Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 September 2000

Sri Lankan plantation workers launch an indefinite strike

More than 300,000 plantation workers in Sri Lanka launched an indefinite strike on September 11, demanding a monthly 400-rupee (US$5.30) salary increment to match the recent pay rise for public sector workers.

The Plantation Association of Sri Lanka and the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Sri Lanka have refused to pay, claiming they cannot afford it. The Plantation Association is arguing that because they have signed a two-year collective agreement with unions, that includes a salary increment, the present strike action is illegal. However, even with this increase, the daily wage of a plantation worker is only 121 rupee (US$1.50).

The strike was called by the Ceylon Workers Congress and the Sri Lanka Communist Party controlled Red Flag Union. The Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union, controlled by the opposition United National Party (UNP), and the Up Country Trade Union Front have not joined the dispute.

Sri Lankan farm workers strike over pay demand

Farm workers in the Hambanthota district have ended the strike that they began on September 9. The workers were seeking a 400-rupee pay increase and demanding that casual workers be made permanent.

The 53 striking workers returned to work after the farm management gave written assurance that their demands would be met. Workers have threatened to resume the strike the management does not honour the commitment.

Indian Telecom unions call off strike

Communication unions in India ended a three-day strike by 350,000 Telecom workers on September 8. The action seriously disrupted voice and data communications throughout the country. Services in New Delhi and in Bombay remained operational because they are run by another company.

Unions called off the strike after the government reportedly agreed to workers' demands for job security and the retention of retirement benefits when the state-owned Telecom is corporatised in October. Earlier the Bharatiya Telecom Employee's Federation pulled its 3,500 members out of the dispute after it struck a separate deal with the government.

The coporatisation of Telecom, which is unopposed by any of the unions involved in the dispute, is major step towards the full privatisation of the provider and large-scale retrenchments.

Bank workers strike against suspension

Bank workers went on strike this week in the Indian city of Allahabad to protest against the suspension of the Gramin Bank Officers Association's general secretary. Work at the bank's headquarters and at 92 of its branches was brought to a standstill.

Bank workers are planning protest action this weekend in the nearby city of Lucknow and a hunger strike on September 22 if the union leader is not reinstated.

Philippine blind workers protest against forced labour

Fifty blind people employed as casual workers by the Department of Social Welfare (DSW) in Quezon City, locked employees of the National Vocation Rehabilitation Centre (NVRC) out of their offices and occupied the premises last Monday.

The blind workers were protesting against laws allowing the DSW to round up blind beggars from the streets and force them to work as cheap labour, manufacturing rags, soap and mats under NVRC supervision.

A spokesman for the protesters said: “We earn more on the streets than with the DSW, who only pay us 600 pesos ($US13.30) a week.” NVRC head, Honorita Banudan, confirmed these claims and said resources provided by the DSW “were scarce” when it came to providing work programs for the blind.

Miners killed in explosion in China

On September 5, 10 miners lost their lives in a methane gas explosion at the Yongdingzhuang Coal Mine in Datong, a city in China's Shaanxi province. Rescuers are still searching for 15 workers.

Local authorities said that the final death toll is not known and that investigators are still trying to determine the cause of the blast. Fatal accidents occur almost on a daily basis in China's dilapidated mining industry, where even minimal safety regulations are ignored by the mine operators or not enforced by government authorities. Many mines lack adequate ventilation and safety equipment.

There were 7,423 miners killed in 1998 and 3,464 during the first nine months of 1999. Figures for the remainder of 1999 and for 2000 have not yet been made available.

Niue teachers dispute deepens

On Friday September 9, 80 protesters on the small Pacific

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island of Niue marched to parliament in support of the three-week strike by teachers at Niue High School. The teachers are demanding a $2,000 pay increase to become accredited New Zealand Qualifications Authority assessors for senior students.

The marchers said there were snubbed by Premier Sani Lakatani and prevented from entering the parliament building by a cordon of police.

Niue's premier has declared that the government would not give into the teachers' pay demands because it would spark similar claims by other public servants. The striking teachers had been given until the day of the march to return to work. However, 10 teachers formally resigned in protest against the order.

Senior teacher Epsy Pukehe, who had earlier been suspended for giving a television interview about the strike, told Radio New Zealand that the government may be forced to hire expatriate qualified teachers at three times the amount they pay local staff.

The Ministry of Education claims that Niue High School is operating “normally” with volunteers and relieving teachers brought in from other areas of the public service. Students dispute this, claiming they have no supervision during classes, which are often restricted to three periods of teaching a day.

The *Niue Economic Review*, which has called on government to pay the teachers, said the total increase of $38,000 was a small amount when compared to the dispute's impact on school certificate and sixth form students.

New Zealand union will act to limit pay claims

As New Zealand public servants prepare to launch a campaign for pay increases, the key state sector union, the Public Service Association (PSA), has assured employers and the government it will act to restrict union members' demands.

PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said this week that while public sector employees had “legitimate and reasonable wage expectations,” negotiations for new agreements would be “guided by the bargaining reality of the day”.

Wagstaff said there was no logic to the belief that there would be a single across-the-board amount or one-size-fits-all figure for what was now a fractured and diverse public sector.

What this means can be judged by the outcome of recent wage disputes conducted by the PSA. Over the last two years, collective contracts negotiated by the union in larger government departments were settled with a 2.5 percent wage component. In contrast, public service chief executives have had their base pay boosted by 20 per cent since 1997, along with increases to performance bonuses, superannuation and other perks. Chief executives' pay packages typically range from $150,000 in smaller departments to $340,000 in the Treasury.

Australian university staff strike over pay

Academic and general staff at the University of Melbourne struck for 24 hours on Wednesday, demanding a 15 percent increase over three years. A spokesman for the strikers said that contrary to the claims of Vice Chancellor Sally Walker, the strike action was successful with the majority of staff stopping work. Pickets were established at university entrances and only a few staff and students attended classes.

The National Tertiary Education Union said it had been prepared to restart negotiations during the strike but management declined the invitation. The union said if management refused to discuss the claim it would call a 48-hour strike on October 9.

Oil workers end strike

Around 200 construction workers at the Attee oil company, employed as contractors at Esso's Longford refiner in Melbourne and on the company's offshore oil platforms, ended a week-long strike last Wednesday without achieving an agreement with the company on working conditions.

The strike was called over a new enterprise work agreement and a log of claims, including a 15 percent pay increase over three years and $3 an hour increase to boost redundancy payouts. The construction contract between Esso and Attee is expected to end in around two year's time.

Waste collectors on strike over wages

Commercial waste collectors in Australia's capital Canberra went on strike for 24 hours on Thursday over a wage increase and a pay equity issue. The workers walked off the job after negotiations between their employer, Pacific Waste, and the Transport Workers Union broke down.

A union spokesperson said the company did not have a uniform scale of pay and there was up to a $100 difference between wages paid to collectors doing the same type of work. The workers want wage levels standardised on the higher rate of pay.

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