

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 February 2000

Unions end 13-day Indian coal strike

Unions covering coal miners at the government-owned Singareni mines called off a 13-day strike on Monday, after three days of closed door discussions with management and government representatives.

Union officials agreed to drop 17 demands from a 44-item log of claims, including an across-the-board increase in rent assistance for miners. The final agreement provides for a rent allowance rise of 10 percent of basic pay, but only to miners working in the company's collieries in Bellampalli, Ramagundam and Kothagudem. Those in other regions will continue to be paid at the old rate. The company has agreed to redeploy some 300 medically unfit miners to other jobs.

The company has refused to pay workers for time lost during the strike. A "salary advance" of 1,000 rupees will be paid and recovered through monthly deductions from workers' wages of 200 rupees. The unions have also agreed to measures to make up for production short falls caused by the strike.

Union leaders will now participate in a management-union committee to meet every three months "to avoid strikes in the future". The government has warned union leaders that "stringent action" will be taken against workers and unions in the event of future industrial action.

Indian government workers stage protest

Central and state government employees, covered by the union Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, staged a demonstration outside the Central Secretariat building in New Delhi on February 22.

Workers are demanding an improvement in shift arrangements, an increase from eight to 12 days that workers are allowed off sick without a medical certificate, and the acceptance of medical certificates from any registered doctor outside those stipulated by government departments.

The workers are also demanding an exemption from professional taxes levied by states such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Tamil Nadu and Kerala. A delegation from the demonstration delivered a memorandum highlighting the workers' demands to Cabinet Secretary Prabhat Kumar.

Volunteer teachers set up picket in Sri Lanka

Volunteer teachers in the Batticaloa district of the Eastern province of Sri Lanka picketed the education office on February 23 to demand the provincial authorities make their jobs permanent. Some of the teachers have been working as casuals for up to 15 years. Following the action, the education secretary promised to resolve the problem within two weeks.

Workers freed from Cambodian factory

A police raid last Friday in Phnom Penh freed 51 Chinese and Vietnamese workers who were being kept as virtual slaves by a Cambodian textile manufacturer, G.T Garment. After coming to Cambodia on promises of an eight-hour day and \$US100 per month, the workers had found themselves locked inside the factory compound and denied any payment at all.

The workers were informed that their wages would be only be \$US40 and that the first \$US100 would be withheld to pay for food and transportation costs. The workers were told that before they could leave they would have to pay \$US220 in immigration fees—over five months pay.

The textile industry has mushroomed in Cambodia over the past three years, with investors attracted by some of the lowest wages in Asia. By 1999 some 72,000 workers were employed in 110 factories in Phnom Penh alone, with dozens more being opened.

In 1997, a UN representative Thomas Hammerberg reported that it was common to see workers regularly body-searched and fire escapes padlocked. "Absence from work due to illness and other reasons is punishable by a high reduction in salary. It is long and hard work and the economic rewards are minimal," he stated.

Nothing has changed. Throughout last week, textile workers from four factories demonstrated at the Cambodian parliament against the mass sacking of workers who had joined unions and opposed their appalling employment conditions.

Hong Kong government surveyors stop work

Over 900 workers from the Hong Kong government's Surveying and Mapping Office went on strike for 24 hours this week against plans to privatise the service.

Despite the growing anger among staff, the government's Business and Services Promotion Unit manager, Mike Rowse, dismissed the protest. Rowse said that he had no intention of conducting discussions with workers on the future of the department: "We don't call the staff together and say 'these are our business plans next year, would you like to vote?'"

Consultants advising the government have estimated that the office would return \$950 million over 10 years to private owners, through the sale of mapping and other high-technology services. The government has also agreed to provide any future owner with a franchise to provide services to state enterprises.

The Confederation of Trade Unions has not organised a broad campaign to back the surveyors. Instead it has confined its activity to making appeals to the government, pointing out that the cost of mapping and surveying services will increase if privatisation is

carried out.

Union undermines anti-privatisation campaign in Hong Kong

One of the unions involved in a protracted protest campaign by Housing Department staff in Hong Kong—Senior Estate Assistants Association—announced last week it was pulling out of the Alliance of Housing Department Staff Unions following an inter-union conflict. Over the past six months Housing Department workers have staged a series of stoppages, marches and rallies in an attempt to force the government to reverse its decision to privatise the management of public housing estates.

Last week the Housing Department announced plans to cut the pay of contract workers. Under the proposal, some of the 850 contract workers could receive \$HK7,000 less a month when they apply to renew their contracts this year, while others would have their salary level frozen indefinitely.

One contract worker said: “One of my colleagues will face a 30 percent pay cut if he renews his contract this year. We are all very upset by the plan. The authority is really acting harshly and defying common sense”.

Union body threatens national strike in South Korea

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the second largest peak union body in South Korea, announced on Tuesday that it would call nationwide strikes of its 500,000 strong membership on May 31, unless the government agrees to its demands for shorter working hours and an end to corporate restructuring. The union body is also calling for tax reforms and increased social security funding.

The KCTU national strike also warned of work stoppages across the auto industry in April and protests and strike action at the end of March to oppose the sale of Daewoo and Ssangyong. The unions are also calling for an end to plans to merge the nation's agricultural and livestock cooperatives into a single entity, a move that will result in the loss of hundreds of jobs.

A KCTU spokesman said this week that unions would combine the industrial stoppages with a “rejection” campaign, aimed at ensuring the defeat of ruling party candidates in the forthcoming elections on April 13. On March 3, it will announce the names of some 20 government candidates in the industrial areas of Ulsan, Pusan, Changwon, Yusung, Chonan, Ilsan and Seoul, and work for their defeat.

Negotiations with the government on the union's demands are due to begin next month. Last May the KCTU promised a similar industrial campaign against restructuring and downsizing, only to call it off mid-stream without achieving any of its demands. Many workers who had answered the strike call were left isolated and were subjected to victimisation.

Striking New Zealand meat workers face the sack

Progressive Meats, a lamb and venison meat processor in Hastings, New Zealand, issued a warning to 170 striking meat workers that they will be sacked if do not return to work by Monday. The workers went on strike on February 20 after a breakdown in negotiations over a new work contract.

The new contract includes piecework payment that would mean workers were only paid for the number of beasts they slaughter and prepare. They would not be paid if work stops for any reason,

such as a mechanical breakdown. Paid tea and meal breaks would also be abolished. Even without work interruptions, the new arrangements could result in a cut in weekly wages by over \$50.

The meat workers' union has previously accepted sweeping changes to working conditions at the plant, including the introduction of a skills-based performance rate of pay that has allowed the company to boost production and profits.

Smelter workers to continue strike in New Caledonia

Workers at the Doniambo nickel smelter near Noumea, in New Caledonia, have voted to continue a three-week long strike that has cut production at the plant by over 30 percent. The workers are demanding the smelter abandon a restructuring plan that would slash jobs and working conditions.

Besides picketing to stop goods leaving and entering the plant, strikers also blocked the departure of a ship in the eastern port of Kouaou that was transporting ore to the smelter. The smelter requires over 9,000 tons of ore a day to run at normal capacity.

Shipyard workers march against closure in Fiji

More than 200 people marched through the Fijian capital of Suva on Thursday, to protest the closure of Shipbuilders Fiji Limited. The shipyard shut completely last week, laying-off the remaining 12 workers and bringing the total number of retrenchments over the past three months to 132.

The protesters, mostly retrenched workers and their families, carried banners accusing the company and the Labour Party-led government of betraying them. Workers had earlier held demonstrations demanding that the government intervene to stop the closure.

A spokesman for the protesters said that police had closely monitored the march. The response of the government was to issue a statement through the Labour Ministry branding the march as illegal and threatening to take action to prevent further demonstrations.

Australian offshore oil platform workers continue strike

Catering and cleaning staff employed on Esso Australia's offshore oil platforms in Victoria have decided to continue to strike, despite a return-to-work order issued by the Industrial Relations Commission. The 120 cooks and cleaners walked off the job on Monday demanding that Eurest, a contracting company that provides services on the platforms, improve the wages and working conditions of its long-term casual staff.

The workers are also demanding that the company make redundancy payments when it lays off contract workers. A spokesman said: “We thought we had agreement with the company in relation to offering redundancies to some long-term casuals, but the company now sees fit to withdraw from that position”.

The Australian Workers Union, which covers the striking workers, warned that supplies of natural gas and oil could be affected by late next week if the dispute is not resolved.



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