

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 October 2000

## Malaysian workers picket over unfair dismissals

Over 800 members of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) picketed the Human Rights Resources Ministry in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday over delays in the processing of unfair dismissal cases and holdups in granting official recognition to unions. The demonstration, with representatives from 52 affiliated unions, carried banners reading “Don't test workers' patience” and “Enforce labour laws”.

Human Rights Resources Minister Dr Fong Chan refused to meet the unionists claiming the protest was illegal because the MTCU was a registered body under the Societies Act and could not be involved in such actions.

A MTUC memorandum to the minister pointed out that there were 85 unresolved unfair dismissal cases in 1998, 57 in 1999 and 32 so far this year. The memo also said that many employers blocked union recognition for up to two years, even though the 1967 Industrial Relations act required that recognition claims be settled within 21 days.

## Indian council workers on indefinite strike

Workers at the Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai began an indefinite strike on Wednesday over the refusal of municipal authorities to agree to demands for bonus payments and improvements in working conditions. Health, engineering, drainage, building proposals and cemetery workers later decided to join the strike.

The Municipal Commissioner said that the demands could not be considered because BMC's financial position was “precarious”. Following Wednesday's walkout a BMC spokesman warned that it would take “stern action” against the striking employees.

## Lucknow junior doctors strike over pay

Junior doctors at King George's Medical College in Lucknow, India held a one-day strike on Wednesday to

demand an increase in their house rent allowance. They are also demanding payment of wages for the period they were on strike. The junior doctors took industrial action in April after the College administration accused some of them of assaulting a senior doctor.

## Public sector workers protest government changes

Over 65 percent of South Korea's 340,000 teachers collected signatures this week in protest over government plans to increase public servant and teacher contributions to the pension scheme. The government proposal, announced on Monday, would increase employee contributions from 7.5 to 9 percent of their monthly wage. While the increased premiums will raise 1.3 trillion won a year, retirees will receive 1 percent less in pension benefits.

Pension fund reserves have dropped from 6.2 trillion won in 1997 to 1.2 trillion in June this year as public sector workers took up the government's early retirement program. Despite the proposed premium increase, the government will need an additional 900 billion won per year to prevent a collapse of the pension fund.

The Ministry of Government Administration and Home Affairs plans to submit the pension reform bill to the National Assembly by the end of this month. If approved, the scheme will be implemented from January next year.

A campaign committee formed to organise future protest action told a press conference in the National Assembly Building this week that they would file lawsuits to block the government's plan.

## Staff and students protest university cuts in New Zealand

About 80 staff and students at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, protested outside a meeting of the university's governing council this week. The meeting had been called to consider a “restructuring

plan” to cut courses and staff numbers. The university is expecting a \$7.7 million deficit in the coming year.

Chancellor Russell Marshall, a former Labour Minister of Education, attempted head off the protest by moving the meeting to a secret location. Unable to gather a quorum for the governing council, the Chancellor reconvened it as a public meeting and pushed through an acceptance of the restructuring plans. The cuts, which will be formally announced on October 20, could mean the loss of 50 to 70 teaching jobs, and will require teaching staff to justify the continuation of targeted courses.

### **Aged care staff strike over new contract**

Around 120 workers at two Wesley Mission aged-care hospitals in Wellington, New Zealand, walked off the job for three hours and demonstrated in the city centre this week over stalled negotiations for a new work contract.

Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) secretary, John Ryall, said the workers were frustrated by the company's unwillingness to insert a proper redundancy compensation clause into the contract. Negotiations, which began in early August, have so far failed to reach a settlement despite an agreement by the SWFU to go into mediation.

### **New Zealand academics' union agrees to staff cuts**

Following a last-minute deal announced last Thursday, the Association of University Staff (AUS) agreed to drop legal action against Massey University and end staff protests against the administration's “repositioning project”. Under the agreement up to 44 jobs will be cut across the University's campuses in Palmerston North, Albany and Wellington.

The litigation was due to begin in the High Court in Wellington on October 16. A joint union and university administration statement declared that the legal case, which centered on the University's procedures in drawing up the staff cuts, “no longer served any useful purpose”.

AUS filed papers in the High Court last August challenging the restructuring after the university council approved recommendations to axe 79 positions, down from the 116 positions first proposed when the project was officially announced in May. The university agreed to delay the job cuts until the case was heard in the High Court.

### **Nurses and doctors close hospital over security**

Doctors and nurses at the Mt Hagen General Hospital in Papua New Guinea walked off the job on Monday, closing down the facility indefinitely. The hospital staff are protesting over ongoing security and safety problems at the facility.

The action was called after the recent rape of three nurses returning home from night shift. It was the fourth incident in which night-shift nurses have been attacked. The nurses and doctors marched to the provincial government building and handed the governor a petition demanding compensation for the nurses and improved security measures.

### **Australian furniture company locks out workers**

Office furniture manufacturer Brownbuilt locked out its 70-strong workforce at its plant in South Oakleigh, Melbourne, on Wednesday. The lockout occurred when workers took industrial action after negotiations broke down with the company for a 15 percent wage increase.

A spokesperson for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union claimed that Brownbuilt had dug its heels in during the recent discussions, refusing to lift its pay offer by 1.5 percent to meet the full 15 percent demanded.

### **Aged-care workers fight for conditions**

Members of the Australian Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union employed by St Vincent's Community Services in Queensland walked off the job for two hours on Thursday over stalled negotiations for a new work agreement.

St Vincent's aged-care hospitals are demanding a 10 percent pay increase over a two-year period and improved leave entitlements. One aged-care worker told the media that although they were reluctant to take industrial action affecting disadvantaged and aged people, they were frustrated with the slow pace of negotiations.



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