

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 February 2000

## Public sector strike continues in India

Over 250,000 employees of the Rajasthan state government, in India's north-west, are continuing their 60-day strike for improved wages. Last Saturday violent clashes erupted between hundreds of workers and police in Bharatpur. Over 20 workers were arrested and five were badly injured.

To further intimidate strikers the government announced this week that after the dispute was over, all workers would have their job performance reviewed and any deemed to be below standard would be sacked. Two unions, representing some 50,000 workers, have already directed their members to return to work after holding closed-door discussions with the government.

Despite this, the strike may widen as the 100,000-strong Rajasthan State Gazetted Officers Services Confederation is threatening to stop work if the government does not settle a wage demand by February 19. Transport workers across the state may also strike in support.

## Indian coal strike continues

Over 120,000 miners at the state-owned Singareni Collieries Company Ltd (SCCL) will remain on strike after negotiations with the company's management and government representatives broke down. The strike began on February 9 and has halted production at all of Singareni's 70 mines.

The workers are demanding improved pay and conditions, including permanency for casual workers and increased rent allowances. They also want 200 workers declared medically unfit to be retained and given above-ground work. The miners are also opposing any increase in their present six-day working week.

Over 50 miners and several union officials, including the deputy general secretary of the Singareni Collieries Workers Union, have been arrested and are still being held in police custody.

## Bombay Exchange workers threaten to strike

More than 400 workers at the Bombay Stock Exchange

are threatening to go on strike this week if their demand for a 25 percent pay increase is not met. Management claims it can not make a decision as the stock exchange president is out of the country. But it has also made clear that any pay increase will be tied to productivity trade-offs, including an increase in the length of the working week.

## Gas explosion kills three men in Hong Kong

Last Saturday, three metalworkers died and four were seriously injured in a gas explosion at the Bachy Soletanche metal factory in the Yuen Long district of Hong Kong. The blast, which may have been caused by a leaking acetylene cylinder, was so powerful that it blew the three workers off the floor and flung them against the factory's ceiling. A witness said that one worker was "jolted to the metal roof like a rocket taking off".

The company had been operating welding equipment illegally. A Fire Department spokesman said: "They tried to get a license from us last October but they did not meet the requirements, so no license was issued".

The incident could have been far worse. Ah Wai, whose 50-year old father Sin King-fai was killed, went to the factory after the explosion. "I saw a lot of highly inflammable materials stacked together while 30 to 40 gas bottles were moved from the scene."

Injured worker 48-year-old Suen Kwong-chuen explained: "It's the usual practice because it's more convenient when we work to put the materials and bottles together even though they are highly inflammable." A spokesman for the Association for the Rights of Industrial Accident Victims said that up to 80 gas cylinders were stored in the workshop. "If the explosion had spread it could have threatened the lives of nearby residents."

The blast at Yuen Long is the third gas explosion in Hong Kong's factories in the last three months. The previous two claimed the lives of five people and seriously injured 10 others.

In the wake of the latest deaths, Commissioner for

Labour Matthew Cheung Kin-chung said the government would consider introducing a “code of practice” to govern welding and other manufacturing operations. Employers breaching the code could be fined up to \$50,000 and face a six-month jail term.

A spokesman for the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, Leung Fu-wah, said that even if the code were introduced it would not protect welders. “A code of conduct offers only a clearer basis for judges in court trials after lives have been sacrificed,” he said.

The employers have indicated they will oppose any attempt to introduce regulations that interfere with production. Employers' representative Ho Sai-chu said: “A regulation is not necessarily the right solution. In any case, the final measure must seek a balance between efficiency and the safety of the workers.”

#### **Police break up hotel picket in the Philippines**

A picket by 300 Manila Hotel employees was baton-charged by over 100 police last Saturday attempting to enforce a Labour Department return-to-work order. The police included members of the Special Weapons Action Team (SWAT). Twelve picketers were arrested and many others were injured in the attack. The workers set up the picket at the hotel entrance after management repeatedly refused to negotiate over wages and benefits.

#### **Australia and the Pacific**

##### **Ambulance officers step up campaign**

Ambulance officers in New South Wales lifted a ban on Friday after the management agreed to employ 108 extra staff in rural areas and to “review” staff numbers in the urban areas. The ban threatened to disrupt weekend sporting events across the state, including horse races, triathlon and speed car racing. Drivers and paramedics had refused to be on standby at the events to attend to injuries.

A membership meeting in Sydney on Wednesday had voted unanimously to escalate the dispute with the NSW Ambulance Service over staffing levels and the introduction of a new centralised radio system for dispatching ambulances. The officers have expressed concerns over the reliability of the system and believe that it will increase ambulance response time.

The officers began their industrial action on January 18, refusing to handle administrative matters or the new radio system. The bans were later extended to include restrictions on the transfer of patients between hospitals and from hospitals to other care facilities.

##### **Workers occupy hospital kitchen in Melbourne**

About 40 hospital workers occupied a kitchen at the

Monash Medical Centre on Monday after hearing that the management was planning to stand down a number their colleagues involved in an industrial campaign.

Members of the Health Services Union of Australia No. 1 branch held work stoppages and placed work bans last week over staffing and resource levels. The work bans caused the cancellation of elective surgery on at least two days. The dispute was due to go before the Australian Industrial Relations.

#### **NSW tugboat deckhands strike**

Tugboat deckhands in New South Wales went on strike for 24 hours on Wednesday in opposition to plans by Adsteam Marine to cut the size of deckhand crews from four to three on all NSW tugboats. The company wants tugboat engineers to take over some of the duties of deckhands.

About 100 deckhands Australia-wide could lose their jobs. The union is calling for deckhands to be given the chance to train as engineers. A union spokesman said the company has threatened workers with retrenchments if they do not agree to voluntary redundancies.

The strike affected ports in Sydney, Newcastle and Port Kembla. Future industrial action may involve workers in other ports across the country.

#### **Air New Zealand attendants to strike**

International flight attendants employed by Air New Zealand warned this week that they will strike on February 29 for a 3.5 percent pay increase and an increased rest period between international flights. The attendants went on strike for 12 hours last November but the industrial action was called off after the company agreed to negotiate.



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