

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 September 1999

Child laborers protest

Hundreds of child laborers in the north Indian city of Kanpur, marched through the town this week in protest against the shocking exploitation suffered by this section of the Indian workforce. Chronic poverty forces hundreds of thousands of small children throughout India to work for low wages under the most brutal conditions.

The marchers were also protesting the high levels of illiteracy among child workers. Speakers at the end of the march demanded that employers be made to educate their child labourers. The protest was joined by scores of other workers.

Suzuki workers in Pakistan carry on struggle

Employees at the Pak-Suzuki Motor Co in Karachi, Pakistan are still fighting for the reinstatement of 90 workers who were sacked in July 1998 when they organized and formed their own union, the Pak-Suzuki Motor Co. Star Workers Union.

Local police barred union members from entering the plant and the company initiated a campaign of intimidation against casual and permanent workers sympathetic to the dismissed employees.

The sacked workers took legal action against the company and last month the presiding judge ruled that the workers had the right to form and register a union.

Suzuki management responded to the ruling by announcing that it plans to sack hundreds more workers who support the Star Workers Union. The company intends to cut production from three shifts to one and create the conditions to slash the 1,250 strong workforce.

A union spokesman said the workers will continue their struggle until all have been reinstated with full back pay. Workers everywhere are urged to lend their support.

Protests can be sent to the company in Japan to Mr Osamu Suzuki, fax: +81-053-448-9365 or by phone at +81 053- 440-2438.

Send letters of support to:

Aijaz Ahmed,
Secretary General [Pakistan Trade Union Movement],
B-54, Block 4A Journalist Society,
Gulshan-e-Iqbal, Karachi,
Pakistan

Protest by medical students and doctors in Colombo

A 5,000-strong column of medical students, parents and doctors marched across Colombo on September 6 to hand over a list of demands to the government ministers responsible for health and education. They marched about four kilometres to the health ministry and picketed for over an hour. Representatives from the

action committee of medical students handed over their demands to the relevant ministers.

Major demands of the action committee are to stop the privatisation of health services, abolish the private medical colleges, provide government jobs to all students passing out from medical colleges and raise the budgetary allocations of the health sector.

The Health Minister accused the students of being stooges of political movements and said categorically that there was no way of providing government jobs to every doctor in the country.

Marchers went to the Vihara Maha Devi Park after the demonstration and launched the All Ceylon Association of Parents of Medical Students by amalgamating 20 district associations of parents of medical students and vowed to continue the struggle.

Workers sacked at Free Trade Zone factory in Sri Lanka

About 1,100 workers at the South Korean-owned Hein Lanka factory in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone near Colombo were sacked on September 4. Management fired the workers after strike action on the previous day protesting against the dismissal of members of the factory's workers' council. The council president and another member were sacked on August 20 and a female representative was dismissed on September 1.

Workers said management's aim was to cut the workforce, speed up production, drive up productivity and profits.

Protest campaign at Colombo Port

The Container Transporters Association is preparing to launch a protest campaign against the handing over of container transportation at Colombo Port to a single company. The association members—small transport haulers—have been carrying out the work for about 20 years.

The association secretary, Sunil Fernando, said about 3,000 people depend on the transportation work. "Those transporters have bought about 200 vehicles for container transportation by getting bank loans totalling Rs. 4,000 million [\$US570 million]. We have to face unexpected problems because the P & O company has decided to hand over the transportation to one company. We will face default to the banks and be unable to maintain our vehicles properly," he said.

After the leasing the Queens Jetty at Colombo Port, P & O contracted out container transportation to a Singapore and Sri Lankan joint company on September 6. The government is in the process of privatising Colombo Port. The association has warned it will take immediate action if there is no solution to their problems.

Australia and the Pacific

PNG workers to walk out over wages

National Capital District Commission workers have threatened to go on an indefinite strike if the Papua New Guinea government refuses to pay a long outstanding pay increase and other entitlements by September 20. Former Governor Bill Skate signed an agreement in 1995 awarding the workers a 32 percent pay rise. The agreement was again ratified in 1997 by Governor Philip Taku. The workers are also critical of the government's management of a home ownership scheme first approved in 1986. Since then, not a single home has been built.

Housing workers demand reinstatement

About 170 workers in Papua New Guinea retrenched from the National Housing Corporation have begun a petition campaign to demand reinstatement. The workers met at the NHC headquarters in Tokarara on Wednesday to draw up a petition to be presented to the Minister for Housing, John Kamb.

The workers are demanding the reinstatement of the old structure under which they were previously employed, the removal of the Corporation's managing director and the dismissal of the chairman of the board of directors. The petition also calls for an end to the Corporation's practice of hiring casual labour this year to undermine full time employment. The retrenched workers are still awaiting wage and other entitlements owed to them.

PNG teachers to push for entitlements

Teachers in the Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands are demanding a union campaign to force provincial authorities pay overdue leave entitlements before the end of this year. Many teachers have not received their leave airfares since 1995 while others are owed 60,000 kina in housing allowances.

The union has refused to call any industrial action but will only "seek legal advice" over the outstanding payments owed to the teachers.

The teachers are also demanding that the provincial government make vehicles available to community and primary school inspectors. The teachers are concerned that education standards in the Eastern Highlands are dropping because the inspectors have no transport to visit the widely dispersed schools.

Australian postal workers on the verge of walkout

Nationwide industrial action threatened by postal unions was called off after management agreed last weekend to review staffing levels. Postal workers, in Victoria, NSW and Canberra are angry that reduced staffing levels are forcing them to work 13-hour days in an attempt to clear mail backlogs.

Postal centers at Baulkham Hills, Minto, Warriewood and Botany in Sydney, in particular, are badly effected by staff cuts. Postal workers are also protesting Australia Post's policy of replacing permanent staff with contract labor from body hire agencies.

New South Wales teachers take strike action

New South Wales state school teachers began a series of rolling stoppages this week to protest against the Carr Labor government's refusal to continue negotiations on a 7.5 percent pay claim. The teachers are also seeking clarification on staffing levels and pay rates for casual teachers.

Teachers at St. George, Port Jackson, Bondi, Shell Harbour, Batemans Bay, Wollongong and Queanbeyan staged two-hour

walkouts.

President of the NSW Teachers Federation, Sue Simpson said the industrial action would continue all week unless the government agreed "to discuss and increase its pay offer."

Nuclear reactor workers on strike

More than 600 workers employed at Sydney's Lucas Heights nuclear reactor struck on Tuesday. The workers are protesting over the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation's decision to eliminate voluntary redundancy arrangements from their work agreement. The dispute is currently before the Industrial Relations Commission.

Crew occupy ship

The French-owned ship Australian Enterprise, which was held up for several days last week in South Australia when its crew members staged a sit-in, has been further delayed in the West Australian port of Fremantle.

The seamen are demanding that the company abide by an agreement it made promising them employment for at least two years. The company recently revealed that it planned to sell the ship and abandon Asian trade routes. The ship was only able to leave South Australia after the owners agreed to rehire the crew to another vessel.

A spokesman for the Maritime Union of Australia said that the company has reneged on that promise and that the crew "unanimously agreed to stay on board and hold the vessel to berth indefinitely".

New Zealand health workers strike

More than 500 nurses, midwives and caregivers employed by Pacific Health in Tauranga, New Zealand, went on strike for 48 hours earlier this month over pay and working conditions.

A spokesman for the Nurses Organisation, the union covering the strikers, said the industrial action was "an expression of the extreme frustration nurses feel at inadequate pay and the refusal of Pacific Health to adequately address safe staffing and quality issues."

According to the union, five years ago Tauranga nurses were among the best paid in the country. They have now slipped well down the national rankings. The nurses' strike action and picket lines outside health centres won strong support.



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