

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 September 2000

## Indian strike opposes police shootings

Hundreds of workers were arrested on Tuesday during a one-day general strike in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The strike closed shops, business establishments and educational institutions across the region and severely affected public transport services.

The strike was called by opposition parties, including Congress (I), the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India (Marxist), in protest over the police shooting of five people the day before in the state capital of Hyderabad during a demonstration against a sharp rise in electricity prices. Police fired intermittently into demonstrators for about 45 minutes when they attempted to reach the State Assembly Building.

A CPI spokesman condemned the “shoot to kill” action but did not question the right of the police to use violence against protesting workers. He said that the police could have “indulged in a lathi [baton] charge, teargas, water cannon” or could have “aimed below the knee”.

The government has made it clear that is preparing to use such measures again. Hyderabad police chief S. Sukumar said, “Troops are ready for any eventuality”.

## Telecom workers strike

Over 300,000 Indian Telecom workers struck on August 24 against government plans to privatise the Department of Telecommunications. Telephone exchanges, administrative and telegraph offices in West Bengal, Kerala, Assam, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and the North Eastern states were closed by the dispute.

Workers from the Department of Telecom Operations in Delhi also went on strike and demonstrated in front of the department's headquarters. In West Bengal, workers from the Income Tax and Auditor Generals office went out in support of the Telecom workers. Seven unions participated in the dispute. Since the government began to privatise the telecommunications carrier, basic telephone charges have increased by 160 to 220 percent.

## Dock workers protest in solidarity with Burmese sailors

Dockworkers in the Indian city of Calcutta held a Burmese cargo ship in the port for two days, to protest against the substandard working conditions on board. The dockworkers allege that Burmese sailors often go without adequate food and water and are not paid the correct salary. The ship was allowed to leave on August 22 after its owners gave assurances they would improve the crew's conditions.

## Sri Lankan broadcasting workers demonstrate

Some 500 workers from the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) held a lunch-hour demonstration on August 30 in front of the corporation's headquarters in Colombo. The demonstrators were protesting against the partial privatisation of the corporation and demanding a monthly pay increase of 3,000 rupee (\$US38) for all employees. The demonstrators also demanded the removal of corrupt administrators, an end to unlawful appointments and promotions, and truthful media coverage of their demands.

A spokesman for the demonstrators said: “There is a plan to privatise the SLBC through restructuring. We have faced job cutting and deteriorating working conditions. Some facilities have already been cut down. When we did not take our annual medical leave, we were paid a wage of one month as an allowance. Now it has been stopped.”

The joint action committee of SLBC trade unions organised the protest. Although officials from the pro-government Sri Lanka Independent Workers Union and General Workers Union refused to join the campaign, the union's members still participated.

## Water board workers demand cost-of-living allowance

Workers from the Sri Lankan National Water Supplies and Drainage Board staged lunch-hour pickets last week at the department's head office in Ratmalana, about 15 kilometres south of Colombo. The workers are demanding a 4 percent pay increase, the reestablishment of a cost of living allowance and the end of many salary anomalies.

The campaign was organised by the United Action Committee, comprising all the trade unions with members employed by the water board. Action Committee leaders have suspended the campaign while the Urban Development Minister considers their claim.

## Chinese workers hold company directors hostage

Seventy workers at Meite Packaging, a Chinese-American joint venture in Tianjin province, occupied the plant last week and held six directors hostage for 40 hours.

At the beginning of August, company officials announced that the workers would lose their jobs when the plant closed and relocated its operations to a development zone some 50 kilometres away. The threatened workers picketed the factory every day in an attempt to stop goods from entering or leaving.

Although management and local government officials agreed to begin negotiations after they released the hostages, the factory was closed down the next day and the machinery hastily removed to the new premises.

## Child labourers rescued from Filipino sweatshop

On Tuesday police rescued child workers from a sweatshop operating in the Manila suburb of Binondo. The children, who were attempting to flee the civil war in southern Mindanao, were recruited by the Violy Employment Agency, which promised them good jobs away from the fighting.

The children claimed they were forced into virtual slavery when they started working for the sweatshop. They were not allowed to write home and were locked in their quarters at night. When one of the children became ill for a week and could not work, he was locked up and denied food.

## Junior doctors strike in New Zealand

Almost 300 junior doctors went on strike in New Zealand last week over a claim for a 20 percent pay increase and better working conditions. The strike began at the Whangarei Hospital on August 22, but within three days doctors from Palmerston North, Wanganui and Hamilton had joined in.

The doctors' strike is the first nationwide industrial dispute under the

nine-month old Labour-Alliance government and is a sign of the worsening crisis facing the public health system. Last year more than 300 doctors left New Zealand, mainly for Australia, where they receive higher pay and better working conditions.

Hundreds of operations are being cancelled in many regions in New Zealand because of acute shortages of doctors and nursing staff. Yet the Minister of Health, Annette King, has consistently maintained that the government will not increase funding and that hospitals are expected to meet any pay rises from within their own budgets. King said she would not become involved in the negotiations because the hospitals are all “run as private companies”.

A spokeswoman for the Resident Doctors Association (RDA), Deborah Sidebotham, said there is a growing feeling among junior doctors that national strike action is the only way to achieve their pay rise. However, the union has done everything it can to avoid calling one. The action taken so far has been on an isolated hospital-by-hospital basis, with doctors at each site returning to work after being on strike for a week.

Earlier this week, the RDA initiated meetings with an arbitrator and 18 hospital companies in order to try to come up with a deal to avert a national strike. While neither the RDA nor the hospitals would reveal the details, they indicated that the two-year contract would involve complex changes to base salary rates and training entitlements, without an increase in the total wage bill beyond what has already been offered.

#### **Niue teachers back on strike**

Teachers on the South Pacific island of Niue, who walked off the job on August 18 for two days, are back on strike as their pay dispute enters its third week. A majority of the 22 teachers at Niue High School, the island's only secondary school, are seeking a pay increase of \$2,000 a year, following a government decision to adopt qualification standards used by the New Zealand education system.

The teachers are now asking to meet directly with the cabinet to outline their case. They are also contacting the New Zealand education authorities to notify them that the school is not meeting the standards required for internal assessment. The Niue government has kept the school open, but a number of retired teachers supported the strikers by refusing to take classes.

#### **Fijian bank workers to vote on strike action**

Westpac Bank employees in Fiji are preparing to vote in postal ballots on a proposal for a national strike. This week the Australian-owned bank threatened to lay off 120 staff, if the 400-strong workforce did not accept major changes to working conditions, including converting from full-time to part-time and a reduction in annual leave entitlements. Westpac also wants the right to send workers on leave without pay when it suits management.

The bank workers have said they are prepared to go on strike illegally if the government prevents them holding the ballot. Labour Minister Ratu Tevita Momoedonu announced that he planned to see both union and bank officials separately to discuss the situation.

#### **PNG civil servants oppose forced retirement**

Seventy-eight civil servants from the Department of East Sepik are taking legal action over their forced retirement in 1999. Both national and local government departments were directed to reduce staff by retiring employees when they reached the age of 50. None of the 78, including teachers, health workers and other officers, were given retirement notices or the choice to continue their employment. The first they knew of their termination was when they ceased to receive wages. The same policy was implemented in other districts and departments.

The Public Employees Association will not take industrial action in support of the workers' challenge and have referred the matter to lawyers for a “legal opinion”. However, the lawyers have said that they are still waiting for direction from the union to interview the sacked workers.

#### **Australian bank moves to deunionise its workforce**

The Financial Sector Union (FSU) held a series of national stopwork meetings last week of members employed by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA). More than 10,000 CBA employees attended meetings in Brisbane, Adelaide, Melbourne and other state capitals with union members in Sydney marching on the bank's Martin Place headquarters on Friday chanting “which bank, bully bank!”. The CBA management gave the FSU until August 31 to accept its latest pay offer or it declared it would by-pass the union and offer individual work contracts to all employees. If this happens, it would be largest offer of individual contracts in Australian corporate history and the first major attempt by a bank to deunionise its workforce.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) has signalled that it will not call industrial action and will restrict its response to a feeble protest. The ACTU's president Sharon Burrows told the media this week that the organisation would “campaign” for all affiliated unions to close their accounts with the CBA.

Since launching the wage campaign the FSU has been in full retreat. After months of stalled negotiations, the union reduced its original pay claim from 13.5 percent over two years to 8.5 percent plus “performance pay,” with any bonuses linked to productivity increases. The bank has refused to shift from its offer of 6.5 percent over two years.

#### **Australian home care workers campaign for wage rise**

Home care workers in New South Wales, who assist homebound sick and invalid people, have begun a statewide campaign of industrial action for a two percent wage increase. On August 28 the workers held demonstrations and picketed Home Care offices across the state, including the company's main office in Parramatta in western Sydney. In the small seaside town of Port Macquarie over 25 workers attended a protest. Negotiations over the pay claim have been ongoing since March but little progress has been made.

#### **Sydney hotel workers take strike action over Olympic bonus**

Workers employed by the Regent Hotel in Sydney went on strike for 24 hours on Monday, demanding to be paid the same Olympic bonus that is being offered to hotel employees elsewhere in the city. More than 50 workers manned a day-long picket line outside the hotel.

While the Australian Hotels Association advised the hospitality industry to pay an Olympic bonus of no more than \$2 an hour, some hotels are paying workers bonuses of up to \$550 a week. The Regent Hotel workers plan to hold daily protests over the next week to press their claim.



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