

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

9 October 1999

Sri Lankan government sacks textile workers

The Sri Lankan government has decided to retrench 2,500 workers from a textile factory in Pugoda, about 30 kilometres from Colombo. The factory is one of the three mechanised textile mills now under the control of the National Textile Corporation (NTC), a government body.

The factory was privatised in 1992 by the then United National Party (UNP) government leading to a systematic cut back in jobs and working conditions. Following a two-year long strike from early 1997 the plant was closed down by the current Peoples Alliance government.

After widespread agitation by textile workers the factory was eventually placed under the NTC and the kept open pending its sale to an investor. The workers were paid between 50 to 60 percent of their original salary. Now the government has offered to pay compensation only to workers who willingly accept redundancy.

Indian sugar workers strike

A six-day strike over unpaid wages and bonuses at the Sangur Sugar Cooperative in Haveri, a city in southern India, was called off this week following talks between union officials and senior management.

The union agreed to end the strike after being informed by the Sugarcane Growers Association that the factory was on the verge of bankruptcy, due to bad investments in plant equipment. No agreement was reached on the payment of the money owing to the workers.

Teachers plan protest

Teachers in the southeastern Indian coastal city of Mangalore will begin a campaign to force the University Grants Commission to implement a new pay scale. Members of the Association of Mangalore University College Teachers are angry that the Commission has not introduced the new rates of pay even after receiving the permission of the Ministry of

Human Resource Development and the State government.

Initially, the teachers are planning to conduct a petition campaign and lobbies of the relevant government agencies. Some teachers have also threatened to begin a hunger strike if the Commission continues harassing union members.

This week, union leaders attempted to contain the dispute by calling for the formation of a tripartite committee, comprising representatives from the Commission, the government and the unions, to resolve the issue.

Telecom workers protest

Communication workers sacked by Indian Telecom staged a protest this week in front of the Department of Telecommunications head office in Mangalore to demand their reinstatement. The workers, who were suddenly dismissed by the communications provider some weeks ago, had worked for Telecom continuously for more than 12 years as day hire labourers.

Leaders of the communication workers union said they would organise support to ensure that the sacked workers were reemployed.

Teachers fight for unpaid salaries

Nearly 2,000 members of the Karnataka State Aided School Teachers Association in southern India will attend meetings this week to plan further industrial action to force the state government to pay back-wages owed to them for more than six months. Despite two previous strikes and protests to place pressure on the government, the wages are still being withheld. The teachers are also concerned about the sharp decline in the standard of education being provided in the region.

Insurance workers oppose privatisation

Insurance workers employed by the Life Insurance Corporation in India stepped-up their campaign this week against government plans to privatise their industry. A protest was held outside the corporation's divisional headquarters in the northeastern city of

Patna.

The protest followed comments by the country's finance minister, Yashwant Sinha, at a recent meeting in Washington. The minister publicly promised that if the government was returned to power it would privatise the insurance industry and open it up to overseas investors. A union spokesman said the move would result in mass layoffs.

Sharp victimises workers

Management at the Sharp-Japan plant in the Philippines has begun a campaign of harassment against 94 workers who played a prominent part in a recent 23-day strike over the dismissal of 57 workers and an agreement to protect permanent jobs.

The workforce returned to work on September 16 after management agreed to reemploy the sacked workers while their cases are reviewed. The 94 workers are being confined to a "training room" to be lectured by company officials on "work values" and are not allowed to move anywhere in the plant unless accompanied by security guards. Other workers complain that the factory is like a military camp because of the company thugs and guards on patrol.

The company has hired 200 new contract workers in breach of an agreement it earlier made with the union. A union spokesman said the company "is clearly preparing to terminate a large number of permanent workers".

Students rally to support striking academics

Students from the Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, joined over 700 striking academic staff to stage a mass protest rally on campus this week. The academics struck for 12 hours on Thursday over the refusal of the university's Vice Chancellor to enter into serious negotiations for a new employment contract and a pay claim. Academic staff are seeking a yearly salary increase of \$2,000.

Student representatives read out a message signed by more than 2,000 students pledging total support for the academics. The rally overwhelmingly endorsed a motion of no confidence in the Vice Chancellor and his entire senior management team.

The academics have threatened further strike action on Monday if the administration continues to refuse to address the issues.

Police break-up bus drivers' pickets

Police have been called in to remove Stagecoach bus

drivers who are picketing terminals in Auckland. About one-third of the company's 900 strong workforce refused to sign a new employment contract and staged a lightning 24-hour strike on Tuesday, disrupting services across the city.

Many of the drivers failed to report for work the next day and began picketing terminals. Police have not arrested anyone so far but have continually broken up pickets and forced protestors to move on.

Meanwhile, Stagecoach bus drivers in Wellington called a stoppage to attend meetings to discuss their new contract.

Transfield workers remain on strike

A dispute that has brought construction work to a standstill on the eastern gas pipeline in the Shoalhaven region, south of Sydney, is set to continue. More than 300 construction workers walked off the job earlier this week, after negotiations with construction company Transfield over a log of claims broke down.

The workers are seeking a \$10-a-day pay increase, annual leave calculated on actual hours worked and improved working conditions. A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the striking workers had met and rejected a \$3-a-day increase.



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