

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 February 2000

## Coal miners strike across India

Over 45,000 Indian coal miners employed by Singareni Collieries went on strike on Wednesday for improved wages and working conditions. All seven unions representing the miners, including the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, supported the strike.

Union officials reported that the strike had closed the company's mines and workshops in the districts of Kothagudem, Yellandu and Manuguru, as well as its 36 mines in the Belampallai region and 16 underground mines and four open cut operations in Ramagundam. Miners successfully resisted attempts to use strikebreakers in the Ramagundam open cut mines.

Management responded to the strike by locking out administration workers. Police have arrested 50 strikers and a number of union officials, including the deputy general secretary of the Singareni Collieries Workers Union.

Over half of the miners' 44 major demands concern changes in government mining regulations. On Tuesday the national Chief Minister N Chandrababu Naidu met with officials from the leading unions, but talks failed to avert the strike.

## Workers end six-day factory occupation in Sri Lanka

Workers at the Demenian Lanka company, a Japanese owned luggage and handbag manufacturer in Katana, about 50 kilometres north of Colombo, ended a six-day occupation on February 1 after the management obtained a police order declaring the action illegal.

The workers occupied the factory after a protest stoppage on January 26 in support of a 300 rupees pay increase owing to them since last year. The workers were also demanding an end to compulsory overtime that required working until 10pm. The management reacted to the protest by closing the factory. Since the return to work, the company has agreed to an 11 percent pay increase and to reinstate a manager who was sacked during the dispute because he was sympathetic to the workers.

## Indonesian union threatens national strike

The Federation of the All Indonesian Workers Unions

(SPSI) chairman, Yacob Nuwu Wea, warned on Thursday of a national strike if minimum wages were not increased by at least 50 percent. Under Suharto, the SPSI was a state-run organisation and the only legally sanctioned union body. The SPSI has threatened strike action previously this month but no stoppages or protests have taken place.

The warning followed a government announcement that wage increases due to take effect on April 1 will not meet the union's demand. While wages in Aceh are expected to increase 54.97 percent, in West Java the rise will be as low as 5.13 percent. The Minister for Manpower Bomer Pasaribu, a former SPSI chairman, said regional governors, in collaboration with the local chapters of the unions and the employers' organisations, would determine the pay increases. The central government would not interfere.

## Protests against low wages in Hong Kong

The Confederation of Trade Unions staged a rally in Hong Kong this week over a government decision to introduce a new sales tax. Government officials claim the new tax is needed because revenue has dropped after public housing rents and other government fees were frozen two years ago. One of the speakers at the rally, Mak Tak-ching, denounced the tax, saying it "would affect the poor more than it will the rich".

Over the last two years, workers have been badly affected by falling wages and job losses. The average monthly income for low paid workers fell 7.3 percent from \$HK4,389 in 1998 to \$HK3,939 last year, while the monthly income for richer sections of society increased 3.7 percent to \$HK15,766. The number of disputes over wages rose from 1,299 in 1998 to 9,144 in 1999.

## Car companies threaten stand-downs across Australia

Thousands of workers employed by Australia's four car manufacturers could be stood down over the next few days because of a shortage of nuts, bolts and screws. The shortages are caused by a protracted strike by 200 workers at Melbourne-based component manufacturer Ajax Fasteners. Ajax supplies about 60 percent of the fasteners used in the country's car manufacturing and automotive component production. The workers went on strike after the

management refused to pay a 4 percent wage increase.

A spokesman for Ford Australia said on Thursday that production at its two Victorian plants, which employ 4,500 workers, could cease at any time. General Motors-Holden announced it was likely to shut down production at its Port Melbourne engine plant and car assembly operation in South Australia on Monday night, affecting more than 6,500 workers. Both Toyota and Mitsubishi have indicated that their plants in Victoria and South Australia were likely to run into supply problems next week.

The stand-down threat is being used to pressure the Ajax workers to end their dispute and return to work on the management's terms. Australian Workers Union secretary Bill Shorten said that while he was concerned by Ajax's "approach" in the dispute, the union "did not wish to see stand-downs" in the car industry.

The component shortages are the direct result of the "just-in-time" system of ordering embraced by the car companies and endorsed by the union during the late 1980s. Materials and parts are delivered only as they are required in the production process. "Just-in-time" allowed the companies to close down warehouses and eliminate hundreds of jobs.

#### **Labor government condemns Queensland rail strike**

Over 15,000 rail workers in Queensland went on strike for 48 hours last week after negotiations over a wage claim broke down. The strike affected all train services across the state. The workers are demanding a 12 percent pay rise over two years. Queensland Rail has refused to improve its offer of 6.5 percent over three years.

The strike went ahead in defiance of an order by the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission directing unions to call it off. The Commission claimed that the strike breached the dispute settling procedures in the current work agreement because the union had failed to give three days notice of its intentions.

Labor premier Peter Beattie, a former railway union official, publicly attacked striking workers on Wednesday, saying that the decision to strike was "bloody-minded" and that the action was "hurting other Queensland workers, the economy and employment growth."

#### **Technical teachers stop work in New South Wales**

More than 900 Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers in Newcastle and other areas of the Hunter Valley region in New South Wales walked off the job for 24 hours on February 9 in opposition to plans by the state government to cut 630 teaching jobs statewide. Over 36 positions will be lost in the Hunter. Up to 50 more jobs in administration and teacher support are also threatened.

The jobs are being axed as part of the government drive to slash \$67 million from the TAFE annual budget. Last year the government reduced funding for a range of courses and

restricted the hiring of casual teachers, forcing regular teachers to take larger classes. The teachers have threatened to strike again in the next few weeks.

#### **Ansett workers oppose cuts**

Ansett flights across Australia were disrupted on Friday when check-in staff walked off the job at 4 pm for three hours to attend stop-work meetings. The stoppage went ahead following a breakdown in negotiations over an enterprise bargaining agreement. The workers have rejected a company proposal that would require them to reapply for their jobs but with lower wages and reduced conditions. The strike follows action three weeks ago by baggage handlers in Tasmania.

#### **Nurses vote to strike in Papua New Guinea**

Nurses in Papua New Guinea voted overwhelmingly for strike action this week in support of demands for improved wages and working conditions, including increases in shift loading, overtime payments and uniform allowances. In secret ballots held in the country's major centres—Port Moresby, Lae, Mt Hagan, Rabaul, Madang, Goroka and Wewak—the nurses voted 1,737 to 26 to strike.

Despite the decisive vote, nurses' union president Susan Haroe urged the members to continue working while the union completed negotiations with the government. However, the government has already indicated that it would not shift from its offer to provide only 12 million kina for allowances.

The union is considering the government's offer even though it has been inundated with faxes and phone calls from nurses in rural areas demanding its rejection. Members of the union's East Sepik branch met this week and voted to reject the offer.

#### **Construction workers in Fiji on strike for two weeks**

Workers at the China International Water and Electric Company (CIWRC) in Fiji remain on strike after walking off the job two weeks ago. The company refused to discuss outstanding health and safety issues or to recognise the Building Construction and Timber Workers Union (BCTWU) in negotiations. The workers are employed on a road construction project on the island of Savusava and claim that many of the project's work practices breach the Occupational Health and Safety Act.



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