

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

25 September 1999

Thai workers demand unemployment benefits

Over 3,000 industrial workers from workplaces across Bangkok staged a mass rally this week in front of Government House. The Labor Congress of Thailand (LCT) organised the demonstration to protest the government's lack of action in providing a social security payments scheme for retrenched workers.

A union spokesman said that despite a similar rally last year, "the Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, has not done anything to assist sacked workers. Promises made to investigate the workers' concerns have been reneged on".

Deputy Labor Minister Jongchai Thienngtham informed the unions that the government would not be considering a benefits plan until 2001 and indicated that even then workers would have to contribute 5 percent of their wages to the scheme.

Thai workers already make contributions to the Child and Old Age Welfare Fund amounting to nearly 5 percent of their pay.

Government workers demand pay rise

Government workers in the Philippines held a rally outside the Congress Building in Manila last week to press for a wage increase of 3,000 pesos a month (about \$A120). The rally was organised by the All-Government Employees Unity, an alliance of unions covering state employees from a range of government departments, as well teachers and health workers.

The workers had earlier rejected a government offer that would have amounted to less than 20 pesos a day. Addressing the rally, a union spokesman condemned the offer as an "insult" to public workers. "Some teachers are being paid as low as 6,000 pesos a month and the situation for health workers is no better," he said.

The country's public sector workers have not had a pay rise since 1994. The cost of basic goods and services has doubled since then.

SEP member fights intimidation in Sri Lanka

H.A. Dharmasena, a member of Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, has registered a complaint with the Postal Department and the police after being threatened

last week by N.N.D. Weerasinghe, the post master in Anuradhapura, in the country's North Central Province.

Weerasinghe had physically assaulted Dharmasena, who works at the Anuradhapura post office, on a previous occasion. However, earlier complains had been ignored by both the police and the Postal Department.

The threats are politically motivated and are aimed at stopping the SEP member from campaigning against the government's plans to privatise postal services. Other postal workers say that Weerasinghe is a henchmen of Peoples Alliance (PA) government and a supporter of privatisation.

Weerasinghe assaulted a number of other employees, including N.M. Senevirathna, on August 25, but the authorities ignored their complaints. The police have now been forced to act against Weerasinghe following a campaign among postal workers conducted by the SEP.

Plantation workers strike

Workers at the Penmoor tea estate in Hatton, Sri Lanka, started a go-slow campaign on September 19 demanding that the management reverse its decision to refuse to enroll seven female workers for daily work.

The management decided not to employ the women after they had complained about the increased workload being demanded of them to compensate for receiving a penalty rate payment.

The workers are entitled to the one-and-half days pay for working on Sundays. The management demanded that the women pick 24 kilograms of tea leaves on Sundays when the target for a normal day is only 18 kilograms.

Plantation workers fight factory closure

Over 265 workers on the Peram estate in Talawakelle, a hill town in Sri Lanka's plantation region, launched a token strike earlier this month to protest against the management's plans to remove machinery from the estate's tea factory.

The factory was shut down in 1995 by the estate owner, the Maskeliya Plantation Company, but was supposed to be re-opened some time in the future. Hundreds of jobs in the region will be lost if the factory is closed permanently.

On September 17 the management and the police attempted to remove the machinery even though they had pledged not to do so in a meeting with the union two days previously.

The workers are also complaining that health and educational conditions are deteriorating rapidly. Whereas in the past, five to six workers had been assigned to clean and maintain the area surrounding the workers' quarters, this has now been reduced to only one. Drinking water and lavatory facilities are also below minimal standards.

The estate school is only equipped to teach up to fifth grade. Children requiring further education are forced to walk 5 to 6 kilometres to the town of Talawakelle.

Bangladesh port workers attacked by police

Police attacked striking port workers at Bangladesh's Chittagong Port last week, injuring at least 30 and arresting over 100 others. About 5,000 workers employed at the port on a casual or temporary basis have been on strike since September 9 demanding their jobs be made permanent.

On September 16, 200 soldiers were deployed in a scab operation to ease the cargo jam that had resulted from the workers' strike. The police attacked the strikers when they attempted to block the strikebreakers entering the port.

Chittagong is the main port in Bangladesh, handling over 80 percent of the country's exports and imports.

Indian teachers strike

Teachers in the northern Indian city of Delhi, members of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Teachers Association (JNUTA) held a strike this week to protest a cost cutting program by the University Grants Commission.

The Commission is refusing to create new teaching posts and aims to slash education spending by 10 percent. A teacher's spokesman said, "the proposed cuts will have a drastic effect on research and experimental work at the university".

Strike hits Sydney rail services

A 24-hour strike on Friday by members of the Australian Services Union employed by CityRail cut Sydney's 2,300 daily train services by nearly 80 percent.

The workers struck in opposition to plans by the management to destroy 450 jobs—stationmasters, assistant stationmasters and clerical staff—in line with demands by the state Labor government for cost cutting.

A CityRail spokesman said services on at least three lines in southern and southwestern Sydney were cancelled and the strike caused delays right across the rest of the network. There were no services between East Hills and Central Station, Cronulla and Sutherland and from

Liverpool to Campbelltown.

Academics reject pay offer

Academics at the Newcastle University overwhelming voted at membership meetings this week to reject a management pay offer of a 7.2 percent wage increase over three years. The staff members resolved to continue their campaign of half-day rolling stoppages, due to begin next month.

The university's offer falls well short of the 14 percent over three years that the academics are seeking in line with rise recently won by teaching staff at the Sydney University. The meeting voted to leave the conduct of the campaign and the timing of the stoppages in the hands of the union executive.

Technical teachers strike

Technical and Further Education teachers in New South Wales struck for 24 hours on Wednesday and held a rally outside Parliament House in Sydney. The teachers are protesting against budget cuts that will result in the destruction of 630 jobs and a sharp reduction in the number of courses available to students.

Teachers from the Hunter and Illawarra regions joined their Sydney counterparts in a noisy march from Hyde Park through the city to the parliamentary building. It was the second strike by TAFE teachers in less than a month. A union spokesman said the rolling strikes would continue until the government agreed to reverse the budget cuts.

Health workers rally to defend services

Health unions staged a public rally outside the Lismore Base Hospital last week to protest the Carr state Labor government's budget cuts to the Northern Rivers Area Health Service.

The cuts will result in a \$5 million funding shortfall, forcing the closure of the orthopedic ward and a woman's care unit. Over 100 casual jobs will be lost. A union spokesman warned that outpatient services might also be privatised. To save on maintenance and running expenses, two of the four lifts in the hospital—needed to handle visitors, patients, meals and rubbish removal—will be taken out of service.



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