

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 November 2002

## **Government workers launch indefinite strike in southern Indian state**

Nearly 78,000 government employees and teachers from state-run schools across India's southern state of Tamil Nadu remain on strike after walking out on October 23. The strike, called by a coalition of government employee associations, is in support of a 15-point log of claims. Their demands include pay increases, improved bonuses, travel allowances and the revival of several previously axed benefits. Workers demonstrated in front of government office complexes and regional headquarters on October 28.

The state government claims it has no funds to meet the demands. It has declared that 22 of the affected government services fall under the Essential Services Maintenance Act, thus making the strike illegal. So far, 15 union leaders have been arrested and 150 others have been given dismissal notices. Chief Minister Jayaram Jayalalitha has declared there will be more arrests. The government has filed a "public interest" petition in the Madras High Court and is threatening to cut the salary of workers who remain on strike.

### **Indian telecom engineers on strike**

Nearly 40,000 government telecom engineers attached to BSNL and MTNL (state-owned companies for India's national and metropolitan telecommunications networks) began an indefinite strike across India on October 24. Their demands include an industrial allowance, pension entitlements and promotions by seniority. The strike has disrupted the telecom services across the country, affecting railway and air reservations and the transfer of electronic data through leased lines.

### **Indian plantation workers to march against closures**

Members of the Kerala State Estate and Plantation Workers Union in India plan to hold a march and demonstration to demand the government take action against plantation owners who fail to pay wage arrears and who close plantations.

A union spokesman said some 25,000 plantation workers lost their jobs following the recent closure of estates in Idukki and Wayanad. The result has been an increase in the rate of poverty-related deaths and a growing number of suicides among laid-off workers. The union is demanding the government take over and reopen the plantations and prosecute employers who refuse to pay workers their outstanding wages.

### **Sri Lankan workers protest against privatisation**

Thousands of workers affiliated to around 75 trade unions demonstrated in central Colombo on October 24 against the

government's privatisation policies and budget austerity measures. The protest was dominated by chants against privatisation, cutbacks to pension rights, the reduction of the government sector workforce, the sale of state-owned properties, the reduction in the health and education budgets and the rising cost of living.

The members of some unions such as Ceylon Bank Employees Union and the Independent Dockyard Union took sick leave to participate in the action. Those belonging to the Ceylon Mercantile Union went on strike and picketed in front of their work places, before joining the demonstration in the afternoon.

### **Sri Lankan health workers oppose pay cuts**

Health workers in the Ampara district of eastern Sri Lanka demonstrated in front of the Deputy Provincial Health Service Office on October 23. The protest was part of a campaign to force the government to pay salary arrears and travelling allowances owing for the past two years. About 60 public health inspectors and midwives from rural areas in Ampara, Uhana, Mahaoya and Dehiattakandiy are also involved in the campaign organised by the All Ceylon Health Services Union.

### **Indonesian workers end blockade**

Dismissed workers at PT Hyungsung in Tangerang have allowed the factory's South Korean owner to leave the plant after he agreed to pay the severance money to which they are entitled under the country's manpower regulations. The owner has also handed his passport to the workers' union as a guarantee he will not flee the country.

About 500 workers imposed a blockade on the factory on October 14 after being abruptly informed that the plant was closed and the workforce sacked. The owner and his family were prevented from leaving the premises.

The company, which produced Targus computer bags, had offered to pay only one month's severance pay, or about 590,000 rupiah (\$US65). A Ministry of Manpower decree states that retrenched workers are entitled to severance pay based on the length of service. Employees with more than one year but less than two years service are entitled to twice their monthly salary. The PT Hyungsung workers, mostly female, joined the company when it first opened in July 2000.

### **Thai workers campaign for unpaid wages**

Over 800 former employees of the Bed & Bath Company in Thailand's Samutprakarn province are continuing a protest to force the company to pay wage arrears.

The workforce was locked out on October 7 over the issue. The company was forced to reopen after workers formally complained

to the district office of welfare and labour protection. But workers were locked out again by October 10 and security guards stopped anyone from entering the plant.

After negotiations with Ministry of Labour officials, the company agreed to allow workers to return on October 27. However, when they turned up for work they found the factory closed and a notice on the gate informing them to remain outside until a company lawyer arrived. The lawyer failed to turn up and the management had switched off their mobile phones.

Workers believe the closure had been planned for some time. They claim to have seen bank representatives inside the plant selecting and making claims on machinery and other equipment. The accounts and administration departments had moved out their equipment.

The workers have held several demonstrations outside the Ministry of Labour demanding that it take action against the company to secure the unpaid wages. The Bed & Bath Company produced goods for Nike, Reebok, Adidas, Harley Davison as well as many universities and sporting teams in the USA.

#### **Australian mine workers stop work**

Mine workers at the Bulga coal mine near the town of Singleton in New South Wales walked off the job for 24 hours on October 30 after being informed by management that it had submitted plans to the Industrial Relations Commission to shed more than 80 jobs.

A spokesperson for the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) made clear that the union will not challenge the job losses, demanding only that they be carried out on the basis of seniority, not the merit system proposed by management.

#### **Australian metal workers rally for entitlements**

Workers employed by the bankrupt company, National Forge, rallied outside a creditors' meeting at the Melbourne Town Hall on October 28. A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union told the rally of 360 workers from the company's two Melbourne plants that they may never receive the \$15 million in entitlements owing to them.

National Forge, which manufactured golf clubs, was put in the hands of receivers after its major US client GE Power Systems cancelled 85 percent of its 2002-2003 orders, worth some \$6.7 million. According to the receiver, after proceeds from the sale of the plant, equipment and land are used to pay off creditors, only about \$4 million will remain to meet workers' entitlements.

#### **Postal workers challenge unfair rule**

Sydney postal workers have forced Australia Post to reinstate parcel sorter Richard O'Brien, who was forced to take sick leave under the company's fitness policy because he was overweight. A number of workers backed O'Brien and challenged the decision in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

The AIRC ruled that 53-year-old O'Brien should be allowed to resume work under a deal worked out between Australia Post and the union which includes changes to the present fitness policy. He can return to his duties if a medical practitioner finds he is fit for work.

Under the new policy, Australia Post will be obliged to retain workers with medical conditions in their jobs, if necessary by changing their workplace or duties. If not, they will have to re-

trained or re-deployed. The union says that 259 postal workers nationally have been affected by the previous policy introduced in 1999.

#### **Private nurses strike for improvements**

Nurses working at the Saint Andrews private hospital in Toowoomba, Queensland, went on strike for one hour on October 30 and have imposed ongoing bans on performing office duties. The nurses are demanding improvements in pay and working conditions in line with staff in public hospitals. They say they are being paid nine percent less than their public hospital counterparts.

#### **Council workers demand extra holidays**

All local government services workers at Maribyrnong council in Melbourne's western suburbs walked off the job at lunchtime on October 30 in an indefinite strike. They are demanding extra public holidays, additional to their award. The workers are employed in garbage collection, parks and gardens, roads, building and maintenance services.

Traditionally the council has paid some of its staff for three extra public holidays during the year—Show Day, Easter Tuesday and a picnic day. It is now attempting to abolish the paid holidays in exchange for a payment. The workers have rejected the offer.

#### **New Zealand radiographers strike over pay**

Radiographers in Auckland's four main hospitals began a four-day strike on October 29. The workers walked off the job in the Auckland, National Women's, Starship and Green Lane hospitals after protracted talks with the Auckland District Health Board failed to settle pay demands.

A spokesman for the radiographers warned the four-day strike would not be cut short and would be followed by more industrial action if the pay issue was not resolved quickly. The strike will disrupt thousands of surgical cases and medical procedures.

#### **Hotel strike for wage increase**

Workers at the luxurious Carlton Hotel in Auckland went on strike for 24 hours on October 29 in support of a 3 percent pay increase. The 60 strikers set up a picket outside the hotel's main entrance. Even though the workers did not receive a pay increase last year, the management is offering only a 1.8 percent increase.

#### **Newspaper workers end strike over pay**

Thirteen editorial production staff at the New Zealand newspaper *Whakatan Beacon* returned to work on October 29 after being on strike for a week in support of a \$NZ2 an hour pay increase.

An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman said the company had agreed to the pay increase as part of a two-year deal that bring wages and conditions at the eastern Bay of Plenty community newspaper into line with those at comparable publications.



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