

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

2 October 1999

Workers injured in Japanese nuclear accident

At least 37 workers were directly contaminated after a major nuclear accident at a Japanese uranium-processing plant this week. Three workers have been hospitalised and two of them, Hisashi Ouchi, 35, and Masato Shinohara, 39, are in a critical condition.

According to the plant's management a spontaneous nuclear fission began while workers were putting uranium into a tank with nitric acid, one of the processes required for producing fuel for nuclear power plants.

Radiation levels around the plant were 16,000 times higher than normal before emergency procedures were effective and over 10 times normal levels two kilometres from the accident's epicentre. Five local residents were also seriously contaminated and 150 people evacuated from the immediate vicinity.

The plant, located in the town of Tokaimura, 120 kilometres north-east of Tokyo, is operated by JCO Co, a private company that is owned by Sumitomo Metal Mining Co, one of Japan's largest business groups.

Indian teachers fight cuts

University teachers in Aligarh, in north India, are planning industrial action in protest over spending cuts by the University Grants Commission. This week, the teachers, who are members of the Aligarh Muslim University (AMU), endorsed a proposal by the Federation of Central Universities Teachers Association to begin protest action.

AMU secretary, Mustafa Zaidi said that the government was attempting to cut all public education and leave it "entirely to the private sector for commercial exploitation." Teachers have warned that the cuts will drastically reduce the quality of education available to students.

Insurance workers protest

Workers at the government-owned Life Insurance Corporation of India, in Allahabad in central India struck for four hours this week. The strikers staged a noisy sit-down demonstration in front of the company offices. The action was called to oppose the company's delay in settling a long outstanding pay claim.

The Federation of Life Insurance Corporation of India Officers Association, which represents the workers, said the government had promised to reach an agreement by October 1997, but had reneged on the commitment.

Power workers fight privatisation

Power workers in Kanpur, in northern India, joined mass

demonstrations this week to protest state government plans to privatise their industry. A union spokesman said privatisation will mean, "massive job losses and a sharp increase in the price of power for the ordinary working man in the region".

Speakers at the protest warned that if the government persisted with its proposal power workers would take all-out strike and impose widespread power blackouts.

College teachers to vote on strike

Maharashtra college and university teachers have threatened an indefinite strike in November over the state government's refusal to honor a revised salary agreement.

The government signed an agreement with the All India Federation of University and College Teachers Organization (AIFUCTO) in August last year, following a national 40-day strike by over 400,000 teachers.

While West Bengal, Tamil Nadu, Punjab and 11 other states are already paying the new salary rates, the Maharashtra teachers have not been paid, despite promises made by the state's chief minister four months ago.

The proposal for strike action will be put to the Maharashtra Federation of University and College Teachers Organization (MFUCTO) annual meeting in Bombay this Sunday.

Indian railway workers protest job cuts

Workers employed by South Central Railway demonstrated outside the company's Hubli divisional office in Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka, last Monday.

The workers were protesting over the authority's decision to hand over one section of the service to the newly formed Pune division of the Central Railway. According to the divisional secretary of the South Central Railway Mazdoor [Workers] Union, which called the protest, more than 4,000 jobs will be eliminated when the Kolhapur-Miraj-Ghorpuri section changed hands.

The protesting workers marched from the railway workshops to the rally at the divisional office. A union delegation submitted a memorandum to the divisional railway manager opposing the transfer.

Sri Lankan union breaks own rules to remove SEP member

Dehin Wasantha, a member of the Socialist Equality Party (SEP) in Sri Lanka, has been bureaucratically removed from his elected position in the University Technical Officers Union. Wasantha, a technical officer at the University of Moratuwa, was elected Engineering faculty representative to the union's

university branch committee last July.

The proposal to remove Wasantha was made by officials at a union branch meeting on August 20. Wasantha was not invited to the meeting. Officials declared that Wasantha should be removed because he had written an article for *Kamkaru Mawatha*, the SEP's Sinhala language newspaper, criticizing the union leadership.

Of the 21 union members in attendance at the meeting, 11 supported the proposal, one opposed it, and eight abstained. The action against Wasantha is gross violation of the union's constitution, which states that in order to remove a member from an elected position requires endorsement by two-thirds of the branch membership.

Packing workers fight for decent conditions

Milk powder packing workers at New Zealand Dairy Products Company of Sri Lanka (Anchor Foods), situated in the Free Trade Zone in Biyagama, have been on strike since September 17.

The workers are fighting for a series of demands including:

- * Recognition of their newly formed union, the reinstatement of three sacked activists and the cancellation of the transfer of another

- * A 40 percent salary increment increase, a cost of living allowance and the reduction of Saturday working to a half day

- * The provision of paid meals, a discount on company products and free transport facilities to and from work

The strikers are also protesting against a cut in leave entitlements by seven days and the shocking working conditions at the plant. There are no toilet breaks and workloads have become unbearable with new, increased production targets.

The workers have also complained that management, under the guise of providing security, have employed thugs to intimidate workers using company transport and on the factory floor. The thugs, together with ex-military and ex-police officers, are now being used against the strikers. Some have openly threatened to kill workers if they continue to be active in the strike.

The factory is owned by the Maharaja Organization and packs popular brand names, such as Anchor and Ratthi.

Estate workers stop machinery removal

Following protests by workers in Talawakelle, Peram Estate management has withdrawn plans to remove machinery from the estate's factory. The workers struck last month and declared that they would take further action.

Factory owners, the Maskeliya Plantation Company, closed it in 1995 promising to eventually re-open it. Since then the management has reversed this decision and announced that the closure is permanent. The workers have warned that if the factory is permanently closed hundreds of jobs would be lost in the region.

Seafarers killed by fumes

Two Chinese crewmen died after being overcome by diesel

fumes in a cargo ship anchored in Hong Kong waters this week.

The ship was taking fuel from a barge when pump lines became tangled. The two crewmen went into the hold to tackle the problem but failed to re-emerge. A third seafarer found them unconscious but they died on arrival at the hospital.

Public sector workers oppose budget cuts

Two and half thousand CityRail station staff struck for 24 hours last Wednesday bringing passenger train services in New South Wales to a standstill. The strike was the second stoppage by rail workers in less than two weeks.

The workers are protesting over the state government's plan to eliminate of 450 station jobs. The Australian Services Union (ASU), following a recommendation by the Industrial Relations Commission, has agreed to hold off further strike action pending a meeting with Carl Scully, the Minister for Transport, next week.

The union said it wants to make a deal that would allow the government "reforms" to go ahead but limit job losses. ASU secretary, Nick Lewocki, said he was "confident a compromise could be negotiated". However, Labor premier, Bob Carr said that the government would not change its plans. "We can't put a heritage order over the public sector," he said.

Other NSW public sector workers currently in dispute include:

- * Sydney Water staff, who are opposing 4,000 redundancies

- * Over 2,500 bus drivers, who are involved in a struggle over wages and conditions

- * Nurses at the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital in Sydney, who stopped work for 24 hours this week to oppose a \$12 million cut to the hospital's budget

- * Transport workers responsible for the collection of waste from Sydney hospitals, who imposed bans this week

Guards take industrial action

Security guards employed by Australian Protective Services at Commonwealth facilities have begun a campaign of rolling work stoppages with Sydney airport affected by bans this week. The guards are demanding a pay rise, with no loss of conditions.

Transport Workers Union official, Trevor Santi said that action would be taken in Canberra, Australia's capital city, over the next few days. This would leave Parliament House, the Department of Defence and overseas embassies unguarded.

Santi said that security at the Lucas Heights nuclear reactor could be affected in the near future. "We haven't planned, at this stage, to flow action on to Lucas Heights but that will only be a matter of time."



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