

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 October 2000

## State workers stage protests in western India

On October 20 workers employed in several government firms in the Indian state of Gujarat, held protests against the state government's decision to pay only half of the Diwali festival bonus. The government said it faced financial difficulties and would pay the remaining amount at a later date.

About 600 employees from the Gujarat Housing Board (GHB) staged a protest outside the GHB premises in Pragatinagar, Naranpura. Police launched a lathi-charge [lathi—a long bamboo baton] against the protesters and arrested 29 people after the angry crowd jostled the board's chairman Chivon Barot. Workers at the Modern Terri Towels Unit located at Sanand Taluka ransacked the company office and set fire to a car.

The union covering workers in GSRTC, the state-owned bus service, and S.T. Karmachan Mahamandal, another government industry, has threatened further protests if all the employees are not paid the bonus arrears before the end of the month.

## New Delhi rail workers hold one-day strike

Thousands of New Delhi rail workers, employed by Northern Railway, held a one-day strike and protest rally outside the corporation's headquarters this week to protest against the company's refusal to implement a promotion system based on seniority.

The strike erupted because the rail network management refuses to introduce the system despite two Supreme Court judgements ordering them to do so. Union leaders at the rally warned that a nationwide protest campaign would be launched if the workers' demands were not met.

## Delhi University teachers plan national strike

Teachers from India's largest university, Delhi University, are planning to intensify their campaign against the government's refusal to honour a written agreement on their career advancement scheme and a range of other work issues.

The teachers, who went on strike over a week ago, will hold a meeting on November 6 to plan further action. This week the union executive endorsed calls for a national strike of all central university teachers on October 30.

## Indian government workers strike over wages and conditions

Thousands of government employees from the city of Lucknow went on strike last Wednesday to demand the

removal of the existing disparity in salaries, a new promotion system and free medical care.

The dispute also paralysed government offices in the cities of Kanpur, Faizabad, Basti, Gorakhpur, Varanasi, Allahabad and Agra. If the city authorities refuse to act on the demands, workers have threatened to take mass leave on November 25, followed by strike action on December 14, 15 and 16. A spokesman for the workers warned that an indefinite strike is being considered.

## South Korean pilots end strike

Pilots employed by South Korea's oldest airline, Korean Air, ended a 17-hour strike last Sunday night after a compromise deal was signed with management. The 1,300-member pilots union signed an agreement increasing hourly pay by 12,000 won and lifting flight allowances. However the new pay scales will not be implemented until April 1 next year.

Management refused to limit pilots' flying time to 75 hours a month. Pilots complain they are sometimes forced to work for over 100 hours a month, leading to fatigue and jeopardising safety.

The industrial action grounded Korean Air's 107 flights and affected nearly 60,000 passengers. The airline estimates that the strike cost over 20 billion won in ticket sales.

## South Korean teachers protest government changes

Over 7,000 teachers held a march through Seoul and a rally at the Myongdong Cathedral this week to protest against government policies that they claim are "ruining public education". The teachers went ahead with the action despite threats by South Korea's Education Ministry that it would take disciplinary measures against them.

The action was called to oppose the privatisation of schools and to demand that the government direct 6 percent of the Gross National Product towards public education. The teachers also called for a revision of the public servants' pension law to stop the decrease in pension rates, and the release of two union members held in police custody for leading "illegal" rallies.

The teachers took annual leave to attend the rally in order to avoid prosecution under the Teachers Labour Union Law that prohibits them from engaging in political strikes. The rally endorsed calls for a national teachers' stoppage and mass rally in Seoul on November 5.

## Sri Lankan garment workers demand reinstatement

More than 400 workers at the Venture International Garment factory in Kotmale have been sacked in retaliation for a 13-day strike. The workers went on strike on August 30 to protest the management's refusal to deposit Employees Provident Fund and Employees Trust Fund dues in designated bank accounts. They were also demanding 14 annual leave periods a year.

Garment workers from other plants have endorsed a protest campaign to demand the reinstatement of their sacked colleagues and have received the support of several organisations in the area.

#### **Engineering workers picket plant near Colombo**

Workers at the Werahara Engineering Services Company (WESCO), 15 kilometres south of Colombo, have launched a campaign to demand the management deposit arrears owed to the Employees Trust Fund and Employees Provident Fund.

The management has avoided the payment—in excess of 200 million rupees (\$US2.56 million)—and continued to defy a court order issued last year that it resolve the issue by December 31, 2000.

The workers are also demanding that WESCO pay their salaries on time. Many complain that pay delays this month hampered their efforts to return to their permanent place of residence to vote in the October 10 national election.

The workers are angry that the company is deliberately running down the operation and is selling off stocks of expensive spare parts to make quick profits. They have attempted to weld up the locks of the stores, but the management moves the parts out of the premises during holiday periods.

The workers began a picketing campaign in front of the workshop gates immediately after the end of the election holiday.

WESCO, one of the largest engineering workshops in the country, manufactures buses. It was once state owned and run by the Sri Lanka Transport Board, but was sold to the present owner for a pittance in 1993 under the United National Party government's privatisation plan.

#### **Pickers halt New Caledonia TV and radio broadcasts**

Striking television and radio workers in the French Pacific Island territory of New Caledonia returned to work this week after their union signed a “training” accord with the employer, Réseau France Outremer (RFO), France's overseas broadcasting network.

All radio and television broadcasts by the network were halted last Saturday when Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) pickets barred access to the RFO premises in Noumea. The action disrupted planned coverage of the opening of the 8th Festival of Pacific Arts.

USTKE is demanding that RFO end discrimination and promote union members. Earlier industrial action over similar demands paralysed RFO stations for up to a week. Last week's action coincided with a visit to New Caledonia by RFO chairman André-Michel Besse, international relations director

Wallès Kotra and French Secretary of State for Overseas Administrations, Christian Paul.

The day before the RFO picket, all unions other than the USTKE signed a “social pact” with the country's main employers and the local government, setting up a “conflict resolution” procedure and a “preventive dialogue” aimed at ending industrial disputes. The signatories said the pact was designed to “protect” New Caledonia's economy by avoiding strikes.

#### **Australian lottery workers demand job security**

Workers employed at state-owned TAB betting and lottery agencies across South Australia have threatened to strike on October 28 if the state government fails to agree to proposals on job security and working conditions.

The workers fear that many will be retrenched after the government privatises the gaming organisations next year. If the strike goes ahead it will be the second Saturday in three weeks that the workers have walked off the job on what is one of the busiest days for horse racing and other sporting events.

The workers' proposals include an increase in the amount of the redundancy payment, a stipulated period for transfers to be implemented, and guarantees for ongoing employment in the privatised industry or other government departments.

A spokesman for the Public Services Union said the government's offer was “substantially less than that given to other workers in other privatised government facilities”.

#### **BHP mining delegates vote for rolling stoppages**

Coal miners at six BHP mines in Queensland and NSW will continue a campaign for new work agreements and a 15 percent pay increase over two years. Union delegates in the two states met on Monday and endorsed a proposal for rolling stoppages over the next two months at the Crinum and Gregory mines in Central Queensland and at the Appin, Cordeaux and Tower mines on the NSW South Coast.

The campaign will continue sporadic industrial action called by the mining union across the five mines over the last month. Last week the union ended a five-day strike in the Queensland mines one day early when the company threatened a lockout.

The delegates' meetings were called after BHP management withdrew its latest pay offer of 30 percent over three years and refused further negotiations. The company has demanded productivity trade-offs, including 12-hour shifts.



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