

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 September 2000

Thai textile workers fight company attacks

More than 300 women sacked by Thai Durable Textile's (TDT) plant in Bangkok, are continuing a three-month protest outside the company's gates and Government House to demand reinstatement. The women, most of whom are members of the TDT labor union, were dismissed without compensation, for taking strike action.

When Thailand's textile industry was hit by the recession three years ago, TDT workers consented to do unpaid extra duties, to take a 50 percent wage cut and forgo bonuses. Management promised to restore the lost conditions and reward workers when the crisis eased.

When the company's financial situation substantially improved last year, it refused to honour its promise and insisted that the workforce continue under existing conditions. After prolonged negotiations, over 1,000 workers began strike action in June and picketed the factory.

The company retaliated by sending more than 100 thugs to attack the picket line. Local police, who refused to acknowledge workers' complaints against the company, later used tear gas to disperse 1,500 workers who had come from other plants to back the strike.

TDT's Human Resources manager issued a statement denying any violence by the company's thugs and claiming that union members had committed an act of "illegal defiance" by persuading other workers not to enter the plant. The company then filed four charges against the workers in the criminal and civil courts and demanded they pay eight million baht compensation for production losses. TDT is also suing for four million baht in compensation for water and electricity that the company claims strikers used during the protest.

As the protest drags on, the women are suffering increased hardship. Many have had to take children out of school because they can no longer afford the fees. Others are unable to buy basic food items such as milk powder for young children.

Meanwhile, textile workers from another company staged a protest march this week over the failure of Thai Iryo Textile to pay entitlements when it shut the Pathum Thani plant. The demonstrators say management reneged on a promise to pay by September 15.

Jakarta authorities prepare to suppress protests

Government authorities in Jakarta are gearing up to suppress strikes and demonstrations over a 12 percent fuel price rise to be implemented on October 1. A government spokesman said: "We all know that fuel hikes are a sensitive issue that can lead to social unrest."

A meeting at City Hall this week, attended by representatives of the police, military and the Land Control Transport Agency, discussed plans to maintain transport and the flow of fuel, kerosene and food. Extra police will be on duty to guard government buildings, business centres, offices and gas stations. They have been ordered to work closely with the private security forces to deal with protestors.

Petrol companies have made arrangements to deliver fuel directly to businesses experiencing shortages caused by protests and more than 200 private buses will be used to break an expected strike by bus drivers from the city-owned bus company.

Sri Lankan trainee teachers demand the release of fellow student

Students at the government's Teachers Training College in Batticaloa, in war torn eastern Sri Lanka, struck last week to demand the release of a colleague from police custody. The teacher, Chandramohan, was arrested by the police Criminal Investigation Department on suspicion of having connections with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE). He was detained in transit to his hometown of Mullathivu for the second term vacation.

The student council, which has said there is no evidence linking Chandramohan with the LTTE, has reported the arrest to the Anti-Harassment Committee and the Human Rights Commission—two government appointed bodies. Chandramohan has not been released to date.

Sri Lankan cooperative workers demand salary increment

Workers from a number of co-operatives in southern Sri Lanka demonstrated last week for a 1000-rupee (\$US12.80) salary increment. The Co-operative Commission issued a circular ordering a 400-rupee salary increment but many co-operatives have refused to pay, claiming a lack of funds.

The co-operative system in Sri Lanka is a welfare service and was once fully funded by the state. Successive governments have slashed funds to welfare services, including to the co-operatives, in line with the demands of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. As a result, many co-operative shops have become unprofitable and fallen into debt.

At the present, the initial monthly salary of a clerk employed by a co-operative, including allowances, is 2,500 rupee (\$32) while general hands receive 2,300 rupee (\$29) a month. The unions covering co-operative workers have refused to defend members' wages and conditions. Rank and file workers initiated the present campaign.

Indian teachers continue strike over pay

Teachers from Delhi University in India held a one-day strike on Thursday to protest over the refusal of the vice-chancellor to alter promotion procedures and allow lower-ranked teachers from the reader grade to be able to rise to professor grade. Teachers also want the suspension of a college teacher revoked and librarians recognised as teachers. The vice-chancellor has only agreed to establish a selection committee to allow upward grading of senior lecturers to readers in colleges.

Construction workers support Chubb strikers

Around 200 construction workers working at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport struck for an hour on Wednesday morning in support of a strike by workers involved in the security scanning of baggage. The scanners, who are employed by Chubb Security, have been picketing the airport since last week after the company refused to consider their demand for a pay increase and locked them out.

The Chubb workers, who are paid \$A11.96 an hour, want wage parity with luggage handlers who receive \$14.80. The dispute is still before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

Many fuel tanker drivers have refused to cross the picket lines even

though the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union agreed to abide by a court directive that picket activities will not disrupt normal airport operations.

Nurses strike against contract labour

Nurses at the Riverton Hospital in South Australia struck for 24 hours this week against a hospital management decision to employ casual, unlicensed personal care attendants to carry out nursing duties. Australian Nurses Federation Secretary Gail Gago said that the unlicensed workers were not trained to the same standards as licensed nurses. "Replacing nurses with unlicensed workers could result in lower standards of care and increased risk to patient safety," she said. The possibility of further industrial action will be discussed at stop-work meetings at the end of the week.

Mobil refinery workers end strike

Mobil oil refinery workers at Port Stanvac in South Australia have been ordered back to work by the Industrial Relations Commission this week. The workers struck last week, demanding a 13 percent pay increase over 30 months, with no tradeoffs. If the stoppage had continued, the state's fuel supplies would have soon dried up as Port Stanvac refinery supplies most of South Australia.

In May Mobil offered to pay a seven percent rise over two years, in return for 31 voluntary redundancies, changes to shift arrangements and other work practices which was rejected. The National Union of Workers has now accepted the same terms as the basis for a return to work. Union spokesman Paul Richardson refused to give any reason for the decision and stated: "We are confident we now have an agreement and we won't be resorting to, or reverting to, industrial action to change that agreement."

Food workers accept pay cut

Workers at Balfours Bakery in South Australia have reluctantly accepted a new enterprise agreement negotiated by the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union that contains a \$28 a week pay cut. More than 80 percent of the staff voted in the ballot.

This is the third time the company has attempted to cut wages. The workforce recently rejected a move by the management to cut pay by 76 cents an hour and reduce double-time payment for Sunday work to time and a half. Some workers stood to lose \$80 a week had the management succeeded.

The company's CEO, Malcolm Gibbons, said: "Reforms were necessary to make us competitive in the market. Does this mean a person who earned \$650 a week might now earn \$620? Absolutely!"

Balfours, which had debts of \$11 million, was taken over by Notron, a Sydney-based consortium in the 1990s, for \$14.5 million. Notron turned over more than \$60 million in sales in 1998-99 and wants to lift this to \$100 million by 2003. The 106-year-old company employs over 550 full-time and casual staff and is one of Australia's biggest pie and pastry manufacturers.

Australian miners strike over pay and conditions

Coal miners from three BHP mines near Wollongong in New South Wales began a 72-hour strike last Sunday over a log of claims. The 300 miners from Appin, Tower and Cordeaux mines struck after rejecting the company's latest pay offer.

The miners are seeking a 15 percent pay increase over two years and an improvement in company superannuation contributions. BHP has offered to pay 10 percent a year over three years and a six percent a year profit sharing incentive if production, safety and productivity targets are met. The company also wants to introduce compulsory 12-hour shifts and the right to keep injured employees at work.

BHP miners from the Crinum and Gregory mines in central Queensland carried out a three-day stoppage this week over wages and similar demands. Workers from Hay Point port coal loader in Queensland struck in support.

Hospital cleaners protest against overwork

Cleaners at Wollongong Hospital have voted for work-to-rule action against the introduction of a new computerised cleaning system. Called "Daniels", the new system uses computer data to determine the time and number of staff needed to carry out cleaning tasks. Hospital cleaners believe that system will lead to job losses. The Area Health Service chief executive admitted that the new system was "designed to save money".

Nurses fight staff shortage

In a long running dispute, nurses at the Canberra Hospital have given notice that they will take industrial action if their demands for 100 extra nursing staff are not met by next week. Nurses will stage daily stop-work meetings beginning October 9, and continue the action indefinitely until the issue is resolved. The hospital has lost 65 full time nurses in the past year.

Pasminco miners involved in two disputes

Workers at Pasminco's Rosebery mine in western Tasmania walked off the job for 24 hours on September 25 over the employment of contract labour. The 120 mine workers claim that the use of contract labour breached an agreement between the union and the mining company earlier this year.

Miners at Pasminco's Broken Hill mine in New South Wales also voted for their union executive to press for a 12.5 percent pay rise over two years, an extra week's annual leave and improved long service leave.

Workers rejected a company proposal that they work on five public holidays, with Christmas Day as optional, and an extra 45 minutes per shift, which amounts to an additional 134 hours a year. The mass meeting of union members, however, decided to accept relocation assistance offer from the company of \$1,500 for families and \$750 for single workers if they are retrenched.

New Zealand nurses' strike to go ahead

Nurses and midwives employed in the Wellington region by Capital Coast Health (CCH) will strike on October 1, after a bid by their union to avert industrial action failed. The union, the NZ Nurses' Organisation, had approached CCH to enter mediation over the nurses' pay claim but received no response from the company.

Last week, 660 out of the 780 nurses and midwives voted in favour of industrial action at stopwork meetings at Kenepuru and Wellington hospitals. The CCH has offered a five percent pay rise followed by a minimum of two percent next year.

The union is proposing a seven percent rise, equal to that given to intensive care unit nurses this year, in spite of demands by nurses at stop work meetings that the union increase the claim to over 10 percent. Wellington nurses plan to picket the main entrance of Wellington Hospital during the strike, while Kenepuru nurses will stage a public rally in nearby Porirua.

Meetings of nurses throughout the country also called for a national contract with a unified pay scale and transferable conditions. The call was made following a vote at the Nurses' Organisation's annual conference last week. Wairarapa nurses held a rally and stop work last week and nurses in Otago, Waitemata and Auckland are about to start pay talks. Nurses at MidCentral Health last week voted to reject a four percent pay rise, followed by another one percent at a later date.

Striking Niuean teachers victimised

Vacancies for four heads of department at the Niue High School closed amid public controversy this week after the Niue Public Service Commission refused to consider the applications of 10 teachers who resigned during a recent pay dispute. The teachers resigned in protest at being ordered back to work after being on strike for three weeks. The government had previously said the teachers were welcome to reapply for their jobs.

Spokesperson for the 10 teachers, Epsy Puheke, said the teachers found it difficult to understand the conflicting messages from the government and NPSC. This was "indicative of a mishandling of the whole situation,"

she said. Education Ministry officials are reported as saying they want a “clean start” at the Pacific Island’s only secondary school, which has been involved in a series of staff disputes over many months.

Reports indicate that expatriate staff may be hired for the vacancies. The striking teachers were demanding a \$2,000 a year pay increase on top of their normal salary of around \$14,000, in order to implement the requirements of the New Zealand qualifications system. Expatriate teachers hired from NZ are paid in the vicinity of \$70,000. Despite the close links between the education systems of the two countries, the New Zealand secondary teachers' union, the Post Primary Teachers' Association, has not offered to support to Niue teachers.

Students support Massey University staff pay protest

Protesting Massey University staff set up a soup kitchen outside vice-chancellor James McWha's home in Palmerston North last week in protest over the low staff pay and working conditions. Staff and students were opposing the university's 1.25 percent pay offer, and warned that further strike action was possible.

Lecturers struck for 24 hours on September 1 over the university's contract offer. This is the first time teaching staff at Massey have gone on strike. Karen Rhodes, a staff spokesperson, said that if there were no agreement before the end of the month there would be further strikes.

Over 86 staff from other departments are facing redundancy under the university's “repositioning” program, but their union, the Association of University Staff, has kept the two issues separate and has no proposal to defend the threatened jobs.



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