

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 August 2000

Indian textile and diamond workers protest in Gujarat

Over 300,00 power loom workers in the Indian state of Gujarat, a major textile producing centre, went on strike last week to demand unpaid wages. Employers had closed down the industry for 10 days from July 22, to pressure the state government to increase the electricity subsidy it pays them. With most factory owners promising to meet the workers' demands, the majority of strikers have returned to work.

During this dispute, some one million Gujarat diamond workers began a campaign against wage cuts, imposed by employers in response to a downturn in the global diamond industry. The workers are paid on a piece rate basis to cut and polish diamonds.

Indian teachers strike to defend conditions

Most educational facilities in Mumbai were closed on Wednesday when 40,000 teachers from schools and junior colleges took action against the state government's policy of appointing teachers on contract. Teachers employed under contract do not receive holiday or sick leave and other basic entitlements.

Mid-term examinations have been postponed and the Greater Bombay Secondary School Teachers Organisation has said teachers will consider an indefinite strike if the government does not change its stance.

Teachers in Calcutta demand unpaid wages

Teachers at Deemed University in Calcutta are continuing a work-to-rule protest against the government's refusal to pay wages owing to them for over a year. The teacher's campaign began last month when they banned some academic and all administrative work. Teachers from Jadavpur University are also campaigning for unpaid wages.

Sri Lankan factory workers fight lock out

Workers from Micrees Industry, a manufacturer of polypropylene, demonstrated in front of the labour secretariat in Colombo on Tuesday to protest against the lockout of the factory's 300-strong workforce.

Micrees locked out the workforce on June 15 in attempt to cut workers' salaries by 50 percent and abolish food and attendance allowances and the annual picnic. Management claims that the factory had become unprofitable and that the

cuts were necessary for its survival. Workers responded by establishing picket lines and launching a poster campaign. Five meetings between the Commercial and Industry Workers Union (CIWU), which covers workers at the plant, and management, have failed to resolve the dispute.

Philippines jeepney drivers strike

Jeepney drivers in Metro Manila staged a two-day strike on Monday, demanding an end to fuel price rises and the abolition of the Road User's Tax and the Oil Deregulation Law. Protests were organised by various driver support groups.

The government used 30 extra buses and military trucks to transport passengers and increased the peak-hour time period for the Light Rail Transport and the Metro Railway Transit networks. Over 15,000 police were deployed to intimidate the strikers. During clashes 11 workers were arrested, including the president of one of the drivers associations.

South Korean civil servants face mass layoffs

Local authorities in South Korea are planning to dismiss 8,000 civil servants, including 1,100 Seoul City officials, by the end of the year. The authorities are demanding the retrenchments after failing to get the numbers through voluntary resignations, honorary or early retirements. Civil service workers have protested that temporary workers, and those in technical or other low-level positions, are being targeted for dismissal.

Government authorities from Kyonggi province have ordered city and county officials to select workers they can force to resign by the end of September. Kwangju, South Cholla, North Cholla and South Kyongsang provinces are also preparing systematic dismissals.

Papua New Guinea teachers reject new pay deal

Ten thousand teachers from the PNG Highlands region, who resigned last month demanding improved wages, have rejected a government-union deal to end their campaign.

The PNG Teachers Association ordered all teachers back to work after it secretly signed a three-year Memorandum of Agreement with the government Teaching Services Commission. The deal only provides a five percent wage increase, backdated to January, and another five percent

from January next year. It also includes a lump sum payment of two percent, backdated to January 2000 but not paid until early next year. The deal was made last Friday after teachers ignored a court order declaring their protest resignations to be illegal and ordering them to return to classes.

Teachers rejected the deal saying it falls far short of their demand for wage increases of between 100—200 percent and have stated that they will not return to work unless it is met.

Nurses in Australian state vote for action

A meeting on Wednesday of over 2,500 nurses in Melbourne, Victoria, voted overwhelmingly for an industrial campaign against the state Labor Party government. Nurses have been demanding a 24 percent pay increase over three years, improvements in the nurse-to-patient ratio, an increase in rostered days off and an improved career structure.

The mass meeting was called after the government only offered a pay increase of 9 percent over three years. The Labor government also announced it would only provide 200 new nursing positions, even though there are 1,500 nursing vacancies in the states' public hospital system. Over 2,000 nurses leave the profession every year because of poor wages and conditions. The state's nursing budget has faced annual cuts of \$180 million since 1992. A nurses' spokesperson said that; "On any given day there are between 100 to 200 beds closed in the public sector because of the shortage of nurses."

The nurses' action will close some 2,000 public hospital and aged care beds throughout Victoria, ban a quarter of all booked operating theatre sessions and ban selected Red Cross blood banks, district nursing and psychiatric services.

Queensland rail workers oppose sackings

Nearly 200 workers from the Redbank rail workshops in Ipswich, Queensland, marched on the offices state treasurer David Hamill last week after it was announced that 160 permanent workers and 97 fixed-term jobs are to be cut. The workshops, which once employed over 4,000, currently employ 850 workers and the loss of 257 jobs will have a devastating impact on the town.

The proposed sackings at Redbank are only the tip of the iceberg. Nearly 5,000 Queensland rail jobs are likely to be cut, with the government encouraging workers to accept voluntary redundancies.

Industrial action at Esso's Australian oil and gas plant continues

Workers at Esso's Longford gas and oil refinery in Victoria are continuing industrial action over an Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. The 450 workers are angry at Esso's refusal to agree to improved superannuation benefits and a wage rise of 15 percent over three years. While the workers ended strike action two weeks ago, industrial bans on the supply of gas are still in place, reducing output by 5 percent.

Management have only offered 3.5 percent per year for three years.

Sydney factory workers strike

Some 130 workers at the Selley's factory in Sydney's southwest have voted to strike for a week after the collapse of pay negotiations. Workers are demanding a 6 percent annual pay rise, which the company has rejected. A picket line has now been established, which could cut supplies of the company's homemaker products.

New Zealand teachers "no faith" in union

Eight teachers taking personal grievance cases against an Auckland girls' school say they have no faith in their union to represent them and have instead sought private legal advice. The teachers have filed personal grievance claims against Kelston Girls' High School in the Employment Tribunal on the grounds the school is an unsafe work environment.

Virginia Woolf, the teacher at the centre of the first grievance, is considering legal action against the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and one of its field officers, claiming he had released confidential information about her case to the school. Woolf reached an out-of-court settlement with the school board over a personal grievance claim for \$350,000 last week. The deal was reached nine days into an Employment Court hearing during which Woolf testified that she was forced to resign in January, after teaching at the school for 14 years.

Woolf said she was the victim of oppression and dominance from her faculty head and had to take extended sick leave after collapsing at school through stress and anxiety. She sought compensation for humiliation, medical costs, back pay and loss of future earnings. The school maintains that Woolf and the other claimants have been unable to meet the requirements of the new "performance standards" for teachers, negotiated by the union as part of its last contract settlement. However, a senior teacher from the school said in evidence that nearly all of the English department's teachers signed letters supporting their colleagues, whom they felt had been unjustly treated. The school principal and the faculty head, the key respondents on behalf of the school, are, respectively, former and present national executive members of the union.



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