

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 August 2000

Filipino railway workers face strike-breaking operation

Nine hundred workers from the Manila Light Rail Transport (LRT) system have been sacked in a state-organised attempt to break their 10-day strike. The Department of Transport and Communication (DOTC) took over the LRT and resumed its operations on Wednesday. It is now recruiting strikebreakers with the intention of resuming full services within a fortnight.

The workers began strike action on July 25, after protracted negotiations for a new contract broke down with the LRT's operator, Metro Inc. The action paralysed the rail network, which carries over 400,000 passengers per day.

The Filipino government intervened into the dispute immediately, ordering a return to a work and deploying police to break picket lines. Dozens of workers have been injured or arrested in clashes and at least 50, including the leaders of the LRT union, face criminal prosecution on frame-up charges.

The attack on the workers, and their subsequent sacking on July 27, was ordered by Philippines President Joseph Estrada. Visiting the United States to attract foreign investment and secure a loan payment from the International Monetary Fund, Estrada denounced the strike as "a criminal action". The LRT is one of numerous state-owned assets being prepared for privatisation.

The strike action, which is continuing, has been isolated by the Filipino trade union leadership and diverted into court challenges. All signs point to an escalation of state repression over the next week. Metro Manila Police head Edgardo Aglipay claimed on July 31 that left-wing groups, intent on destabilising the government, were supporting the strikers. Uniformed police have been moved into 15 stations along the track and plain-clothes police deployed on the carriages.

Sri Lanka railway workers strike for salary allowance

Sri Lankan railway workers staged a one-day strike from midnight July 27, demanding a 3,000-rupee (\$US38) interim salary allowance. The strike was in defiance of government emergency regulations banning industrial action.

Almost all of Sri Lanka's 15,000 railway workers participated in the campaign called by the Railway Trade Union Front, a coalition of 28 rail unions, despite attempts by pro-government unions to block any action. Supporters of the government attacked strikers, injuring four workers.

The railway workers strike is part of a broader campaign across Sri Lanka for wage rises. The Peoples Alliance government increased the price of essential goods and services in June in order to finance the ongoing war in the north and east of the country. It has offered a monthly wage increase of \$7.50 for government workers, \$5 for workers in the private sector and \$6 for pensioners. Workers are

calling for a \$38 interim salary allowance followed by a full increase in salaries to keep pace with the higher cost of living.

Emergency laws used to end Sri Lankan dockyard dispute

The Sri Lankan Dockyard Company (Colombo Dockyard Ltd.) has ended a seven-day lockout of more than 5,000 workers, which it imposed in response to a July 20 strike. The lockout was lifted after management obtained a court order instructing a return to work, on the grounds that the supply of navy boats was being affected.

Unions assured management that they would oppose any further industrial action and collaborate with the company's plans to increase productivity. The dockyard agreed to reinstate 95 workers suspended during the strike and to withdraw charges against 18 engineers who participated. Three engineers are still facing charges filed against them for attending a union meeting.

The dockyard workers struck for a two percent salary rise to compensate for lost hours due to a cut to the nightshift. During the dispute, dockyard workers marched to the Labor Secretariat in Colombo and picketed the building in protest against the lockout.

One of the slogans used by the union leadership during the picket was a direct appeal to the People's Alliance (PA) government: "Open the factory to enable supplying boats to Navy." The slogan was raised despite the fact that the dockyard workers had gone on strike in defiance of the government's emergency war regulations. The "war footing" regulations imposed in last May make strikes and protests illegal.

Sri Lankan engineering workers seek pay rises

Workers from the Serendib Engineering Group have been campaigning since June for a log of claims, including repayment of a salary cut and the reinstatement of four suspended workers. The workers have placed posters and held regular picket lines in front of the factory.

The company manufactures agricultural machinery for tea, rubber and coconut plantations. After the formerly state-owned company was sold to Serendib in 1998, workers demanded a 1,000 rupee (\$US12.50) interim allowance until a collective agreement was signed between the union and the new management. The company only paid the allowance for five months.

Management shut the plant between December 9 and 23 last year and deducted two weeks pay. The company has also reduced a two-month annual bonus to one month and not deposited funds into an employee provident fund or their trust fund. When Serendib workers picketed against these changes on December 31 management retaliated by suspending four workers and transferring five others.

Pakistani firefighters campaign against victimisations

Firefighters from the Port of Karachi are campaigning against the victimisation of two union leaders who were suspended during a week-

long strike last month in protest against management attempts to abolish overtime payments.

The firefighters ended the strike after failing to spread it throughout the port and to other Karachi workers. Port authorities suspended the two strike leaders and distributed letters accusing them of “disturbing the smooth working of the Port Fire Service”.

Jakarta's Governor to appeal pedicab ruling

Indonesian pedicab drivers have won a lawsuit against Jakarta's Governor Sutiyoso. Nearly 140 drivers, representing the 6,000 pedicab drivers in Jakarta, filed the suit in February after the Governor tried to prohibit pedicabs operating in the capital. The drivers demanded the government allow them to continue operating in certain areas and accused the city administration of using violence to get them off the streets.

The court ruled that the pedicab drivers be allowed to operate in and around residential complexes, marketplaces and other selected areas in the capital. He also advised the city administration to revise its bylaw prohibiting pedicab drivers operating in the capital. Governor Sutiyoso has indicated that the city administration still plan to remove pedicabs and will appeal the judge's decision in the high court.

PNG teachers defy return to work order

The Papua New Guinea National Court in Waigani, following an application by the Teaching Services Commission (TSC), issued an order last Friday directing 10,000 striking teachers to return to work.

PNG teachers have been conducting a wages campaign since mid-July, in defiance of their union and threats of dismissal from the national government. After the Teachers Association (PNGTA) refused to register the teachers' demands with the Office of the Industrial Registrar, teachers in the Highlands districts submitted mass resignations, shutting down schools across the region. The strike has now spread to most of the country.

On Tuesday, union officials from the East New Britain (ENB) branch of the PNGTA agreed to direct striking teachers back to work. The provincial government has offered a 13 percent increase and a 5 percent cost of living adjustment, with a further 2 percent next year. The 27 percent increase over the next two years falls far short of the teachers' demand for a 60.52 percent cost of living increase and a 100 percent wage rise. The majority of teachers have rejected the offer and refused to return to work.

In the Highlands, teachers for years 10 and 12 have returned to work but others have indicated they intend to remain on strike until their demands are met.

Teachers in Mendi (Southern Highlands) have vowed not to return to classes, despite the court order and a 15.6 percent wage rise recently awarded by the provincial government. Teachers in the New Guinea Island region voted to strike on Thursday and are demanding the resignation of the Education Minister and the replacement of the union executive in the PNGTA.

Australian pharmaceutical workers strike

Over 70 pharmaceutical workers from the Fauldings plant at Underdale, Adelaide went on strike this week over negotiations for an enterprise agreement. Workers are seeking a 12 percent pay rise over a 27-month period. The company has only offered 10 percent. A National Union of Workers official said that the dispute would not be allowed to spread to Faulding's main plant at Salisbury, north of Adelaide.

Brewery workers' industrial bans lifted

Industrial bans on the production of the popular Victoria Bitter beer were lifted this week by union leaders who are seeking a negotiated

settlement with the largest Australian brewery, Carlton & United Breweries (CUB). Over 400 workers were involved in the dispute, demanding that CUB provide an 18 percent pay rise over the next three years. Union leaders called off the work bans after beer stocks began to run low in many Victorian hotels.

Joy Mining lockout continues

Over 200 workers staged a protest rally outside the Chase Manhattan bank in Sydney last week in an attempt to pressure Joy Mining to end their lockout of workers and to restart negotiations on an enterprise agreement. For over four months 73 Joy workers have been locked out of the company's plant at Moss Vale on the New South Wales south coast.

The US-owned mining equipment company is attempting to introduce four types of individual contracts onto its workforce. The dispute has involved a 24-hour picket at the Moss Vale plant and weeks of rallies, protests and pickets outside the company's Coniston premises and one of its subsidiaries in Unanderra. Several weeks ago, 5,000 workers held a rally in Melbourne in support of the locked out workers.

In the latest development, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission recommended an end to Joy's lockout under a proposal that both sides cease legal action against each other. Joy workers were due to meet yesterday to consider the recommendation.

Miners' bodies recovered

The bodies of three workers killed in the Bronzewing mine collapse in Western Australia on June 26 have been found. The men were Shane Hamill, 45, Timothy Lee Bell, 21 and Troy Terrence Woodward, 26.

The three men were working in a decline shaft 400 metres below the surface when a retaining wall from an old excavation collapsed, burying them under some 18,000 cubic metres of rock, mud and sludge. It is assumed the men died instantly, but details regarding the cause of death have not been released.

Mining operations resumed early in July while the search for the bodies continued. While the state government and unions have said that an investigation would be held, no proceedings have begun.

New Zealand council workers strike over pay

About 90 staff employed by the Hamilton City Council, a provincial centre in New Zealand, went on strike this week in protest at stalled pay talks. The workers waved placards during an hour-long public demonstration in the central city, and will continue doing so twice a week.

The parks, nursery, utilities and interment staff are demanding a 3 percent pay rise over one year or 3 percent and 2.5 percent over two years. Council management is only offering 1.75 percent over one year or two 2 percent rises. The workers are also protesting the fact that there is no entitlement to free tea and coffee, a provision removed in a previous contract settlement.



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