

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 March 2001

## **Indonesia hotel workers prepare for strike-breaking**

Workers at the Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta have established picket lines this weekend to prevent management breaking their three-month strike with scab labour.

Nine hundred workers struck in December for improved wages, bonuses and working conditions. Over 200 of the strikers have been sacked on false charges that they vandalised hotel property during an occupation of the lobby.

The hotel management claims to have hired 350 new employees and recalled 600 who did not join the strike. A spokesman said that the hotel had informed its clients that it would be reopening for business.

Earlier in the week the Shangri-La management boycotted a meeting at the Ministry of Transmigration and Manpower in central Jakarta to discuss the dispute. Some 400 workers gathered outside the ministry office to press their demands.

Last month the government promised to provide security guards at the hotel if management attempted to break the strike.

## **Chinese taxi drivers strike against fees increase**

Police clashed with thousands of taxi drivers in Lanzhou City, in China's northwestern province of Gansu, on March 13. Ten drivers were arrested and 20 were injured. Nearly 5,000 drivers had surrounded the provincial government offices in the city centre to protest against an increase in government fees and charges.

The measures include a compulsory 2,500-yuan (\$US300) road fee and a 300-yuan increase in fines levied for violating traffic regulations. The government is also forcing drivers to pay 240 yuan for the installation of metal cages valued at 40 yuan to separate drivers from passengers.

The drivers struck on March 12 and handed a petition to government officials warning that industrial action would continue if the fees were not dropped. The officials promised a review, but the next day announced that the fees had been implemented.

Drivers are enforcing the strike, stopping and smashing the windows of any taxis caught working.

## **South Korean airline staff ban move to new airport**

On March 14, workers employed by South Korea's major

airlines, as well as four airline-related companies, banned moving to the new Incheon International Airport due to open in two weeks time.

The workers claim it will cost them more to travel to the new airport and are demanding that the government reduce the toll fee on the highway connecting it to Seoul. They have also requested other forms of assistance to reduce travel costs.

Unions plan to hold a poll over four days from March 16 on whether to strike. The workers will walkout in early April if the majority votes yes.

## **Sri Lankan doctors strike for risk allowance**

Government doctors in the war-torn North and East provinces in Sri Lanka staged a one-day token strike on March 13 demanding that a special "mission allowance" be extended to residential doctors.

The allowance, which is equivalent to one month's salary, is presently paid only to non-residential doctors. Out of the 400 doctors working in the area, 250 are non-residential and the remaining 150 are residential. All work in the midst of the ongoing civil war in the region between government troops and the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.

## **Sri Lankan factory workers sit-in at labor ministry**

Over 100 workers stormed into the Sri Lankan Labor Ministry in Colombo on March 12 to demand the immediate reinstatement of 618 workers suspended from four factories in the capital's suburbs.

The 618 workers—188 from Wonder Light Soap, 230 from Daintee Confectioneries, 80 from Accessory Network and 120 from Asian Cotton Mills—were suspended for three months under the government's Emergency Regulations for participating in protests calling for pay rises and better working conditions.

## **Indian smelter workers continue strike against privatisation**

Over 7,000 workers at Bharat Aluminum in central India are continuing their two-week strike against the government's sale of its controlling stake in the enterprise to Sterlite Industries, a private company.

On March 13, a spokesman for the management claimed

that the strike had already cost one billion rupees (\$US21.50 million).

“There is absolutely no production-related activity inside the plant. The smelter is closed and metal in all the 408 pots has solidified. It would take about three months to restart the plant,” he said.

The BALCO share sale is the federal government's first big privatisation and a test case for the sell-off of its majority stake in other state-run firms. BALCO supplies 15 percent of India's aluminum output.

### **Toyota workers on indefinite strike in Melbourne**

Around 250 workers at the Toyota parts plant in Port Melbourne began an indefinite strike on March 13 in an effort to get three workers reinstated. The workers, who were responsible for cleaning in the maintenance section of the factory, had their jobs contracted out by Toyota.

The company claimed that the workers were given redundancy packages in line with a previous union agreement and the Industrial Relations Commission ordered a return to work on March 14. A mass meeting of the Port Melbourne workers the next day rejected the court directive and voted to stay out.

The strike has disrupted production at Toyota's main assembly plant in Altona, with parts shortages cutting output 400 to only 200 cars per day.

### **Western Australian linen workers return to work**

The Miscellaneous Workers Union ended a strike this week by 200 women workers at Linencare Australia in Perth, even though the company had not agreed to implement the striker's demands. The women went on strike on March 9, and established picket lines to demand improved pay rates and permanency for 65 casual workers. On March 13, management called the police to clear a picket preventing trucks in and out of the plant.

The casuals, many of whom have worked at Linencare for over four years, are paid \$1.50 an hour less than fulltime workers. The company launders linen for Perth's major teaching hospitals, as well as servicing a large number of nursing homes and hostels.

The union has struck a deal accepting permanency for only 30 of the 65 casuals and agreed to more “flexible” shifts to cover peak workloads. The company rejected an offer by the permanent staff to defer a pay rise in return for making all 65 casuals full time.

### **Victorian healthcare workers step-up industrial action**

Work bans by healthcare workers in Victoria have entered its second week, with staff at five more hospitals joining the dispute. A total of 31 hospitals in Melbourne, regional centres and rural areas are now involved. Union officials have warned that action could spread to 100 hospitals if the workers' demands are not met.

The bans by general workers and nurses are part of a campaign to gain a 12.5 percent wage rise and increased staffing. The Health Services Union said this week that talks with the state's hospital management have become deadlocked. The union is now appealing to John Thwaites, the Labor government's health minister, to intervene into the dispute.

### **Sydney paint company sacks union delegate**

The senior delegate at the Mirotone paint company in the Sydney suburb of Revesby, Ken Phillips, was sacked on March 13, just two hours before a scheduled meeting between the union and the company. The meeting had been called to discuss the three-week lockout at the plant.

The delegate had been called into the office before the meeting and offered a staff position. When he refused he was sacked on the spot. The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union condemned the sacking as an “extremely provocative act” and said it will go to the Federal Court to seek an injunction to have the dismissal reversed.

The union began negotiations for a new work agreement with Mirotone in November. The company locked out the workforce last month, after they refused to accept an increase in working hours and to sign over to individual work agreements.

### **Workers defend rights for casuals in Fiji**

Workers at Fiji National Provident Fund in Suva walked out on March 13 and held a stop-work meeting to defend the rights of casual workers.

A spokesman for the Finance Sector Union said the management was ignoring an agreement that temporary workers had to be made permanent after three months. “They (management) have been exploiting these workers for some time now. They take on someone for a couple of months and terminate them before the date to become permanent,” he said.

The company also refuses to make temporary workers permanent if they have a spouse working in the organisation. The union claims that exceptions are made if a worker has a spouse in a managerial position. One worker said, we are sick of “unfair policies used by the management which best suits their own purposes. They put certain policies in place for workers, but feel that they don't apply to them.”



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