

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 November 2001

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

Doctors at government hospitals in the war-torn northeastern provinces of Sri Lanka struck on November 7 to demand the extension of a danger allowance. The allowance is only paid to doctors residing outside the hospitals. The Jaffna branch of Government Medical Officers Association insists that all doctors who work in the area should receive it because they all face similar risks.

According to the union, the government is stalling. Following a strike by doctors in July, the Health minister promised to address the issue within a month. While this week's strike brought hospitals to a standstill, emergency services were exempted from the action.

## **Metalix workers in Sri Lanka conduct protest campaign**

Workers at Metalix, a manufacturer of electrical instruments and steel household appliances, have been waging a poster and protest campaign since October 25. The workers are opposing the management's failure to make regular contributions to the Employees Provident Fund and Employees Trust Fund and its refusal to grant salary advances.

Workers fear the management is planning to close down operations and not pay compensation. Because the workers are poorly paid, only 3,000 rupee (\$US33) a month, many need advance pay to cover expenses.

## **Sri Lankan credit society staff locked out**

Some 450 employees at the Cooperative Thrift and Credit Society in Sri Lanka were locked out on November 2 after taking industrial action. The credit society provides services to government teachers.

The workers went on strike on October 30 after holding a number of protest pickets. They are demanding a 2,000 rupee (\$US22) a month pay increase, permanency for 98 casual workers who have two years service and a seniority-basis appointment system. They are also calling for the reinstatement of three suspended union officials.

Pay rates at the credit society are poor. A permanent upper-grade account clerk is paid just \$US66 a month and a casual account clerk \$US53. Workers first approached management with their log of claims two years ago.

## **Korean teachers threaten strike action**

Korean teachers are preparing to walk off the job and begin a series of national protests this week over the government's refusal to scrap the introduction of contract teachers, job performance bonuses, the hire of secondary school teachers for elementary schools and a new school curriculum. The Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (KTEWU) and the Korean Union of Teaching and Educational Workers (KUTEW) also want the government to increase education spending to six percent of Gross Domestic Product.

KTEWU members took strike action on October 10 and October 27 and held an emergency meeting on October 29 calling on all

provincial and district union leaders to organise additional protest action this week. While there have been 30 rounds of talks with the government over the issue since last March, the government refuses to accept any of the union's demands.

Korean teachers, who are backed by a coalition of parent and student organisations, plan to hold a mass rally of members today over the issue. Students at 11 teachers' colleges in South Korea also staged strikes, class boycotts and other protests action during October in support of teachers.

## **Thai workers killed in factory explosion**

At least 14 workers were killed in a paint factory explosion in Panthong, Thailand on November 7. Another eight people are still missing and believed dead. Twenty-six workers were injured, the majority of them suffering burns. Forty-five people were working in the factory belonging to GF (Thailand) when the explosion occurred. The fire caused by the blast raged for over an hour and gutted the two-story building before firefighters could extinguish it.

Police are investigating what caused the blast and a search is continuing for bodies. Health officials are checking if there was adequate ventilation at the plant. Investigators believe that a spark from a short circuit dropped into a paint-mixing container and caused the explosion.

This is the second paint factory explosion within two weeks. Last week 19 workers were killed in a blast at a plant in Pak Chong.

## **Australian sugar mill workers strike**

Workers at 25 sugar mills in the state of Queensland held stop-work meetings this week after the Australian Sugar Milling Association (ASMA) launched an appeal against an industrial court ruling that mill workers' shift allowance be increased to a rate comparable with other industries.

A spokesman for the union said employers already had a 12-month exemption from paying the increase. "This is an outrageous application by the employers and workers are furious," he said. The workers are threatening strike action if the employers do not withdraw the appeal immediately.

In a separate dispute, the New South Wales Sugar Milling Cooperative locked out workers at three sugar mills in northern NSW this week after they voted to reject the company's latest pay offer.

## **Locked out textile workers injured on picketline**

Four locked out textile workers were injured when a car drove through their picketline outside Feltex Australia's Braybrook plant in Melbourne's western suburbs on November 2. Two of the workers, who were among 500 locked out by the company last month, were admitted to hospital and X-rayed.

About 30 Feltex Australia employees were peacefully protesting outside the plant when a vehicle drove at them. The company claims it

was an accident, but the car driver had just dropped off a non-union employee before forcing the car through the picketline.

Feltex Australia management locked out about 500 of its 800 employees at its Braybrook and Tottenham plants in late October after they took strike action for wage rise and entitlement claims. The workers have been attempting to negotiate a agreement since early this year but the company refuse to put workers' redundancy payments and accrued entitlements such as annual, sick and long-service into a trust fund.

#### **Sydney hotel workers strike over job security**

About 200 hotel workers in Sydney walked off the job for three hours on November 6 to attend a rally and stopwork meeting in the Gazebo Hotel over the growing number of inner city hotel closures.

The hotel workers, who are members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, were told that the union is planning to lodge a case in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission early next year to increase the minimum workers hours for casual workers to four hours. This case, even if successful, will do nothing to defend hotel workers jobs.

Sydney hotel accommodation occupancy levels have plummeted by 25 per cent over the last two months and several hotels have either closed or shut down floors due to the crisis in the tourist industry. The latest to close is the Gazebo. The Landmark Hotel, also in Kings Cross, will shut in December at the cost of over 400 jobs.

#### **Production workers support office staff**

Over 80 production workers at Carter Holt Harvey, a corrugated-paper manufacturer in western Sydney, have gone on strike in support of a pay increase for eight female workers employed in the company's office.

The production workers had only just ended strike action after winning a 14 percent pay rise. When the management refused to extend the increase to the eight office staff, the production workers walked out again. The eight female workers are employed on open-ended staff contracts and were excluded from wage negotiations.

On November 7, the company issued the workers' union with a notice of intention to sue for \$140,000 for losses it claims to have incurred because of the strike.

#### **Fiji transport workers threatened with dismissal**

Workers at the Fiji Land Transport Authority (LTA) walked off the job on November 5 in support of a wage claim. The striking workers are members of the Fiji Public Service Association, Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and the Public Employees Union.

The workers are seeking a further pay increase on top of a recently granted three percent cost-of-living adjustment. They claim the LTA has embarked on a union busting process by hiring contractors. A union spokesman said although negotiations between the union and the management had begun, the workers would stay out until their demands were met.

The Labour minister, Kenneth Zinck, declared the strike illegal on November 7 and ordered the strikers to return to work or face compulsory arbitration. The LTA have threatened that if they stay out longer than seven days, the workers will be deemed to have resigned.

#### **PNG airport workers strike over security**

Air Niugini members of the National Airline Employees Association stopped work this week to demand management improve security following the rape of four female shift workers. A union spokesman said that the management had done nothing to improve employee security. "This is pure negligence on the part of the management and we want something drastic to be done now."

The workers presented a petition to management demanding the dismissal of the head of security, the provision of temporary accommodation and transport for shift workers, and compensation for those who were attacked.

#### **New Zealand academic staff begin industrial campaigns**

Industrial action at all of New Zealand's universities is imminent following low pay offers by university administrations. Staff at Otago, Victoria and Waikato Universities have already voted to begin a range of actions next week.

The universities are offering increases of less than two percent—below the 2.8 percent inflation rate. In recent negotiations the Waikato University refused to offer any increase in pay. The Association of University Staff is seeking an increase of eight percent each year for the next three years.

A series of stop-work meetings at several university campuses over the last two weeks have endorsed industrial action, including work to rule, delaying the release of exam marks, enrolment boycotts and strikes.

#### **New Zealand radiation therapists reject pay offer**

New Zealand radiation therapists working for the Auckland, Waikato and Mid-Central district health boards are considering strike action after rejecting a three percent pay offer. The therapists are asking for a 25 per cent pay rise to stem the flow of staff to higher paid jobs overseas.

Job vacancies are high and patient waiting lists are growing. Of the 150 full-time equivalent positions at the country's six cancer units, there are currently 36 unfilled vacancies. At Wellington Hospital, the shortage of radiation therapists means that 40 percent of cancer patients wait longer than six weeks to begin treatment. The Health Ministry recommends treatment within four weeks of diagnosis.

Health boards claim that they cannot increase the pay offer because of government funding restrictions. The Auckland board, which is already operating with a \$60 million deficit, says that agreeing to a large increase for one group of health workers would set a precedent for others. Meanwhile, cancer patients are being flown to Australia for treatment.



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