

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 February 2002

## Indonesian Telkom workers strike

More than 3,000 employees of the Central Java division of the state-owned telecommunications firm PT Telkom began strike action on January 28 against the government's plan to transfer the unit to another state-owned telecommunications firm, the long distance carrier PT Indosat.

Workers fear that jobs will be lost and that the plan is aimed at preparing the company for privatisation. Over the past weeks, thousands of workers have taken part in demonstrations demanding the transfer be stopped. A union spokesman told the media: "If our demands are rejected, all workers in the division have decided to resign rather than work with Indosat."

The government is coming under pressure from business circles to crack down on the industrial action. This week, the Consumer Protection and Supervision Foundation threatened to file a class action against Telkom if the strike causes its members any losses.

## More deaths in China's coal mines

At least 27 coal miners were killed in two separate gas explosions at the same Chinese mine last weekend. On the morning of January 26, 19 miners died when an explosion ripped through a state-owned underground mine in Hebei province. The following day, another explosion killed eight rescue workers and injured 12 others. One miner is still missing. Over 5,000 miners lost their lives in China last year.

## Korean subway workers endorse rolling strikes

Seoul Subway Corporation workers in South Korea voted last weekend to hold a series of 24-hour strikes from February 4 to March 12, over the company's refusal to agree to a 6 percent pay increase. Management has ruled out any increase until workers accept the elimination of 400 jobs and announced that it will recruit a scab force of retired workers if the strikes go ahead.

## Sri Lanka concrete workers demonstrate for improved conditions

Workers at Keanam Readymix demonstrated outside the factory on January 25. The Korean-owned factory produces concrete mixture for road construction and is situated in Malabe, a suburb of Colombo.

The workers demanded the company recognise their union, cease witch-hunting unionised workers and increase pay. Some 60 workers are working at the factory. They are on daily hire

and paid only \$US1.25 to \$1.35 a day. Although the majority of the workers have been employed at the plant for about seven years, none of them have been made permanent. The company has also ended the payment of annual bonuses.

All the workers are from remote rural areas which suffer extremely high levels of unemployment. Companies such as Readymix exploit the situation to recruit cheap labour.

## Indian doctors arrested at protest over fee increase

Thirty resident doctors at the Nisam Institute of Medical Sciences at Hyderabad in Southern India were arrested on January 28 after they went on strike and occupied the institute premises against an increase in training fees. They were arrested under Essential Services Maintain Act (ESMA) but were later released because the act does not apply to resident doctors

The doctors have been agitating for more than two weeks against a proposed increase in fees for post-graduate courses. The Institute's authorities have retaliated by locking the doctors out of their hostel accommodation, closing down their kitchen and dismissing 24 clinical registrars who supported the strike.

## Indian teachers threaten action over salary arrears

Teachers employed by Sanskrit and Madarsa, two Muslim schools in Bihar, have threatened to go on a hunger strike over salary arrears. According to the Bihar Secondary Teachers Association, project schoolteachers and non-teaching staff have not been paid for 32 months and junior school staff not paid for the last three years.

## Qantas maintenance workers walk out against stand downs

More than 600 Qantas workers at the airline's Sydney maintenance centre struck for 24 hours on January 31, after the airline stood down 24 workers—15 in Sydney and nine in Melbourne—for refusing to work overtime. Maintenance crews at Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport did not take part in the strike.

The workers at both maintenance centres have banned overtime after they rejected a union-brokered pay deal on January 16. The deal would have introduced a wage pause and productivity-based wage increases into the maintenance areas for the first time.

A Qantas spokesman denied that the workers had been stood

down, claiming that they had been “stood aside”. Under the Australian government’s Workplace Relations Act, workers can be stood aside and not paid for a shift if they refuse to do a reasonable amount of overtime.

#### **Racecourse workers strike for heat policy**

About 60 workers at Caulfield racecourse in Melbourne walked off the job during the January 26 Australia Day race meeting. The workers have been in dispute with their employer, Racing Victoria, for nearly three years over its refusal to include a heat-stress policy in their work agreement.

The temperature on the day of the walkout had reached 35 degrees Celsius. A spokesman for the Australian Workers Union (AWU) said the management was “more concerned about the heat stress on horses” than it was about the affect on workers. A planned walkout the previous week was only averted when Victoria Racing agreed to provide its employees hats, sunscreen, cold water and shaded spots to rest.

The company has threatened workers with legal action over losses incurred by the interruption to the race day. The walkout delayed the final four races, forcing management to reschedule them about an hour later. The workers, however, had given the management notice of the action and the AWU placed advertisements in Melbourne newspapers to warn the public.

The Industrial Relations Commission has recommended a heat-stress policy based on temperatures reaching 38 degrees, but the workers have rejected the proposal. The ban on working at metropolitan racecourses in temperatures over 35 degrees will continue, and may be extended to cover rural race meetings.

#### **Workers picket Eagle Aircraft plant**

Striking workers at the Henderson-based Eagle Aircraft plant south of Perth in Western Australia began picketing their factory on January 30. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the picket is to prevent some 35 non-union workers at the plant from returning to work and undermining the strike.

The workers are opposing the decision by the company’s Malaysian owners to close down its Australian operations late next month and make 44 jobs redundant. The company stated it would provide some assistance to a limited number of staff to gain employment within the aviation industry and consider applications for transfers to its Malaysian plant.

#### **Australian sugar mills dispute settled**

This week, the Industrial Relations Court ruled that Queensland sugar mill workers should receive the same allowances as those in other industries. The decision ends a long running dispute between workers and mill owners.

Workers will now receive a 12.5 percent afternoon shift allowance and 15 percent for working at night. A union spokesman said the company’s attempt to block the shift allowances “gave a lot of frustration to our members because the argument was fairly simple. If it was good enough for afternoon and night shift in industry generally to be given a percentage increase, why weren’t they entitled to it?”

#### **Meatworkers stage march over closure**

Meatworkers and their families marched through the streets of Rockhampton on January 29 in protest against the closure of the Lake Creek Meatworks and the loss of hundreds of jobs.

The plant is operated by the Consolidated Meat Group, a company owned by media magnate Kerry Packer. It was not reopened following the Christmas shutdown after union and management discussions failed to reach agreement on a new workplace agreement. Workers suspect the company was planning to close down the Lake Creek operations for some time due to falling profits and rising competition in offshore markets.

#### **New Zealand nurses’ strike called off**

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has called off a planned strike in the Canterbury region. Over 2,000 nurses from 14 hospitals had planned to walk off the job on February 10 over pay demands. The strike was abandoned on January 30, after stop work meetings and a secret ballot. The NZNO claimed that nurses had voted “conclusively” to return to the bargaining table.

The vote, however, was the outcome of a concerted effort by the union to break down support for the strike. Last week nurses overwhelmingly supported a resolution to walk out and extend the length of the proposed strike from 7 days to 15. The union immediately overruled this decision and by last weekend had reduced the duration of the strike to four days.

The NZNO leadership took the unprecedented step of allowing a government-appointed mediator, in charge of negotiations between the board and the union, to address stop work meetings.

Nurses in Canterbury are among the lowest paid in the country. They have been campaigning for seven months for a 10 to 13 percent pay increase to bring them into line with nurses’ pay rates in other main centres. The board’s 6 percent offer will give fifth-year Canterbury nurses a \$38,603 base rate compared with \$41,350 in Auckland and \$38,877 in Wellington.

#### **New Zealand doctors to stop work**

Senior doctors at Whakatane Hospital plan to hold a stop work meeting next week over intolerable working conditions. The Association of Salaried Medical Staff said that the 20 senior doctors working at the rural east coast hospital are often rostered to work on call two or three times a week. The association said the doctors are taking the action because their concerns are not being listened to.



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