

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 September 2000

## Indian Telecom workers strike

Over 350,000 Telecom workers across India began an indefinite strike on Wednesday against the latest steps by the central government to privatise the Department of Telecommunications. The workers are demanding assurances of job security and a separate pension scheme to protect their present benefits.

The striking Telecom workers operate and maintain a network of over 20 million lines across India, except in the cities of Mumbai and Delhi. The strike will disrupt local and inter-city calls throughout the country and seriously disrupt work in all major companies.

The Telecom strike is part of ongoing unrest among public sector workers sparked by widespread industry restructuring and the sell-off of government enterprises. Telecom workers took strike action in June and August.

The government has already ended Telecom's monopoly on Internet services, allowing private ISPs to set up their own international gateways, and has opened up domestic long-distance telephone services to private companies. Telecom will be corporatised as Bharat Sanchar Nigam by October 1, in preparation for its full privatisation.

## Leprosy hospital workers in Sri Lanka protest overtime restrictions

Staff at the Leprosy Hospital in Handala, a northern suburb of Colombo, has been boycotting overtime work for the past fortnight, in protest at a management decision to restrict overtime to 20 hours per month.

The workers rely on the extra hours to supplement their wages. They are also angry that they have not been paid for overtime worked in June and July. Management says it was forced to implement restrictions due to government funding cutbacks.

The overtime restriction has reduced the level of patient care. A workers' spokesman said: "There are 48 leprosy patients in the hospital and all of them are old and they are always in need of our help. But since the management put restrictions on our overtime we have been forced to stop our daily work by 2.30pm. The preparation of dinner for patients has been stopped and now food has to be bought from outside."

## Electricity board employees defy government order

On September 6, Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers held a sick note campaign, defying a government order canceling leave. The action is part of a campaign across the public sector for a 3,000-rupee (\$US38) monthly wage increase.

The government promulgated the order banning leave on September 5, using the Essential Service orders, to prevent workers reporting in sick. According to the Joint Trade Union Front of the CEB more than 60 percent of the workforce participated in the action despite the government ban.

## Strike in Sri Lanka to reinstate sacked workers

Workers at the Ceasta factory, a rubber mattress manufacturer in Maharagama, a suburb south of Colombo, began an indefinite strike on September 4. They are demanding the reinstatement of 27 of their colleagues who were sacked by the company after it modernised the factory and introduced new machinery.

## Bangladesh non-governmental teachers in an indefinite strike

Nearly 100,000 teachers attached to non-government primary schools in Bangladesh have been on strike since September 2, demanding that the government take over their schools. The teachers intend to hold a rally in the capital Dhaka on September 10 if the government of Prime Minister Sheik Hasina refuses to meet their demands. Teachers began fighting for the nationalisation of primary schools in 1992. The Education Ministry does not run 3,000 of the country's 23,000 primary schools.

## Thai textile workers protest against sackings and low pay

More than 500 sacked Thai Durable textile workers are staging an ongoing protest in front of Government House in Bangkok.

Thai Durable employs 1,500 workers, mainly women. During the Asian economic crisis the union signed an agreement not to seek wage rises. The contract expired in February and workers demanded three US cents per day pay increase and a bonus equal to two months wages. The company rejected the demand out of hand.

In May, the workers went on strike and occupied the factory. On June 14, company security guards, supported by riot police, cleared the factory and 390 workers were sacked.

## Indonesian Sony workers still face layoffs

On September 1, the protracted industrial dispute at PT Sony Electronics in Indonesia was brought to an end after the PT Sony Employees' Union signed an agreement with the company.

The majority of the 1,300 strong Sony workforce went on strike on April 26 over the company's plan to cut hundreds of jobs. In July, Sony confirmed that it would sack 1,007 workers.

Under the return to work deal, the company will reinstate all the striking workers by September 16 and negotiate with the union to carry out the layoffs. The company has offered to pay compensation to any workers who accept redundancy.

## Joy Mining strikers left isolated

Striking workers at Joy Mining Machinery on the New South Wales South Coast voted on Wednesday September 6 to extend their strike for another month. The dispute has been going for 23 weeks. The workers took the decision even though the company agreed last week to restart negotiations with union representatives.

More than 70 workers went on strike after negotiations over a new enterprise work agreement broke down. An attempt to introduce individual work contracts was rejected and management implemented a lockout.

The metal unions involved have not organised any industrial action by their members in other workplaces in the region to back the Joy workers. Support has been restricted to financial contributions and brief appearances on the picket line by off-duty workers and union officials.

Consequently, the striking workers are feeling the pressure of the isolation. Workers have already been forced to look for other jobs due to financial and family problems. There are now 60 workers remaining in the dispute.

## Workers picket Snack Bands

Workers at the Snack Brands distribution centre in the Melbourne suburb of Scorseby are on strike over the management's use of security guards to enforce a 24-hour lockout. The company took the action when the workers initiated one hour per shift stoppages and overtime bans after the management refused to negotiate a log of claims.

The claims include a 15 percent pay rise over three years, better staff training, improved safety conditions and increased consultation. Management offered to pay only four percent. The workers are also demanding the company institute a system of job rotation because many workers at the plant suffer from repetitive strain injuries.

#### **Bus drivers strike over safety**

Striking bus drivers at John Hill Bus Company in Wollongong and Shellharbour on the NSW South Coast held a 24-hour snap strike this week in protest over eight defective buses. The company has continued to use the buses even though the vehicles had been found to be defective by the Road and Traffic Authority. A spokesman for the strikers said that the management was not passing on drivers' reports detailing defects to the company's mechanics.

#### **Queensland sugar workers on strike**

More than 500 sugar workers employed at the four district mills owned by Mackay Sugar in Queensland, went on strike for 24 hours on Wednesday. The decision to strike was taken on Tuesday at a mass meeting in Mackay, called to discuss the company's plan to eliminate 105 jobs through voluntary redundancy and early retirements.

Under the redundancy package a mill worker in his late fifties with 20 years service, will receive no more than one year's pay. Under conditions of high unemployment in the region and deepening problems in the sugar industry, finding full-time work is virtually impossible for older workers. The crisis in the industry was highlighted last week when the government announced an assistance package of \$83 million to the sugar cane growers and mill operators.

The sugar workers are due to meet again to consider management offers and to decide on future industrial action.

#### **Truck drivers stage blockade in Western Australia**

Owner-drivers staged a truck blockade of Fremantle Port last week to demand higher haulage rates in the wake of soaring fuel prices and mounting running costs. A similar protest was held at the Kewdale freight terminal in Perth. The drivers plan to broaden the campaign, including a mass protest outside state parliament.

Trevor and Lyn Hanson, who attended the blockade, have been in the trucking industry for 20 years. They explained that they operate a rig subcontracted for return haulage trips from Perth to Derby each week and are paid \$6,000 for each run. Of that, more than half goes on fuel costs.

The couple said they also pay \$4,564 a month for the overdraft on their truck. In the past six years their registration fees have climbed from \$1,500 to \$5,400 a year. Their accounting fees have also gone up from \$250 to \$5,000 because of the extra paperwork associated with the recently introduced GST (consumption tax) and tracking for the fuel rebate.

Lyn Hanson said that the situation had become so bad that the couple was forced to lay off their own son, who has previously shared the driving with her husband. Truck drivers have also been hit by higher insurance costs, including public liability, personal accident, sickness and dangerous goods insurance premiums.

#### **Western Australian teachers hold stop work meeting**

Public school teachers in Western Australia held a stop-work meeting at the end of last week to discuss progress in negotiations over a log of claims. The teachers, members of the Australian Education and State School Teachers Union, are demanding a general wage increase, reduced class sizes and a restructured salary scale to boost the pay of first-year teachers.

Members of the Community and Public Sector Union employed in the

state's schools have also raised questions of staff shortages and increased workloads. A spokesman for the union accused the Education Minister Colin Barnett of renegeing on commitments to provide more administrative staff. "Schools and staff are at crisis point," he said.

#### **Newspaper workers end strike action**

Workers at the *Age* newspaper in Melbourne, Victoria, called off a four-day strike last Saturday as union officials began fresh talks with management. The strike by journalists, artists and photographers at the Fairfax-owned newspaper began after negotiations over wages and conditions in a new workplace agreement broke down.

Management issued the striking workers with lockout orders after about 80 staff picketed the Fairfax head office in Melbourne and stopped newspaper deliveries by blocking the building's entrances with cars. Fairfax employees at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Financial Review*, *Illawarra Mercury* and the *Newcastle Herald* took similar action and were also issued with lockout orders.

A union spokesperson said: "The mechanism for fixing wages, which the company wants to change, would result in a reduction of wages. As well there is concern over the resources of the various papers and the pressure to do more with less".

#### **New Zealand academics strike over pay**

Staff at the Massey University picketed the entrances to the Palmerston North campus on September 1 as 900 lecturers began a 24-hour strike over pay and conditions. The strike, believed to be the first by academic staff at the university, was reportedly well supported by lecturers and students. Pickets were also held at Massey's Wellington and Albany campuses. The academics were striking in opposition to the university's 1.25 percent pay rise offer, rising workloads and management attempts to "claw back" working conditions.

The Association of University Staff, which covers the academics, is attempting to ensure that the dispute does not become a focal point for other university staff who are also facing attacks. The University's "repositioning project", which is threatening up to 86 teaching positions, is being treated as a separate issue by the union. Talks between the union and university management this week failed to resolve any of the issues.

#### **Junior doctors sent back to work**

Striking junior doctors at Waikato Hospital in Hamilton were sent back to work at the beginning of this week, after their union struck a deal with hospital employers to avert a national strike. At the same time the union withdrew strike notices issued by workers in hospitals in Auckland.

The chief executives of 18 of the country's hospital and health services signed the package deal that was put to them in negotiations by the Resident Doctors' Association (RDA) last week. The deal includes an eight percent pay rise, to be staggered over two years, and changes to the pay scale to enable doctors to receive higher pay earlier in their careers. The hospital management also agreed to a greater investment in training.

The RDA claims these additional benefits bring the value of the overall increase to between nine and ten percent. Even if this is correct, the deal is far below the 20 percent pay increase sought by junior doctors when they began strike action in four hospitals nearly two weeks ago.

Neither the union nor the employers have addressed the other issues raised by doctors, such as reduced workloads and improved working conditions. Instead, they have made the claim that the settlement will provide a "platform" for the "hospitals and junior doctors to work together...to solve recruitment and retention problems". The Medical Association criticised the agreement and pay increase as totally insufficient to stop the drain of doctors overseas.

Health Minister Annette King, who has refused to offer increased government funding to assist the hospitals to improve pay and conditions, congratulated "both sides" for resolving the dispute.

#### **Striking Niue teachers face sackings**

Teachers at Niue High School, who are in the third week of a pay

dispute, have been told they will be dismissed if they do not resume duties within seven days. The teachers have said that they are not going back into the classroom until they are awarded a \$2,000 a year pay rise for obtaining the additional skills required to maintain the school's New Zealand Qualification Authority's accreditation.

The government is keeping the school open by forcing other public servants to take classes. Some students are reported to be moving to New Zealand to complete their school certificate and sixth form years. The students fear that their internal assessment will be invalid because it is being carried out by unqualified staff.

The Niuean education system operates under the requirements of the New Zealand education and qualifications structures, and New Zealand teachers often travel to Niue for periods of work. The NZ Qualifications Authority is reportedly involving itself in the dispute by finding qualified markers for the students' work. The New Zealand teachers' union, the NZ Post Primary Teachers' Association, has so far taken no interest in the dispute or the fate of the Niuean teachers' jobs.

#### **Garment workers protest in Northern Marianas**

Last week about 150 garment workers in the US-administered Northern Marianas took part in a protest march calling for the release of unpaid wages. The workers, employed by the Hong Kong-owned clothing firm Eurotex, marched seven kilometres to the commonwealth governor's office. Two weeks ago 300 Eurotex workers walked off the job to draw attention to their demands. The US Department of Labor and Eurotex promised funding to pay the back wages but it has not yet been forthcoming.



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