ja-ela, a northern suburb of Colombo, produces a type of nutritional flour for pregnant mothers and undernourished babies. Workers said that if the present factory conditions prevail, the products would be unhygienic and unfit for consumption. The factory is owned by the government and managed by the Ceylon Tobacco Company.

## **Sick note campaign hits Sri Lankan rail services**

Engine drivers from the Sri Lankan Government Railway launched a sick note campaign on July 20, to press for three demands including: cancellation of the lease of 18 miles of track to the privatised Puttlam Cement Company and the establishment of entry requirements for engine driver posts.

When the drivers reported in sick, about 3,000 rail commuters were forced to use other means of transport. The few operating trains were staffed by retired drivers. Usually 320 trains run daily on the island.

The Locomotive Operating Engineers Union is threatening further industrial action unless its demands are met. The union president K.V.R. Gunasekara said: "The Station Masters Union and Railway General Union have promised to join us if the government fails to grant our demands."

### **Indian university teachers strike**

University and college teachers all over Maharashtra state in India went on a one-day strike last Wednesday to protest against the non-enforcement of their salary increment. Around 150 teachers, members of the Maharashtra Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations, who had gathered at Azad Maidan, were arrested and taken away four police vans.

Even though salary scales were finalised year ago, the teachers were upset at the piecemeal way in which the government has enforced the new pay scales. A spokesman said: "While government and semi-government employees, primary, secondary and even junior college teachers are being paid according to the new scales, we are still receiving the old scales. The teachers have threatened all-out strike action if their demands are not met."

### **NSW firefighters threaten strike**

A strike by 3,000 full-time firefighters in New South Wales will go ahead on Sunday unless the state government agrees to remove abnormalities in its death and disability benefit scheme.

Over 1,500 firefighters who joined the fire service before 1985 are covered by the State Superannuation Scheme, which entitles them to a lifetime pension if they are injured on or off the job. Those recruited after that date receive only a small lump sum payout or no payment at all.

The government made an offer this week to extend the lifetime pension provision to the remaining 1,500 firefighters but stipulated that it would only be paid if

they were killed or injured on duty.

### **Court orders end to strike at correctional centre**

Union leaders sent striking staff at the Riverina Juvenile Justice Centre in Wagga, New South Wales, back to work on Thursday after the Industrial Relations Commission criticised the strike action and ordered that it cease.

The walkout on Wednesday was sparked by the workers' concerns over unsafe working conditions and a shortage of staff. Management and "volunteers" took over the officers' duties. The Public Service Association, representing the staff, is to continue negotiations with the Department of Juvenile Justice.

### **Building workers march in Sydney**

Over 50,000 Sydney building workers stopped work on Wednesday and nearly 15,000 marched through the city to a rally outside the New South Wales Parliament.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) called the stoppage to demand that the state government allow the establishment of union-employer death and accident compensation scheme.

The union claims that workers benefits are at risk because the state-run scheme, WorkCover, is in the red. A union spokesman said that at least 40 percent of building contractors (mostly small operators) were not paying their legally required premiums to the fund.

The executive director of the Master Builders Association announced that the organisation was backing the union proposal because it "offered the only hope of reducing premiums for building employers".

The CFMEU wants to launch the alternative scheme by next July but cannot proceed without government permission. The union threatened to call a 48-hour strike if its demand is not met.



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