

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 March 2000

Indonesian mini-van drivers strike

Thousands of public mini-van drivers in Bogor, Indonesia, went on strike on March 20 against the taxation levied on their operations. The drivers are forced to pay levies as they pass through a number of designated posts along the routes they operate. The strike erupted after the authorities announced the introduction of another levy on March 15, amounting to an extra 200 rupiah a day per van.

Many drivers report that the number of passengers has decreased significantly over past months while the cost of living has soared, making it impossible for them to pay the extra fees. One driver on the Baranangsiang-Merdeka route said: "The route for mini-vans in Bogor is short, and the policy obliges us to pay over and over again every day. I, for example, have to spend at least 3,000 rupiah per day."

During the strike groups of workers stopped mini-vans that had continued to operate and demanded that the drivers remove passengers from their vehicles. Pickets were also set up to stop all inter-city buses from Kampung Rambutan (Jakarta) from entering Bogor. Angry mini-van drivers also beat up two officials they suspected of collecting illegal levies.

Some levies on public bus drivers operating out of the Baranangsiang inter-city bus terminal were also increased by 300 percent on February 16. Bus drivers already pay 600 rupiah to enter the terminal and another 1,000 when they leave. They must also pay a levy at the destination terminal, as well as handing money over at a number of posts along the route. Fees for overnight parking at terminals have increased from 5,000 to 7,000 rupiah.

There are a total of 6,500 mini-vans (angkot) and inter-city buses in Bogor, serving a local population of 5 million people.

Airport staff victimised in Indonesia

Some 32 workers who went on strike on March 20 at Indonesia's Soekarno-Hatta International Airport have been prevented from returning to their jobs. The company plans to employ other workers to fill the positions.

Over 100 airport employees went on strike, demanding that the national flag carrier PT Garuda Indonesia restore their status as government employees. They workers are demanding payment of wages and benefits promised in 1998 when they were transferred to PT Gapura Angkasa.

PT Gapura Angkasa is a private joint venture company established by PT Garuda Indonesia and airport management firm PT Angkasa Pura. The joint company provides ground-handling services to Garuda and other airlines. Garuda transferred 1,600 ground staff employees to the private company in 1998 as part of a restructuring program. The airline suffered significant losses due to the depreciation of the rupiah during the Asian economic crisis. Some 1,200 employees of the joint venture work at the international airport, carrying out a range of duties including checking in passengers and luggage.

One of the workers said that staff were threatened with the sack if they did not move to the new company. They were promised wages and benefits equaling those paid when they were employed by the airline. However, their annual bonus was half that paid to Garuda staff and they

did not receive a pay rise granted by the airline last December. The workers have filed a complaint with Garuda management and the House of Representatives.

Workers oppose privatisation in India

Workers belonging to the Trade Union Joint Action Committee in Western India organised human chain protests at 10 different locations throughout Mumbai (Bombay) on March 15. The limited action is in protest at the privatisation of public enterprises, the increasing use of contract labour and new government restrictions on unions. Workers from life insurance, banks, general insurance, state transport, electricity and textile sectors participated in the protest.

The Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led federal government has decided to speed up the privatisation of key public sector undertakings, including power stations, the docks and insurance. The government also introduced a bill this month to revise the country's labour laws. According to a spokesman for the Indian Labor Conference (ILC), "the bill makes the registration of new unions fairly difficult, if not impossible". The bill amending the Trade Union Act stipulates that no new union can be registered unless it has a membership of at least 10 percent of employees in a relevant work place.

Taxi drivers strike in India

Over 55,000 taxi drivers in Mumbai, India, went on an indefinite strike this week. The drivers have accused the provincial government of not allowing them sufficient time to upgrade their three-cylinder diesel taxis to "less environmentally damaging vehicles". Other transport operators are threatening to join the dispute.

The State Transport commissioner has declared the strike illegal under the Motor Vehicles Act and has threatened he will take measures to break it.

The drivers are demanding that they be given a two-year period to complete the upgrade, but a recent High Court ruling decreed that all changes must be completed by April this year and that the Regional Transport Authority Office (RTO) enforce the ruling.

Taxi owners claim that the RTO has allowed drivers to convert four cylinder vehicles to three for the last eight years. A spokesman for the taxi operators, Fredrick D'Sa, said: "For eight years the RTO officials have been registering our conversions, but now they suddenly turn around and say that whatever we have been doing over this period is wrong."

Despite the cost of the upgrade and the increased fuel cost faced by the drivers, the government has not offered any financial assistance.

Indian council workers' strike

About 140,000 civic employees in Mumbai struck this week when the municipal administration refused to give them ex-gratia housing loans and rent allowances. City officials say that they cannot meet the workers' demands because the council is bankrupt.

The provincial government has declared the strike illegal, claiming that unions had not given notice of their intention to strike. Police and home guards have been deployed outside council work sites that provide essential services, such as water supply. The Municipal Corporation has

employed strike-breakers.

Politicians from all the major parties have joined hands to oppose the strikers. Right-wing Bharatiya Janatha Party leader Arun Deo has urged “all citizens” to act as strike-breakers, while National Congress Party official Subhash Mayekar has condemned the workers and called for a ban on all strikes for two years.

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike over assault

Some 500 workers at the Invery Group of Estates, in Dickoya, near Hatton, went on strike on March 9 to protest against a physical attack on a worker by the estate manager. The strike was called off after five days, when the police agreed to conduct an investigation on the incident. The strikers have also demanded the immediate transfer of the manager involved.

Workers at the plantation complain that conditions have always been bad and that management “treat workers like slaves”. The workers have to pick six kilograms of tea-leaves to receive a full daily wage. If they pick one kilogram less their pay is halved.

One worker, S. Poobalan, spoke to the WWSW about conditions on the estate: “We have to report to work at 8am sharp. Those who are late, even by 5 minutes, are denied the day's work. Once I had to pay a penalty of 500 rupee (\$US6), equal to five days' wage, for a delay in reporting for work.

“The management doesn't take measures to repair our living quarters. There is no water or enough sanitary facilities for us. Anyone who dares to challenge the management's decisions has to face punishment. Most workers are compelled to retire early because they are unable to work under these conditions.”

Speaking of the role of the union, Poobalan said: “I am a member of the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC). We went to our union branch office during the strike to inform our leaders. But before we reached there, the management officials had gone there and taken a union representative to the Hatton labor office to have a secret talk. The workers condemned this act and boycotted the discussion. The unions and the management work jointly to cheat and suppress us.”

Sri Lankan auditors picket against thug attack

On March 15, Sri Lankan government auditors picketed in front of headquarters of the Government Audit Department in Colombo and its regional office in Kandy demanding a proper investigation into a physical assault on seven of their colleagues. The seven auditors, who are employed in the Puttlam district office in the county's North-Western province, were attacked by a group of thugs organised by the Chairman of the Puttlam Urban Council, Kamardeen Abdul Fais.

The incident took place on March 14 when the group of auditors visited Puttlam Urban Council office to examine the 1998 annual accounts. The chief clerk refused to hand over the accounts without the permission of the Council's chairman or secretary. After the auditors finally managed to contact the chairman by phone, he turned up with a group of 15 thugs. One of the men was armed with a shotgun.

The assault occurred after the auditors asked for details about a recently completed Sammantawadi road project in Kalpitiya. The estimated cost of the project had been 568,000 rupee, but only 66,000 rupee was spent and there is record of what happened to the rest of money. The district auditor was stuck with the gun and the other six, including a pregnant woman, were attacked and dragged out of the council building.

The auditor's protest campaign forced the police to arrest and detain two of the thugs. Kamardeen Abdul Fais has been suspended.

Strike at Sri Lankan rubber factory

About 120 workers at Ratnayake Rubber Industries in Borlalgamuwa, a suburb of Colombo, went on strike on March 14. The workers are demanding a salary increase of 500 rupee (\$US6) per month. Before going on strike the workers had demonstrated in front of the factory gate during lunch hours and put up posters outlining their demands.

The management has rejected the workers' demands and responded to the strike action by closing the factory and sending the office staff on leave. The workers say that the management has a plan to lay-off all, or the majority, of the strikers, and reopen the factory with new labour.

The workers belong to the All Ceylon Commercial and Industrial Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party, a partner of the Peoples Alliance (PA) government. The union has told the strikers not to seek the support from other organisations or broaden the dispute.

Fiji garment workers walk off the job

On March 21 more than 200 Fiji garment workers at Ghimi Li Fashions Ltd stopped work in protest at the introduction of harsh new work rules.

Under the new rules, a worker will only be paid for the time that the machine they operate is actually producing. Workers will no longer be paid during breakdowns or toilet and tea breaks. The workers are also expected to be at their workstations before the official 7.45am starting time. All leave must be applied for three days in advance and approved by the section supervisor.

The strike was also called to protest the low wages and poor working conditions. Even after 15 years service many workers are paid only \$1.26 an hour. Other grievances included the quantity of food provided for meals during overtime and proposed changes to the lunch-break roster. The workers ended the strike after two hours, when the management promised to look at their complaints.

Dispute at New Caledonia nickel mine ends

Workers at the Societe Le Nickel (SLN) company in New Caledonia have returned to work after the secretary of the Union of Workers and Employees (SOENC) reached an agreement with government negotiators to end industrial action.

Under the agreement, the joint union-management “mining commission” will oversee changes to working conditions within the company. In return SLN agreed to withdraw a proposed restructuring plan. The settlement ended a seven-week conflict that came to a head when the company stood-down 200 workers at its two mine sites in Nepoui and Kouaoua.

But just one day after the SOENC reached the agreement, the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (UKEW), which claims to represent the majority of the workforce at SLN, resumed the blockades of iron-ore shipments and prevented the transport ship “Santa Barbara” from leaving Doniambo. The bans were lifted when the company agreed to enter into negotiations with union officials from the UKEW.

Australian transport maintenance workers' strike called off

Joint strike action by Trans Adelaide bus and rail car maintenance workers, planned for March 24, was called off after the South Australian government agreed to restart negotiations with unions.

The rail workers previously took strike action on two separate days this month when the State government announced that it had awarded a \$7 million three-year contract to maintain its fleet of 90 one diesel passenger train cars to Goninan, a private rolling-stock repair and manufacturing company.

The bus workers decided to join the industrial action after the government revealed that bus maintenance would be also be privatised by April this year. Even though union officials initially voiced opposition to the government's plans, they have since signaled that they are willing to compromise if union coverage is maintained at the newly privatised set-up.

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