

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 September 2001

Indonesian bus drivers strike over wages

Over 400 bus drivers and conductors employed by DAMRI, the state public transport company in Surabaya, began an indefinite strike on September 26. The strike erupted following the breakdown of negotiations over workers' demands for a 200 percent pay rise.

The bus workers are paid 278,137 rupiah (less than \$US30) a month and work 12 hours a day. One described his wage as "unrealistic" compared to the cost of living and the regional minimum wage, which is around 337,200 rupiah per month.

The workers are also demanding that the company recognise their status as state-company employees, which would allow them to gain a range of benefits. They are currently contracted as "private drivers".

Indonesian garment workers demand unpaid wages

Hundreds of workers from PT Maesa Maju, a garment factory in Gunung Putri, Bogor, rallied outside the town council on September 21 over non-payment of their wages. The workers, who have not been paid for August, demanded the council force the company to hand over the outstanding pay.

A council spokesman promised to speak with management and investigate the financial situation at the factory. Prior to the protest, PT Maesa Maju told workers that the company had serious financial problems and might close.

Sri Lankan hotel workers picket Labor Department

Some 300 Sri Lankan hotel workers picketed the Labor Department in Colombo on September 27. Their demands included permanency for casual workers with over one year service, the abolition of the present contract and shift work systems and an increase in the minimum monthly wage to 8,000 rupees (\$US90). Most of the 150,000 workers in the Sri Lankan hotel industry Lanka are employed as casuals.

The hotel industry has suffered a major downturn since the recent attack on Katunayake international airport by the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. Predictions are that tourism will contract by 50 to 60 per cent in Sri Lanka this year. Hoteliers are defending their profits by layoffs and cuts to workers' benefits. More than 1,500 workers have

already been sacked with another 40,000 jobs threatened.

Press workers strike in Colombo

Typesetting and page-making workers employed by Upali News Paper in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo struck on September 24 and 25 in protest over the suspension of a trade union member. Upali News Paper Ltd is one of Sri Lanka's leading publishers and produces the *Island* and the *Divayina*, English and Sinhala language daily newspapers respectively.

Management agreed to reinstate the suspended unionist after the strike stopped production at both dailies. The union, however, have agreed to a disciplinary inquiry.

Sri Lankan ceramic workers' strike enters second month

A strike at Royal Ceramic in Ehaliyagoda, 70 kilometres from Colombo, has now entered its second month. Royal Ceramic management locked out the entire workforce after employees struck for a 3,500 rupee per month (\$US37) pay rise. Negotiations have collapsed and the company has refused to pay a previously agreed 500-rupee rise.

The strikers are camped near the factory and are receiving support from local villagers. Determined to continue their industrial action, the workers have had little support from their trade union, the Inter Company Workers Union (ICWU). The ICWU is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People's Liberation Front), which recently signed a "Memorandum of Understanding" to cooperate with the Peoples Alliance government.

Indian bus drivers threaten indefinite strike

Bus drivers in Thiruvananthapuram staged a one-day strike on September 24 to demand the withdrawal of a recently announced tax increase on bus operations. In an attempt to undermine the strike, the state government increased services by publicly owned buses in major centres such as Kadalundi and Malabar, which were hardest hit by the strike.

A spokesman for the bus operators warned that they would begin an indefinite strike unless the tax was withdrawn by October 1. To date the government has categorically refused to consider the demand.

Australian retail workers protest job losses

Nearly 100 workers employed by the Target retail chain demonstrated outside the company's head office in the Victorian regional city of Geelong on September 25 in protest over planned sackings.

Coles Myer, Target's parent company, announced last week that it plans to cut 1,000 jobs. This includes 200 from Target's head office in Geelong and 220 from its general merchandising divisions. The new round of job losses comes on top of 100 cut in May. Coles Myer management claim that it has been forced to restructure Target due to falling profits.

This week Japanese retail giant Daimaru also announced that it will close its department stores in central Melbourne and on the Queensland Gold Coast in the next nine months. Over 250 jobs will be axed when the Gold Coast store shuts in January and 760 in Melbourne in July.

Northern Territory teachers reject pay offer

Public school teachers in the Northern Territory rejected as inadequate a 6 percent government pay rise offer at stopwork meetings on September 26.

While some meetings regional centres voted to accept the offer, it was opposed in Darwin and Palmerston. Teachers endorsed a resolution calling for rolling strikes at the beginning of the next school term.

Taubmans strike ends

Workers at paint manufacturer Taubmans in Sydney returned to work on September 26, ending a seven-week strike and lockout over a new enterprise agreement.

Union officials urged workers to accept a deal brokered with management in the Industrial Relations Commission, even though it excludes measures to protect accrued entitlements such as long service leave, holiday and severance pay. The entitlements issue has been assigned to future discussion with the management. The settlement includes a 10 percent wage increase over two years and a small improvement in long service leave.

New Zealand teachers set to strike

New Zealand's 14,000 secondary teachers have overwhelmingly supported proposals for a 24-hour strike on October 11, followed by ongoing industrial action. The action will include teaching bans on certain classes. Bans may also be placed on the introduction of a new national qualifications system next year. The vote was taken at a series of national stop-work meetings over the past two weeks.

Contract negotiations with the government have been underway for five months. Teachers want the agreement to stipulate a specific number of hours set aside each week to prepare and undertake the administrative duties required by their jobs. They are asking for three hours a week in the first year, four in the second and five in the third.

Despite government opposition to the claim, Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark was invited to address the teacher's union annual conference on September 25. She claimed that although the government did not "undervalue" teachers, funding the contract demands was a matter of its "ability to pay".

New Zealand health unions lift overtime bans

Unions representing 1,100 nurses and allied health staff at Princess Margaret and Hillmorton Hospitals lifted overtime bans this week even though there has been no progress in a long-running dispute over pay. Two weeks ago the unions withdrew a notice for full strike action at the two South Island hospitals. The health workers, who are employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB), had been refusing to work overtime or outside their normal rostered area for the past month.

A spokeswoman for the NZ Nurses Organisation industrial action was called off in order to "maximise the potential to reach a negotiated settlement" in the near future. Talks resumed between the unions and the CDHB on September 28. The workers are demanding a 6.5 percent pay increase and an additional week's annual leave. CDHB is offering three 2 percent pay rises over 22 months.

Auckland waterfront workers strike over contract

Two hundred waterfront workers at the Ports of Auckland went on strike for 48 hours from September 27 over stalled contract negotiations. The workers are opposing attempts by the port to break down established demarcation and introduce more flexible labour deployment provisions. The company also wants the right to remove supervisory and office staff from collective contract coverage. The striking workers set up a picket at the entrance to the port, which is New Zealand's busiest.



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