

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 October 2000

State Bank of India workers strike over conditions

Bank workers in Uttar Pradesh staged a statewide strike last Tuesday closing 945 State Bank of India (SBI) branches. The strike was the culmination of 15 days of protest against SBI's transfer rules and other "anti-employee policies" that the banking union says have led to the suicide of at least two workers.

Other demands include improved security at all SBI banks, substantial staff increases and the prompt payment of employee retirement and death entitlements. A union spokesman warned this week that unless the workers' concerns were addressed, widespread discontent could lead to a nationwide strike.

Pedicab drivers protest in Jakarta

More than 450 pedicab drivers surrounded the municipal offices in north Jakarta on Wednesday, demanding the return of three cabs confiscated by city authorities last week. City officials said the cabs had been taken because they were operating in a "prohibited zone".

The drivers also demanded the return of 90,000 rupiah (\$US10.35), tools and three cans of oil, which were in the back of the pedicabs when they were seized. City officials finally agreed to the demands after the drivers threatened to storm and occupy the office building.

The cabs were seized under an ordinance implemented on July 31 prohibiting pedicabs from operating in main streets, except in residential complexes. The drivers oppose the law because it stops them from picking up passengers in the busy business districts.

Several weeks ago, over 400 drivers staged a demonstration outside the mayor's office demanding the repeal of the ordinance. The demonstrators clashed with security guards and the main gate was damaged.

Chinese steel workers block main highway

Last week 500 workers from the Lufeng County steel factory in Yunnan province, in south-western China, blocked a key railway line for six hours after learning that their plant would be closed. The rail line stretches from the major city of Chengdu in the southwestern part of country to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan.

The workers were eventually persuaded to return to work by factory officials who claimed that the plant would not close. An official said that a private steel company in Sichuan province was planning to invest about \$US8.4 million in the state-owned plant and was not considering lay-offs. Private investment will, however, lead to restructuring and job losses.

New Zealand nurses set to continue strikes

Nurses in the Wellington region employed by Capital Coast Health (CCH) are preparing to strike again after negotiators for the hospital company refused to increase a pay offer.

Over 800 nurses and midwives at Wellington, Kenepuru and Paraparaumu Hospitals struck on for 16 hours on October 1, for a 7 percent pay rise. CCH is offering 5 percent in the first year, with additional increases over a two-year period. The company said in the wake of the strike that it was "not putting any more money on the table". Wellington nurses are among the lowest paid in the country.

On Sunday, about 250 nurses picketed the entrance to Wellington Hospital, in defiance of management threats to issue trespass notices against them. In response to CCH's threat, the nurses withdrew a union offer to have accident and emergency department nurses available, and to provide a team who could be called on to run an operating theatre in case of an emergency.

Nurses have warned the union not to "back down" on their demands and endorsed further strike action if they are not met. They could face legal action under the Labour-Alliance Government's new Employment Relations Act, which came into force this week.

While the government and unions claim the Act restores "fairness in industrial negotiations", it contains provisions preventing workers taking immediate strike action. The CCH management has already stated that under the new rules a notice of further strike action by nurses cannot be issued until after 40 days of "bargaining" has been completed.

Queensland workers protest wage cut deal

More than 2,300 construction workers from sites in and

around Brisbane went on strike on October 5 to protest against a “greenfields” site agreement struck between Alstrom Power and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) at the \$250 million Swanbank Power station project in Ipswich.

The company and the AWU used federal industrial relations laws to skirt around state legislation that sets minimum wage levels for construction workers in Queensland.

The Swanbank agreement will cut the base wage rate for a 38-hour week by nearly \$40 and reduce overtime and other allowances. Workers on the site could be \$150 worse off than construction workers employed under state conditions.

The workers rallied at the Roma Street Forum in Brisbane's city centre, before marching to Parliament House to demand that the state government protect working conditions on construction sites. A meeting between government ministers, including Premier Peter Beattie, and a union delegation failed resolve the issue.

Australian IT workers demand restoration of lost conditions

IT workers employed by IBM Global Services in Australia held stop-work meetings this week to discuss a new workplace agreement.

The workers are demanding improved pay and working conditions to match those received when Telstra, the state-owned communications carrier, employed them. In 1997 Telstra outsourced some of its IT functions to IBM under a 10-year contract. Over 4,000 Telstra staff were transferred to IBM and another 1,000 will soon join them.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) is threatening to take the issue to the federal court, which ruled in favour of maintaining conditions in a previous case involving outsourcing of work by Telstra to Stellar Call Centres.

Two weeks ago, however, Federal Workplace Relations Minister Peter Reith released a discussion paper proposing substantial changes to the Workplace Relations Bill. One amendment is aimed at blocking legal challenges to the reduction of working conditions brought about by outsourcing operations.

Melbourne truck drivers take action for better rates

On October 5, about 350 tip-truck owner-drivers stopped work at construction sites across Melbourne and drove in convoy to the city. The drivers were protesting against low cartage rates, rising fuel prices and other hikes in on-road running costs. They are demanding a 20 percent increase in haulage rates.

In late September, about 100 drivers stopped work for a day, halting production on several major projects across the city, including work to widen the Princes Highway between Melbourne and Geelong and the high profile construction

project in the Docklands area.

A Transport Workers Union spokesman said little progress had been made toward a “code of conduct” to safeguard the drivers against rising costs. “Drivers are under pressure to speed, work long hours and overload trucks—just to make ends meet,” he said. Drivers are threatening further industrial action, including a blockade of Spring Street in the centre of Melbourne.

Victorian health workers demand pay and staff increases

Over 4,000 health professionals employed in Victoria's hospitals will attend stop work meetings next Tuesday to decide on a statewide campaign of industrial action to win a 16 percent pay increase over two years. The workers are also demanding that the state Labor government recruit an extra 200 staff.

The workers, including radiographers, physiotherapists, social workers and radiation technicians, have given the government until 11am on Tuesday to agree to their demands or work bans will implemented in metropolitan and regional health facilities throughout Victoria.

A spokesperson for the Australian Health Professionals Association said that the union did not like placing the bans “but our members are disappointed with the way the government has treated them.”

Academic staff picket University of Tasmania

University of Tasmania academic staff this week rejected the university management's latest offer of an 8 percent pay increase over four years and voted to take industrial action. The academics will picket the university entrances next week, to demand a 12 percent pay increase over three years, in line with offers made by other universities around Australia.

If the picket goes ahead, it will be the second time this month that the academics have protested. Jo Fox, an industrial officer with the National Tertiary Education Union, said her members were becoming increasingly frustrated with the lengthy negotiations over the new agreement.



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