

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 February 2000

## Indian public sector strike goes ahead

Thousands of public sector workers across India went on strike for 24 hours on Wednesday after government-union negotiations over work contracts and planned privatisations broke down.

The unions involved in the strike are demanding that all future work agreements covering wages and working conditions be renegotiated every five years, instead of the current 10 years. Although union leaders say they oppose the sale of existing public enterprises, they have not demanded the government drop its privatisation plans. Rather they have called on the government to include union representatives "in discussions and decision-making concerning privatisation and disinvestment".

Over 90 percent of union members attending mass meetings voted to strike. Union officials met with the labour minister last weekend in a bid to reach a settlement. However, the minister said that the government "was not prepared to give any assurances". The union demands have been referred to a newly formed "Group of Ministers" for consideration.

Over the past months India has witnessed a series of strikes in road transport, the power industry and at the country's ports. At the end of January, power unions in Uttar Pradesh ended a protracted strike against plans by the state government to restructure the power industry. A national wages strike by 100,000 dock workers was shut down on January 22. Both strikes were ended with no substantive concessions to workers.

## Workers take industrial action in Indian city of Pune

Bus drivers in the city of Pune went on strike this week demanding better pay and conditions. The drivers, members of the Bhartiya Kamgar Sena (BKS) union, are employed by the Pimbri Chinchwad Municipal Transport Services (PCMT).

The strikers marched from four separate PCMT bus depots and converged on the main PCMC office to present a list of demands to the PCMC commissioner. The demands included the immediate payment of a salary increase already agreed by a wage commission, that wages are paid on time, permanency for temporary workers, and the provision of tools and spare parts for repairs. A spokesman for the workers said that salary payments are up to a month late.

Over 14,000 employees of the Pune City Municipal Corporation (PMC) will strike from midnight on February 13 over the non-payment of a salary increase. Only the city's fire brigade will be exempt from the industrial action. The PMC Engineers Association will also join the strike.

Municipal Commissioner Ratnaker Gaikwad claimed that there is no money to pay the wage claim, which was recommended by a wage commission last year. According to unions, however, the council has not even budgeted for the increase in its 2000 or 2001 annual budget.

## Sri Lankan workers occupy factory

Over 450 workers at the South Korean owned Demian Lanka export company in Katana, 30 miles north of Colombo, have been occupying the company's factory since January 27 demanding a monthly pay increase of 300 rupees and the removal of regulations compelling workers to work up to 10pm.

The workers confronted management with their claims on January 26. When they returned to work the following day they found that the factory had been closed and the owners had vanished. The workers decided to occupy the plant and have demanded that the management meet with them and begin negotiations.

## South Korean dock workers stage protest

Port workers at the Shinsondae Container Terminal and the Uam Terminal in Pusan went on strike on

Wednesday and disrupted rush hour traffic on a major highway between Pusan and Ulsan. The workers assembled 20 container trucks and 50 passenger cars and drove down the Kyongbu Highway at speeds of only 20-30 kilometres an hour. In Seoul, striking workers mustered another eight container trucks and blocked a highway on-ramp.

The workers took the action after both companies refused to recognise their right to join the National Transport and Cargo Trade Union, which is affiliated with the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), one of the country's two peak union bodies.

The workers are covered by the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) but many joined the rival KCTU in December and demanded that it be included in this year's collective bargaining talks over work agreements. Under South Korea's existing labor laws, multiple unions are not allowed in workplaces.

### **Australian power company threatens further lockouts**

Power company Yallourn Energy has threatened to stand down its entire 500-strong workforce in Victoria's Latrobe Valley from Monday midnight, unless 80 maintenance workers accept cuts to their working conditions and the removal of all restrictions on the use of contract labour.

The dispute at Yallourn erupted on January 10 when the maintenance workers rejected the proposed changes and imposed work bans that brought power generation at the plant to a standstill. The company retaliated by locking out the workforce.

The management issued standdown notices early yesterday morning, warning that it could be the beginning of April before operations were resumed. Yallourn Energy's managing director Mike Johnston said that the company made the threats "in order to try and generate some impetus in the negotiating process". Talks with trade unions were scheduled for later in the day.

A spokesman for the Australian Services Union said that it would convene a gate meeting of its members at the power station, along with other unions involved in the dispute, on Monday morning.

Although union leaders are now talking about calling meetings in other power stations, so far they have worked to isolate the Yallourn workers and to restrict action to a nominal picket outside the plant. Union

members in other power stations in the area have continued to work throughout the dispute.

Yallourn provides over 20 percent of the Victoria's energy requirements and also supplies some power to South Australia. The dispute has already caused power failures and blackouts in both states. On Thursday 49,000 users in the Melbourne suburbs of Albert Park and St Kilda were affected and 8,000 more in the Victorian regional town of Ballarat were without power for well over two hours. Power supply to the aluminum smelter in Portland was also affected.

Consumers received little notice of the impending cuts other than a brief statement by the National Electricity Marketing Management Company that it had ordered a 15 percent reduction in the power supply.

### **Building workers face lockouts in Victoria**

Building employers in Victoria are planning statewide lockouts to counter a campaign by construction workers to gain a 36-hour-week and a pay increase. The threat was made by 150 members of the Master Builders Association (MBA) after construction workers on some large building sites decided to take one day off a fortnight to press for their demands.

The MBA issued instructions for its members to follow strict rules when enforcing the lockouts to avoid court action by the construction union. For the lockout to be "legal," the companies must give the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union three days written notice of their intentions. The lockouts will take place on ten separate days spread over February and March.

The union has already struck separate deals with some major building employers. The workers at these companies will not be called on to take industrial action during the campaign.

Even though the state Labor government has not intervened in the dispute, acting Premier John Thwaites said this week that the claim for a 36-hour week could be negotiated if workers agreed to the "appropriate" productivity trade-offs.



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