

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

22 April 2000

## Thousands of teachers march in Jakarta

On Tuesday over 10,000 teachers, including 4,000 from schools in West Java, staged demonstrations in Jakarta marching on the House of Representatives and other government ministry buildings to press their demands for an immediate 300 percent pay rise and a 500 percent increase in other allowances. The teachers are also demanding that a minimum of 25 percent of the state budget be allocated for education and integrated education programs.

The demonstrations went ahead despite a statement by Indonesia's Minister for Education, Yahya Muhaimin on Monday claiming that he had secured a "tentative agreement" to raise teachers' allowances by between 100 to 200 percent. Teachers from schools across the country have been engaged in work stoppages and industrial action for almost two weeks.

The House Speaker Akbar Tandjung addressed the protestors inside the Parliament Building and promised to deliver their demands to President Abdurrahman Wahid by April 26 if teachers dropped the threat of an all-out strike on May 2. He was forced to flee the meeting hall under police escort as angry teachers shouted him down with chants of "liar, liar, liar" and flung empty drink bottles from the gallery.

The infuriated teachers then marched through Jakarta to Merdeka Palace bringing evening rush hour traffic along the route to a halt. A delegation of teachers was met by the acting State Secretary Bondan Gunawan who only promised to "explain their demands to the next cabinet meeting".

Delegates representing over 3,000 teachers in Central Java met on Tuesday and voted to hold their own demonstrations in Jakarta next week. However, despite the widespread hostility among teachers, leaders of the education unions are already signalling that they are willing to come to an arrangement with the government to halt further industrial action.

Bogor Teachers Association leader Aim Halim Hermana said this week that the union was willing to

accept the "phasing in" of the 300 percent pay increase "over time". Last week the chairman of the Indonesian Teachers Union Muhammad Surya told the *Jakarta Post* "the union will no longer condone mass teachers' rallies" and supported the government in urging teachers not to disrupt the students' studies further.

Teachers, like other workers, have been hit hard by rising prices following the Asian currency crisis. The average monthly wage for teachers in Indonesia stands at 250,000 rupiah (\$US32), which is lower than the official minimum wage for workers in Jakarta. The current monthly allowance for teachers is only 45,000 rupiah.

## Indonesian textile workers fight for reinstatement

About 2,500 workers sacked from the textile producer PT Roda Vivatex in Bogor staged a protest outside the city council building on Monday in an attempt to force councillors to push for their reinstatement at the factory.

The workers were fired after they launched a number of protests, beginning on April 11, for improved wages and allowances. They were demanding that the company increase wages to meet the government-regulated regional minimal wage of 286,000 rupiah (\$US38.50) a month, as well as an increase in their meal and shift allowances. The workers involved in the protests were dismissed without being given severance pay.

## Workers protest evictions in China

Last Monday around 400 workers staged demonstrations outside the municipal offices and the Information Centre for Human Rights and Democracy in Xian City in China's Shaanxi province. The workers, who are mainly immigrant families from other provinces, are protesting against being evicted from their homes.

The local authorities evicted the families and destroyed 48 homes in Chenshi village to make way for a proposed technology. A spokesman for the protesters said that the householders had paid a large amount of money to local officials for the right to use the land and construct homes.

## Korean insurance workers resume strike

Health insurance workers in South Korea took strike action this week after negotiations with the government

over the integration of several medical insurance schemes broke down. There are currently separately run schemes for salaried officers, civil servants, self employed workers and teachers but the government is aiming to integrate them into one operation by July.

The 2,800-striking workers, who are involved in running the health insurance service for salaried officers, first went on strike on April 10. They then called off their action four days later when the government agreed to begin talks with the Korea Company Medical Insurance Union.

The workers are demanding the government abandon the integration plan, which they fear will lead to job losses and increased workloads. After days of talks the government negotiators refused to make any concessions.

Industrial action last week blocked the transfer of collected insurance premiums worth 280 billion won (\$US250 million) to the National Federation of Medical Insurance (NFMI). The NFMI, which is responsible for allotting insurance payments to hospitals and pharmacies, received only 67 billion won, or 24 percent of the total premiums collected.

#### **Indian dock workers call indefinite strike**

Port workers at 12 major ports in India have called for an indefinite strike from April 30 to demand the implementation of government promises made in January.

The port unions closed down a five-day long strike by 100,000 port workers in January after the government moved troops on to the docks and promised it would negotiate with the unions and make a decision on the demands for increased pay and housing allowances by March 31. However, closed-door negotiations between the government and unions have produced no results.

In an attempt to avert the strike the Minister for Surface Transport, Rajnath Singh, has again invited the union leaders to meet with him and the port chairman on April 26 to “review the wage settlement talks”.

#### **Sri Lankan medical officers strike**

Assistant Medical Officers (AMO) and Registered Medical Officers (RMO) in Sri Lanka have begun an indefinite strike in support of seven demands. These include the immediate commencement of training for 60 students as AMOs, the publication of the 1997 diploma examination results and increased pay and incentive allowances for medical officers serving in the war-torn north and east provinces. Around 1,550 AMOs and RMOs have joined the strike bringing services at 462 dispensaries and maternity homes throughout the country to a halt.

#### **Australian company locks out workforce**

The Joy Mining company in Moss Vale, in the NSW southern highlands, is continuing a week-long lockout of its 70 strong workforce. The lockout was imposed after workers went on strike for two-weeks when negotiations for a new work agreement collapsed.

During the five-month long negotiations the management threatened that it would either sack or lockout the workers if “they did not accept the company's demands for changed working conditions.”

Management began moving machinery and unfinished orders off the site three weeks ago. A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers has said: “We believe that they are going to transfer assets and try and to collapse the company and then bring people back on the company's terms and conditions.”

Despite the company's provocations the unions have limited the dispute to a small picket outside of the company's main gate. The company has sought to intimidate the picket by calling for a police presence claiming that it was “expecting trouble”.

#### **Australian airline union lifts maintenance bans**

Airline unions lifted work bans at Ansett Australia on Thursday after last minute closed-door negotiations with the company to head off the disruption of domestic air travel over Easter. Over 500 maintenance workers have been working to rule and banning overtime for the past two weeks and had decided earlier in the week to continue their action through Easter.

The unions imposed the bans after the company refused to guarantee they would not outsource work. Union officials have speculated that Ansett may close its Australian based maintenance facilities now that the airliner has been taken over by Air New Zealand. The bans were lifted by the union despite the lack of any concessions from the company.

Some Easter flights could still be disrupted however if a 24-hour strike by 30 Mobil refuellers at Tullamarine airport in Melbourne goes ahead. The refuellers' strike is over a new enterprise work agreement including a 4 percent pay rise.



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