

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 September 2001

Sri Lankan hospital workers strike

Hospital staff and doctors at the Colombo North General Hospital in Ragama, Sri Lanka struck on September 17, following a physical attack on a house officer and a worker by members of the Sri Lankan army.

According to a hospital spokesman, a group of five drunken army personnel brought a patient for treatment. They demanded that the house officer examining the patient hurry up. When he refused and attempted to explain that the steps he was taking were necessary for correct treatment, the five men attacked him. They also assaulted a worker who came to the assistance of the medical officer. Hospital staff have demanded improved security and want hospital authorities to begin legal action against the suspects.

Sri Lankan nurses' strike ends

A five-day strike by nurses at the semi-government Jayawardanapura Hospital in Colombo ended on September 15, after the Public Service United Nurses Union (PSUNU) reached a settlement with hospital management. The 300 nurses began strike action on September 10 demanding a 35 percent increase in overtime rates.

The settlement, however, only provides a 21 percent increase. Claiming a "lack of funds", hospital management said the rise could not be paid until next year. Many nurses suspect that the hospital will not honour the promise.

A similar settlement was imposed on public hospital nurses after they struck for pay increases last month. In both cases, the PSUNU ended the strikes fearful that they would link up with other government workers now taking industrial action. Last week, thousands of Sri Lankan public sector workers launched a one-day strike for pay rises.

Indian government workers strike against pension

policy

State government employees in Uttar Pradesh began a three-day strike on September 18 in protest over moves to change public sector workers' pensions. Workers believe the changes will eliminate some benefits in the present scheme. Thousands of workers rallied in the state capital denouncing the government and warning that industrial action would continue unless the planned changes are withdrawn.

L'Oreal workers strike ends in Indonesia

Beauty consultants and sales clerks at L'Oreal cosmetic company in Indonesia returned to work on September 17 after a four-day strike over the company's refusal to grant permanency to casual employees. The women workers, who claim that L'Oreal's is in breach of labour laws, picketed the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration during the strike demanding that authorities investigate their complaints.

One woman told the local press that although L'Oreal had employed her for seven years she was still working on contract. The workers are paid only 426,250 rupiah (\$US38.70) a month and have demanded a wage increase.

Indonesian electronics workers rally

More than 200 workers from PT Fajar Sun Master protested outside the Tangerang Manpower and Population Agency office in Jakarta on September 14 to demand improved working conditions. The company, which produces household electronic goods under the Cosmos brand, employs 500 female and 100 male workers.

Workers are demanding the company end the contract employment system, increase wages and provide transportation and meal allowances. Two employees have been sacked and 120 others face dismissal for joining earlier protests.

Australian mine workers strike against privatisation

Some 200 coal miners employed at PowerCoal state-owned mines on the Central Coast in New South Wales struck for 24 hours on September 18 in protest over privatisation. The state Labor government recently announced that it plans to sell all the state-owned mines in the area, including the Awaba, Cooranbong, Newstan and Myuna collieries, which supply coal to government-owned power stations. This move is seen as a step towards the eventual privatisation of PowerCoal and the entire power industry.

Taubmans strike enters sixth week

One hundred workers at the Taubmans paint factory in Sydney are now in their sixth week of strike action for a wage rise and guaranteed entitlements. According to a union spokesperson, employees in Sydney are paid an average \$51 per week less than workers at Taubmans' operations in Brisbane and Melbourne.

The company has attempted to break the strike using non-union labour, which is bussed into the plant each day through the workers' picket line. The strike began after the breakdown in negotiations between the company and unions.

Pay dispute halts bus services

Over 400 drivers at the National Bus Company in Victoria walked off the job on September 21 to discuss industrial action for improved wages. The company pulled its fleet off the road after failing to get guarantees from the Transport Workers Union that the workers would return after attending the stop-work meeting.

Papua New Guinean Coca Cola workers face the sack

Over 200 employees at the Coca Cola Amatil factory in Port Moresby were given notice this week that they will be dismissed by the end of the year. The company plans to end production at the plant and transfer operations to its factory in Lae.

The workers have demanded the company guarantee severance pay, six months long service leave, medical insurance, school fees for their children, employment retraining, and relocation expenses to their home provinces. They also want the company to refund money deducted from workers' pay in exchange for shares. Workers have instructed the Amalgamated General Workers Union to inform management that

they have three days to respond to their claims or face strike action.

Striking New Zealand journalists return to work

Striking journalists at the *New Zealand Herald* voted to return to work this week, ending the country's longest-ever strike by journalists. The 100 editorial staff struck for two-and-a-half weeks over contract and pay issues. In addition to seeking a pay rise, the journalists also opposed management attempts to remove 80 senior staff from the collective work contract.

While the union claimed that many issues had been "resolved" no settlement details have been released. Striking journalists at the national news agency NZPA also returned to work this week, after a three-day strike in support of their collective contract negotiations.

Protest strike hits Fiji ports and airports

Operations at Fiji's ports and airports were brought to a standstill this week when Fiji Islands Revenue and Customs Authority workers staged a nationwide protest. The employees are demanding the reinstatement of 15 of their colleagues who have been wrongfully dismissed. Their demand is in line with a recent ruling by the High Court ordering the workers to be re-employed. The Authority has refused to accept the High Court decision.

The striking workers passed a no-confidence vote in the board of management and called for the resignation of the Authority's chief executive officer. They are also demanding that the Authority begin negotiations for a new collective work agreement.



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