

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 October 2000

## Indian council workers continue strike

An indefinite strike by more than 25,000 workers at Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) in Mumbai has entered its second week. The strike erupted over the refusal of the municipal authorities to agree to bonus payments and improved working conditions.

The striking workers, employed in water supply, solid waste management, hospital wards and cemeteries, are not provided with even basic facilities and are denied housing assistance.

Workers complain they are not given water or soap for washing at city waste dumps, are not provided with protective clothing and have no rest or changing rooms. They are forced to remain out in the open all day. Street cleaners also suffer miserable conditions, moving tonnes of rotting garbage every day with primitive equipment. Many workers fall ill or become alcoholics.

The BMC is proposing to cut the city's hospital budget by 12 percent in order to fund an offer of bonus payments. The proposal, which was discussed on Monday, threatens to further undermine the city's infrastructure and will cut health services for the poor.

Even if the health cuts are implemented, however, they will only raise enough to pay 65 percent of the bonus claim. One councillor said that the city authorities are desperate to find a solution to the dispute because of the "volatile situation" developing in the city due to water shortages.

## Indian university teachers strike over promotions

Teachers from Delhi University went on strike last Monday to protest against the government's refusal to honour a written agreement on their career advancement scheme, as well as other work issues.

The teachers complain that they have been provoked into taking strike action after the university management broke an agreement to allow "Reader-to-Professor" promotion at colleges. The teachers are also protesting against revised pay scales and measures they say undermine their professional status, reducing them to "bonded labour".

## Indian food workers plan statewide strike

Workers at the Food Corporation of India (FCI) in Lucknow held a demonstration outside the company's regional office on Tuesday in opposition to the government's decision to cut staff numbers by 2,700 statewide.

A union spokesman said the 23 district FCI offices in Uttar Pradesh needed more workers, not less, "because of increased service demands" and warned that workers were fed up with "the high-handedness of the FCI management". The workers have threatened to campaign outside the corporation's headquarters in Delhi if their demands are not met soon. A 24-hour strike by workers in all FCI offices across the state is planned for next week.

## Sri Lankan plantation workers continue strike

Some 100 plantation workers employed by Deltota Estate at Maskeliya, in the country's Nuwara-Eliya district, have been on strike since September 21.

The strikers are fighting against "unbearable" working conditions and are demanding the company repair their living quarters and provide a

vehicle to transport sick and injured workers to the medical centre in Maskeliya town, over 4 kilometres away. Presently workers are forced to travel there on foot.

In June last year K. Sumathi, a 19-year-old pregnant woman, died because there was no transport to take her to hospital. Not even basic medical facilities are available on the estate.

Workers complain that their living quarters are in a very poor condition because the management has not carried out any repair work for years. Decent sanitation and clean drinking water are lacking. The workers are also furious that management has increased the tea leaf quota that workers must harvest each day, despite having reached an agreement on quotas with the unions in June this year.

Negotiations between the management and the unions on October 1 ended without any agreement being reached. The workers are covered by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) and the Red Flag union, which is controlled by the Communist Party of Sri Lanka (CPSL).

## Thai blast victims fight for compensation

More than 100 people, many of them former workers at the Hong Thai Kaset factory that was leveled by a chemical explosion last year, staged a picket outside the Chiang Mai Provincial Hall on Tuesday. The blast at the Taiwanese-owned fruit packing plant left 36 dead and many more crippled.

The protestors submitted a letter to the government calling for an extra compensation payment of 42.9 million baht for the families of those killed and injured in the explosion. They said they would remain outside the hall unless the cabinet accepted their demand. The victims have received only 20,000 (\$460) to 30,000 baht each.

The explosion was caused by the ignition of a large stockpile of potassium chlorate that had been illegally stored at the plant. The chemical was distributed to farmers to be used as fertiliser to promote the rapid growth of fruit trees.

## Indonesian workers protest fuel prices

Around 500 workers protested in front of the Merdeka Palace in Jakarta last week demanding the cancellation of the government's recent fuel price hike and a 100 percent wage increase for low-paid workers. The workers, mainly labourers, said they were the worst affected by higher fuel prices.

The protest rally was joined by representatives from the SBSI (Indonesian Prosperity Labor Union), the Indonesian National Workers Front, FSPSI Reformasi, AJI, Astek and other labour organisations.

Speakers at the rally criticised a government statement which claimed that the price hike would have little effect on living standards. They pointed out that food and other basic commodity prices had already increased 20 percent.

Labouring grade workers in Jakarta are paid approximately 344,000 rupiah (about \$37) per month, while those employed outside the city receive between 73,000 and 300,050 rupiah. Following the rally, the protestors marched to the parliament to voice their demands.

## Workers protest at Vietnam footwear factory

A dozen workers who had been sacked from the Taiwanese-owned Hue

Phong footwear factory in Vietnam's Ho Chi Minh City went on a hunger strike on Monday outside the company premises.

Police were sent to break up the demonstration after passers-by joined the protest when seven of the hunger strikers collapsed. District officials were forced to organise transport to take the collapsed women to hospital after plant managers refused.

The Hue Phong plant has been the scene of repeated disputes in recent months because of poor working conditions and the abuse of workers' rights by the management.

#### **Australia and Pacific**

##### **PNG hospital staff strike over security**

Striking nurses and doctors at the Mt. Hagen Hospital in the Western Highlands of Papua New Guinea, have returned to work after a week-long strike over the lack of security at the facility. The strike erupted following the rape of three night-shift nurses while returning home.

The provincial government has promised to release funds for the construction of a dormitory so that night shift nurses can remain on the grounds and has agreed to replace the hospital's stolen 15-seat four-wheel drive so that staff can be transported directly to their homes. The government refused to pay compensation to the nurses who had been attacked or replace a private vehicle and hospital equipment that had been stolen.

Meanwhile, 300 nurses in the East Sepik province have called on the PNG Nurses Association to immediately organise stop-work meetings to campaign for better working conditions, including decent accommodation, transport and security for nurses and health workers.

##### **Footballers in contract dispute**

Australian rugby league players are threatening boycotts and strike action in support of players contracted to the New Zealand team, the Auckland Warriors, who fear their futures are in jeopardy after the sale of the club was confirmed this week.

The Warrior players were told that their contracts will not be honoured and were ordered to negotiate incentive-based agreements with the club's new executive director Matthew Ridge. Ridge, a high-profile former player, was appointed to the club's board by the new owners and given the task of breaking player opposition to the new contracts. The players have not been paid wages for nearly a month, and most coaching and office staff members have been summarily dismissed.

The Auckland team, which plays in the Australian club competition, was recently bought by the NZ Rugby League and a private company, Cullen Investments Ltd. The sale comes after several troubled years for the club, both on and off the field. A long period of turmoil surrounding the financial affairs of previous owners, MDC, the investment arm of the Maori tribe Tainui, left the club depleted and debt-bound.

A spokesman for the players said there was concern among footballers on both sides of the Tasman that Cullen Investments is "running roughshod" over the rights of the players, and that the Australian National Rugby League, which approved the sale, should have done more to protect them.

League players' association President Tony Butterfield said his organisation is investigating legal action against the new owners over the contracts, and confirmed that a possible association-led strike was "being talked about". There have been reports that players plan to disrupt the New Zealand national team's World Cup campaign, due to begin in England at the end of the month.

##### **Australian miners begin seven-day strike**

Miners at two BHP coal mines on the NSW South Coast began a seven-day strike on October 16 over new work agreements that include a 15 percent wage increase over three years. The company has offered only eight and half percent over three years and is demanding trade-offs.

The industrial action involves 400 miners from the Tower and Cordeaux collieries, but 200 workers at a third mine at Appin were exempted by the

mining union. A union spokesman said industrial action at Appin could be delayed by up to six days because of "safety problems" at the mine.

Last week the union cut short a five-day strike by BHP miners by one day at the Crinum and Gregory mines and the Hay Point coal loader in Queensland, claiming that the company had hired security guards and was planning a lockout.

While the union has said that it opposes trade-offs and speedup, it has already agreed to accept the destruction of 27 jobs in BHP's three NSW mines. Over the last two years the union has allowed the axing of 2,143 jobs from BHP's national workforce.

##### **Joy Mining workers return to work**

The 73 workers at Joy Mining Machinery Company at Moss Vale, near Sydney, voted on October 13 to end their long-running dispute and accept an agreement negotiated by the union.

The workers were locked out in April this year after they opposed attempts by the management to negotiate four separate pay agreements on the site. The workers stayed on strike despite the withdrawal of the lockout notice in July because of the use of scab labour during the dispute, as well as management's bad attitude in negotiations.

The new deal, arbitrated in the Industrial Relations Commission, is based on a single enterprise agreement covering the entire workforce. A union spokesman said the agreement was reached after Joy management and the three unions involved in the dispute, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union and Australian Workers Union, agreed to drop pending court actions.

Despite the agreement, many workers say they remain uncertain about long-term job security and believe they face retrenchment. Throughout the lockout neither the unions involved, nor the NSW State Labor Council, organised any significant industrial support to back the Joy workers and allowed the dispute to drag on for six months. A number of workers were forced to seek other employment while others became demoralised and ceased to be active.

##### **Victorian tip-truck drivers lift pickets**

Over 400 striking tip-truck drivers voted on Thursday to accept a recommendation from the Industrial Relations Commission to lift picket lines blocking supply to Melbourne construction sites. Negotiations were restarted with seven quarry companies, including Boral, CSR and Pioneer. The companies agreed to withdraw threats of legal action against the drivers.

The drivers had been on strike for three weeks in support of their demand for better cartage rates. Although they had struck a deal with plant hire companies, which employ around half the drivers, they would not call off industrial action because the quarry companies refused to reach an agreement.

Around 1,000 members of the Australian Workers Union, employed on construction sites, have been pushed by employers to take rostered days off during the drivers' dispute. They have voted to go on strike on Monday if there is no progress in negotiations over the weekend.



To contact the WSW and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**