

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 September 2001

Public sector workers in Sri Lanka strike

Workers at public hospitals, the government press and Colombo Municipal Council stopped work on September 12 demanding a 3,000-rupee (\$US30) interim allowance until a new pay arrangement is established for state employees. About 5,000 workers marched through Colombo. The workers also called for the lowering of essential food prices.

Technicians and stationmasters at Sri Lankan Railway took 48-hour strike action a day earlier halting 90 percent of rail services over the same issue.

A Colombo National Hospital worker said: “Our salary is less than 5,000 rupees per month. After deductions for loans and other things we get a small amount to meet our needs. If we get a 3,000-rupee salary increment we can just face the situation.”

The Peoples Alliance (PA) government has declared it has no funds and condemned the strikers as saboteurs against the ongoing war with the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Unions affiliated to Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the government, defended this position.

Sri Lankan nurses strike

More than 300 nurses at the Sri Jayawardanapura General Hospital, which is partly owned by the government, struck on September 10 for an increase in overtime rates of pay. Intensive care, emergency care, operating theatres and wards were all affected. While management and the health ministry have demanded that the strikers call off the action, union officials have warned that the strike could spread to other government hospitals.

Indian teachers defy government order

Secondary school teachers in Gujarat are continuing strike action in defiance of return to work orders by the state government and its invocation of the Essential Service Maintenance Act (ESMA). Some 100,000 teachers from 5,000 secondary schools launched the indefinite strike on August 28 to demand a pay rise and transport allowances.

“We shall not tolerate this injustice any more and will continue our fight till our demands are met,” one teacher told the media. The state government arrested 450 strikers

on September 6 for disobeying the ESMA but they were later released.

Philippines pineapple workers prepare for national strike

Over 3,000 workers at the giant pineapple company, Dole Philippines (Dolefil), have voted to strike after September 24.

The strike call was made following a deadlock in negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement. The Dole workers’ union initially sought a 125-peso (\$US2.50) increase in daily wages but later agreed to lower this to 70 pesos, a 30,000 pesos startup bonus and a monthly sack of rice, 500 pesos electric and water bill allowance and 1,000 pesos housing allowance. Dole workers are paid between 168 to 384 pesos (\$US3.35 to \$US7.70) a day.

The company counter-offered with a 10 percent annual wage increase for three years, a staggered rice allowance of 10 to 15 kilos over the next three years, a daily meal allowance increase and 200,000 pesos for death benefits.

Dole management claim they have been hit by inflation and the global financial crisis and have threatened to transfer operations to Thailand if the economic conditions worsen.

Government workers and taxi drivers join forces in the Philippines

Hundreds of city government employees and jeepney (taxi) drivers in the Philippine’s city of Angeles have formed a coalition to force the city’s administration address a number of outstanding grievances.

The local government employees, members of the Association of Government Employees for a new Dynamic Angeles City (Agenda), are demanding authorities agree to a new collective work agreement with improved conditions. They are also calling on the city executive to stop transferring workers who are aligned with political opponents of incumbent officials. The “outside city” jeepney drivers are protesting against city ordinances that force them to operate outside the city limits. The workers held a combined march and rally at the Plaza Miranda on September 13.

Teachers strike in Indonesia

Over 1,000 teachers in Karangasem, the capital of Bali, struck on September 14 as part of the ongoing nation-wide action to force provincial governments to pay a wage rise owing since January. Teachers in other parts of Bali may follow suit. In the Banyumas region of Central Java, some 700 teachers rallied outside provincial government offices.

Victorian tyre workers strike

More than 800 Pacific Dunlop tyre workers struck on September 12 in Melbourne over the possible loss of 1,400 jobs after the company announced new restructuring plans. Workers from tyre factories in Footscray, Somerton and Thomastown protested outside the company's headquarters in Richmond. Over 500 jobs were axed from the Somerton plant just before Christmas last year.

Bakery workers return to work

Up to 700 Tip Top bakery workers and drivers took statewide strike action in New South Wales on September 11 to demand wage increases. The company has only offered an 8.6 percent rise over the next two years. Staff returned to work on September 13. A Miscellaneous Workers Union spokesperson said negotiations would continue with management over the next few weeks.

PNG national radio workers threaten to strike

National Broadcasting Corporation (NBC) employees in Papua New Guinea have threatened to strike in support of news director Joseph Ealedona who was sacked after being accused by management of allowing the broadcast of anti-government reports.

A meeting of some 100 staff members on September 8 called for NBC independence to be respected, the immediate re-instatement of Ealedona and no interference in news broadcasts by the National Executive Council (a wing of government). Department representatives were nominated to draw up a petition to present to NBC management. If the response is unsatisfactory the workers have threatened to hold a secret ballot on strike action.

New Zealand teachers vote to strike

Over 14,000 secondary school teachers began holding stopwork meetings throughout New Zealand this week to discuss strike action for mid-October. Contract negotiations with the government have been underway for five months.

The Ministry of Education has opposed teachers' demands for less contact hours, more staff and higher pay. In addition to workload controls and maximum class contact hours, teachers are seeking a flat \$2,500 pay increase each year for the next three years. The Labour-led government has only offered a two percent pay increase, the same figure recently accepted by the primary teachers' union.

Teachers attending meetings held so far have overwhelmingly voted for strike action and for a moratorium on new national school qualifications due to be introduced

next year.

New Zealand polytechnic tutors strike over pay

Tutors from four New Zealand polytechnics held a one-day strike on September 7 and warned that more could follow. Contract negotiations have broken down at regional polytechnics in Nelson, Hawke's Bay, Gisborne and Northland.

The polytechnics have rejected the tutors' claim for a two percent pay rise and offered a one percent rise this year, with a further 1.5 percent in 2002. Tutors have accused management of using the polytechnics' financial plight to take a "hard-nosed" attitude towards the teaching staff.

Strike continues at *New Zealand Herald*

About 100 *New Zealand Herald* journalists are continuing a week-long strike. The Auckland-based *Herald* is the country's largest circulation daily newspaper. The journalists have been in dispute with the company over pay claims and attempts by management to remove up to 80 staff from collective contract coverage.

The company resumed negotiations on September 7, but the journalists said it was simply a repeat of previous offers and rejected it. A picket line is being maintained outside the *Herald's* head office.

Health unions call off New Zealand nurses' strike

Unions representing 1,100 health workers employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) called off pending strike action at South Island hospitals this week. After two days of negotiations, the unions agreed to present a settlement offer to nursing and allied health staff. Notices previously issued to strike from September 14 were withdrawn.

The health workers voted to strike after the CDHB refused to improve a four percent pay offer. The board has now offered three two percent pay rises over 22 months. The workers originally sought a 6.5 per cent increase, improved allowances and an additional week of annual leave.

The nurses are maintaining a ban on overtime and restrictions on staff mobility while the union's ratification process is underway.



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