

Workers Struggles; Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 August 2000

Taiwanese telecom workers rally against government

Over 10,000 Taiwanese telecommunication workers employed by the state-owned Chunghwa Telecom marched through Taipei on Wednesday in the first mass protest against the privatisation policies of the newly-elected Democratic Progressive Party government of Chen Shui-bian.

Chunghwa is to be partially privatised later this year. Negotiations between the government and unions collapsed earlier in the week, when the government refused to guarantee the maintenance of existing salary levels and a mandatory retirement age of 65. Some analysts estimate that up to half the 35,000 strong workforce will lose their jobs.

During the protest, demonstrators jeered Chunghwa's new chairman as he tried to appease workers by promising that they would be adequately compensated in the privatisation process. Demonstrators clashed with riot police when they attempted to force their way into a cabinet office compound to place their demands before the Premier, Tang Fei.

Workers have threatened to confront President Chen at the Taiwan's main airport next week when he returns from an overseas tour.

Sri Lankan railway workers continue struggle for pay

Workers from the Maradana railway station, one of the two major stations in Colombo, held a six-hour lightning strike on August 12. Rail workers are campaigning for salary increases to compensate for price rises introduced by the government to raise revenue to finance the war in the north and east of the country against the minority Tamil population.

During the dispute, police threatened to arrest two striking workers on the basis of accusations made by government supporters. Striking rail workers returned to work the following day, after an assurance by the railway superintendent that he would not allow the workers to be taken into custody.

The same pro-government elements were responsible for attacking and injuring rail workers during a one-day strike on July 27. Some 25 thugs armed with swords, clubs and knives stormed the locomotive section of Maradana station and attacked the striking workers. Most of the country's 15,000 railway workers had joined the strike, as a part of a campaign by the island's public sector workers for a \$US38 interim allowance.

Sri Lankan textile workers struggle to protect jobs

Laid-off workers from the bankrupt Veytex factory picketed the Labour Secretariat in Colombo on August 15, to demand the reopening of the plant and reinstatement of the 2,600-strong

workforce. Veytex, which was Sri Lanka's second largest textile plant, is situated in Veyangoda, about 35 kilometres from Colombo. The state-owned People's Bank shut it down on July 10.

The bank has filed a lawsuit against the former owners to recover outstanding debts and called on workers to demonstrate in front of the court. Workers refused, declaring that the owner and the bank have cheated them. The factory has been closed five times before.

The eight unions covering the workers have evaded any struggle for reinstatement. Workers have formed the "Organisation to protect the rights of laid-off workers—Veytex branch" and issued a leaflet demanding their jobs and the payment of outstanding wages.

Workers sacked from Sri Lankan rubber processing plant

Nineteen workers from the rubber processing division of Sherman & Sons in Welisara, a suburb to the north of Colombo, have been sacked for protesting against the curtailment of their New Year bonus, which was due to be paid in April.

As part of their protest, workers occupied the factory roof. The Inter-Company Workers Union (ICWU), controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), ended the campaign by assuring workers that their claims would be met through "peaceful means". But the opposite has occurred, with the Employers Federation informing the union that they will not pay the bonus.

The rubber industry in Sri Lanka is in severe crisis because of an international glut of natural rubber. Sherman & Sons, one of the major rubber exporters in Sri Lanka, is seeking to cut production costs by reducing its workforce.

Locked out Australian workers occupy plant

Heinz Wattie's management have locked out its workforce and suspended production at its Dandenong plant in Melbourne, Victoria. Workers responded to the provocation by picketing the factory and over 150 barricading themselves inside a canteen.

The workers will be made redundant when the company shuts the plant in November. Heinz Wattie's is shifting part of its operation to Hastings, New Zealand and transferring bean and spaghetti production to a new factory in the rural Victorian town of Echuca, which employs only 50 workers.

The Dandenong plant was opened 45 years ago and employed almost 1,000 workers in 1989. Nine rounds of redundancies have slashed the workforce to 250. Management retrenched 100 workers last November and demanded those remaining increase overtime to maintain output.

The state Labor government has refused to oppose the closure.

While the union is pursuing talks with the government, workers were sceptical. One told the WSWs that Labor premier Steve Bracks had let them down and those workers who voted for him would not do so again. Mass meetings are planned this weekend to discuss the situation.

Australian mental health nurses take action over conditions

Mental health nurses in South Australia voted on Monday to step-up industrial action over the dangerous conditions in the state's health institutions. At least 2-3 nurses are being assaulted each week by patients in overcrowded and understaffed psychiatric wards.

For the last month nurses have maintained industrial bans, limiting the number of patients admitted to each ward. Nurses say that seriously ill people are being dumped into the community because of government funding cuts to the mental health sector. They have accused the state government of ignoring their concerns and disregarding their safety, and are demanding more beds and increased funding.

Western Australian university and TAFE staff protest for pay and job security

Some 1,300 academic staff and 1,150 general staff at the four Edith Cowan university campuses in Western Australia went on strike on Wednesday, after negotiations with university management over a new enterprise agreement failed to meet wage demands and guarantee job security.

Tertiary teaching staff have been negotiating with management for over 18 months. Management had offered some workers a 10 percent wage rise over three years but would only guarantee 7 percent. The University Guild and the National Union of Students have backed the strike.

Lecturers from Midland College TAFE also held a stop work meeting on Wednesday to discuss whether they will take industrial action over the lack of progress on wage and working conditions claims.

Queensland miners stood down over drug tests

Two hundred and fifty miners were stood down from the South Backwater coal mine on August 9 for refusing to provide urine samples for drug and alcohol tests. Miners oppose the testing, believing they could be used to victimise workers.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) agreed to blind testing in the Industrial Relations Commission on August 11. Blind testing means that workers provide samples for drug testing on the proviso that the samples are kept anonymous, are destroyed and the results not used against any employee. CFMEU state secretary Andrew Vickers justified the union's position saying the drug testing was part of a "fitness for duty policy".

Western Australian carers fight for award rates of pay

Workers employed by the Activ Foundation as carers for disabled people, social trainers and house "parents" for the disabled, rallied in Perth on Tuesday demanding increased pay. Some 1,000 workers are currently employed under a 1995 enterprise agreement and the Foundations' management is claiming it is unable to match current award wage rates.

The Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union is calling for redundancy entitlements and an optional salary

package for the workers. The current workplace agreement includes compulsory salary packaging and a five percent administration fee charged by management on staff.

Joy Mining campaign escalates

Striking workers from the Joy Mining Equipment Company voted last week to extend their campaign for another week, in protest against the firm's application to the Australian Industrial Commission to pursue financial damages against individual workers. The Commission is obliged to approve the application if the two parties cannot reach agreement. The approval would allow the company to file common law claims against 60 individual workers and their union.

Bank uses delaying tactics to force pay deal

After six months of negotiations and a 24-hour strike, Commonwealth Bank of Australia workers are no closer to finalising a new pay deal. The Finance Sector Union has reduced the original pay demand from 13 percent over three years to 8.5 percent, but the CBA claims this is still too high and will only agree to 6.5 percent over two years.

The standoff in negotiations is being used by the CBA to introduce individual non-union contracts. A CBA spokesman said that the bank was happy with the stalled EBA negotiations and was considering the use of individual contracts or putting the 6.5 percent pay offer directly to bank workers in the form of a non-union agreement.

Pacific Island teachers strike over pay

Over half of the 22 teachers at Niue High School, the only secondary school on the tiny Pacific Ocean island of Niue, struck for two days last week. They were protesting over the government's lack of progress in negotiating a pay increase. The teachers want a \$2,000 a year increment for qualifications and additional skills required to meet the New Zealand Qualifications Standards, which was adopted by Niue's education system. Unrest has been mounting for some time and teachers say that past and present governments have taken little notice of their plight.

Niue's Minister of Education is reported to have addressed the teachers after they refused to leave the staff room last Friday. She threatened to sack teachers who did not comply with an instruction to return to work. Niue primary school teachers who have not yet joined the dispute are also attempting to negotiate increased pay.

Teachers have not had a cost of living allowance increase since 1996. The striking teachers' spokesperson said they were tired of waiting for more money. Teachers say the government budgeted last year for a teachers' pay rise but it was never paid. Also at issue is a disparity between pay rates for locally-trained teachers, who earn the equivalent of \$US8,000 per year, and expatriate New Zealand teachers, who earn \$US30,000. The teachers have warned that industrial action will continue if the government does not guarantee an immediate increase.



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