

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 December 2000

## Indian postal workers begin national strike

Over 600,000 postal workers across India began an indefinite strike on Tuesday after wage negotiations broke down. They are demanding the government honour an agreement reached in May to grant postal workers the same pay increase as other public sector workers. The National Federation of Postal Employees, representing 70 percent of strikers, said it had been attempting to negotiate a wage rise since 1997. In 1998 and earlier this year, postal workers staged strikes and protests over the issue.

Within hours of the strike, letters and parcels began piling up at mail service centres. In an effort to get some mail through, the government is using the Army Postal Service and home guards to operate postal vehicles, sort mail and act as security guards at various post offices.

The strike has affected other services besides mail deliveries. More than 40 percent of all banking, particularly into savings accounts and fixed deposit schemes, is conducted through India's 156,000 post offices. Union leaders are due to meet with the chief labour commissioner next week.

## Sacked hotel workers protest in Sri Lanka

Laid-off employees of the Colombo Intercontinental Hotel in Sri Lanka demonstrated outside the hotel on December 4 against attempts by management to rob them of their redundancy compensation. The hotel was once run under an international chain owned by Bass Hotel and Resorts, but the company terminated its lease agreement with the hotel in July.

According to Intercontinental workers, Bass had provided 330 million rupees for compensation but the local management only allocated 40 percent to staff and distributed the remaining 60 percent between 11 people in top management. The protest was triggered when management and government labour officials attempted to force workers to sign agreements accepting the arrangement.

## Chinese construction workers blockade rail line

Some 2,000 construction workers blockaded the Qiqihaar-Harbin rail line in China's north-eastern Heilongjiang province on December 4. Local government officials sent hundreds of police to the scene and at least five workers were arrested. The workers were demanding the payment of two years wages owing to them by their employer, the state-owned Daqing Number Two Construction Company.

According to reports from the Hong Kong Centre for Human Rights and Democracy, many of the workers do not have enough money to buy food and are experiencing extreme difficulties. They resorted to the blockade after negotiations with the management last week failed to bring any results.

## South Korean union rally against restructuring

About 25,000 workers belonging to the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), South Korea's two main peak union bodies, staged a protest rally in Seoul on December 5. The rally called for an immediate halt to the government's economic restructuring program that is resulting in the loss of thousands of jobs.

The protestors called for a cut in working hours to protect jobs and demanded the government withdraw its plan to reform the pension scheme for civil servants and teachers. The scheme is designed to increase the workers' contribution while cutting pension benefits. The rally also called on the government to guarantee basic labour rights for civil servants and temporary workers.

The two peak union bodies had predicted a turnout of over 50,000 workers, mainly from public firms and financial institutions. The numbers failed to materialise when the electricity workers union withdrew from the protest after striking a deal on Monday to accept the government's privatisation plan for the state-run Korea Electric Power Corp.

## South Korean pilots win pay rise

Pilots employed by South Korea's Asiana Airlines called off a strike planned for Thursday after management agreed to a 15 percent pay increase next year, guarantees concerning job security and union recognition.

The pilots had voted by a margin of 96.6 percent to go on strike. Pilots have been campaigning since June for Asiana to officially recognise their union and agree to a draft plan on flight safety, including a reduction in flying hours.

As a consequence of the dispute, the government was forced to change its plan to charter an Asiana plane for President Kim Dae-jung's flight to Oslo on Friday to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

On October 21, pilots from Korean Air staged a one-day strike forcing the airline to reduce their flying hours to the international standard set at 75 hours a week. The pilots had

been working more than 100 hours a week.

### **Indonesian timber workers strike over wages**

Over 500 workers at the timber company PT Tri Cahya Purnama in Indonesia struck on December 6 demanding a salary hike and improvements to their welfare benefits. The workers are seeking a daily pay increase of 1,000 rupiah for workers with two years service, 1,500 for those with three years and 2,000 for four years. They also demanded the company give equal pay for male and female workers, pay workers' daily transportation fees and enrol the workforce in an insurance scheme.

### **ABC workers strike for 24 hours**

More than 4,000 staff from the Australian Broadcasting Commission walked off the job at midday on Tuesday and voted to strike for 24 hours over budget cuts that threaten the loss of 200 jobs and the axing of key programs. Over 100 jobs are expected to be lost in television production alone and another 20 to 30 jobs are expected to go from radio.

Over 300 supporters organised by the Friends of the ABC staged a rally outside the broadcaster's Canberra studio in support of the strikers and a similar protest took place outside of the Southbank studio in Melbourne.

The strike comes in the wake of the sacking of Media Watch host Paul Barry last week and the axing of the popular Quantum science program and the ABC's science unit. Well-attended meetings at Sydney Town Hall and in Melbourne endorsed a resolution demanding the reinstatement of Barry and barring any journalist from applying for his position.

The meetings also endorsed a union recommendation demanding the ABC's managing director Jonathan Sheir "guarantee the essential independence and non-commercial character" of the government-owned broadcaster and that "no further staff would be terminated without extensive consultation with the workforce."

Senior ABC journalists addressed the meetings, calling for public support and warning that the budget cuts and moves to commercialise the ABC would lead to its destruction. Barry told the Sydney meeting that the dispute was about "the editorial integrity and independence of the ABC" and the right of people in the organisation "to say what they know they should say without fear of losing their jobs".

The latest budget cuts, anticipated to be about \$12 million, are a continuation of the Federal Liberal government's attempts to wind down the public broadcaster. In 1997 the government slashed \$66 million from the ABC's budget, forcing programs to be axed and staff to be cut by 20 percent, mainly from the radio and television units.

### **Work bans dry up car components**

Workers at the Preslite Australia factory in Reservoir, Melbourne, which has placed itself into receivership, imposed bans on supplies leaving the plant last Thursday. The action is an attempt to get assurances from the company about the future of workers' jobs and financial entitlements. The plant supplies

windscreen wiper engines to most of the major car manufacturers in Victoria.

Unions claim that the decision by Preslite Australia to appoint a voluntary administrator to oversee the operations has put a cloud over the future of the 90 workers employed at the plant.

Car manufacturers, meeting with government representatives this week, warned that they would begin standing down production workers in the next few days if the dispute at Preslite continues. A union spokesman claimed that Preslite's action placed \$4 million in entitlements owed to workers in danger and that bans would remain in place until a satisfactory outcome was achieved.

### **Melbourne University stands down academics**

Members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) employed at Melbourne University have threatened to step up industrial action after four academics were stood down on December 5 for refusing to process student exam results.

The bans were placed last week after negotiations for a new workplace agreement for the university's 5,000 academic and general staff stalled. The workers are demanding a 15 percent increase over three years but the university's authorities have refused to shift from a 10 percent offer. Other issues in dispute include a review of academic misconduct and probation provisions.

### **Esso strike ends**

On Wednesday the Australian Workers Union, covering a group of workers employed at Esso's Longford refinery in Melbourne, agreed to end industrial action even though no progress had been made in negotiations for a new work agreement. The workers were seeking a 15 percent pay increase over 3 years and a 35-hour week.

The 36 workers were stood down after placing work bans on the use of bicycles used for transportation around the plant, effectively imposing a go-slow. The stand-downs by the company included 12 Hot Work Surveillance Officers who are responsible for testing for the presence of gases before welders commence work.

The management threatened to maintain the lockout throughout the Christmas period unless all work bans were lifted. The dispute over a new agreement began in August when the workers started a series of rolling stoppages.



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