

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 September 2003

Miners strike in Indonesia

Miners at PT Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC) in East Kalimantan, Indonesia walked off the job again on September 17, just three hours after returning to work. They had been on strike since August 29. The 2,700 miners were demanding a 15 percent bonus payment from the sale of the company by owners Rio Tinto Indonesia and BP PLC to PT Bumi Resources. The sale is worth \$US500 million, including retiring \$187 million worth of debt.

Workers went out again after learning they would be penalised for the first action, despite assurances by management to the contrary. The return-to-work settlement also included an offer of a "goodwill bonus" totaling \$6 million. On Wednesday, however, workers received a management letter stating that the company would impose sanctions on anyone who had failed to return to work as of September 12 and stating that the "goodwill payment" was subject to income tax.

Minister of Manpower and Transmigration Jacob Nuwa Wea declared the latest strike illegal and said the government would back the company if it sacked the strikers. The government claims to have lost 17 billion rupiah (\$2 million) in royalties during the strike.

Mass protests of public sector workers planned in Taiwan

An estimated 5,000 to 10,000 workers from several state-owned enterprises in Taiwan will rally outside parliament on September 23 to protest the government's privatisation program. The workers, employed by Telecom, Taiwan Power, Taiwan Sugar Corp and Taiwan Tobacco and Liquor Company, fear that privatisation will cost jobs and lead to lower wages and a loss of benefits.

Last week, 8,000 rail workers protested in Taipei against the privatisation of the country's rail system and threatened a seven-day strike in January, in the midst of the busy Chinese New Year period. The government planned to privatise a total of 47 enterprises by 2001 but the process has been delayed.

City workers protest in the Philippines

Local government workers in the Philippines city of Angeles began a campaign of protests this week to force City Hall to honor its obligations under a Collective Negotiating Agreement (CNA).

The employees, members of the Association of Government Employees for a New and Dynamic Angeles City (AGENDA), plan pickets and rallies. They are demanding the payment of bonuses owed to them since December last year, including a rice allowance, birthday package bonus, dental assistance and leave entitlements. They are also demanding that casual employees who

have served for an aggregate period of five years are given permanency.

Workers to fight for outstanding pay in Thailand

Over 130 Burmese migrant workers are threatening legal action against the owner of the J P Knitting Factory in Mae Sot, Thailand, over the company's refusing to pay two months wages owing to them. The factory closed on August 15 and the owner, Somchai Thongdi, promised to pay the outstanding wages by September 11. He failed to honour the commitment. Five Thai workers are also owed outstanding pay.

A similar case involving Burmese workers employed at the now closed Nat Knitting Factory in Mae Sot is still before the labour court.

Sri Lankan health workers launched indefinite strike

Some 80,000 workers across Sri Lanka, from minor staff to assistant medical practitioners, launched an indefinite strike on September 17 to demand a pay increase. Health workers from the indigenous (Ayurvedic) sector also joined the strike.

The workers, who are demanding a similar pay hike to the 43 percent recently won by medical officers, staged a sick note campaign on August 26 and threatened strike action if their demand was not met.

The United National Front government has responded to the strike sending the military into the hospitals to take over duties with 300 military personnel deployed in Colombo National Hospital. The government has also cancelled all leave in the health sector and announced that 700 casual employees have been recruited to replace the striking workers.

On September 16, police disrupted a meeting organised by a 53-union strong federation just prior to the strike and other provocations have been organised by the government under the banner of the "sick peoples campaign".

Police attack Sri Lankan textile workers

Around 3,000 workers who occupied the Thulhiriya Kabul Lanka factory (approximately 60 kilometres from Colombo) on September 9 are continuing to demonstrate outside the plant. The workers seized the factory in response to a management notice that the payment of salaries for August would be delayed due to a shortage of funds. Six Korean managers and 17 local managers at the factory were stopped from leaving during the occupation.

On September 11, armed police from four police stations in the area brutally attacked the occupying workers even as negotiations between union leaders and the labor minister were in progress. Police used rubber bullets, tear gas and batons. More than 40

workers were injured and five hospitalised. Female employees, including a pregnant woman, were among those attacked and some sustained fractured limbs after being hit with rubber bullets.

The police also attacked people in nearby houses. During the police raid, 10 workers were arrested and charged with damaging the company's property. They were later released on bail.

Teachers across three Australian states strike over wages

In an unprecedented action, over 100,000 schoolteachers across three Australian states went on strike on September 17 demanding improved wages and working conditions.

In New South Wales, thousands of teachers from TAFE colleges, state and primary schools stopped work for 24 hours and 10,000 rallied outside Parliament House. NSW teachers are demanding a 25 percent pay rise over the next two years, but the State Labor government has dismissed the claim and is only offering six percent.

In the other two states, Victoria and Western Australia, thousands of teachers stopped work for half a day demanding a 30 percent pay increase over three years. About 9,000 striking teachers attended a mass meeting in Melbourne and endorsed a resolution calling for an escalation of industrial action if the State Labor government did not improve its pay offer before December. The government is offering a maximum of 9 percent over three years.

The Australian Education Union warned this week that holding down wage rises to just 3 percent would affect recruitment to the profession and cause a shortfall of 25,000 teachers before 2010.

Aged-care nurses demand staff increase

Forty nurses at Blue Care's Gracemere Gardens home for the aged, west of Rockhampton in Central Queensland, stopped work for two hours on September 11 to discuss inadequate staffing levels. The nurses are also angry that management wants to reduce rostered hours.

A spokeswoman for the Queensland Nurses Union said that nurses do not have enough time to care properly for the home's 90 residents, including assisting them to take showers. The nurses are considering taking strike action if staff shortages are not addressed.

Water corporation workers strike over sacking

About 300 workers at the Hunter Water Corporation in the Hunter Valley, New South Wales, walked off the job on September 18 over the dismissal of a colleague as part of restructuring. The worker was a supervisor and had been employed at the corporation for more than 25 years.

A spokesman for the Australian Services Union said the way the man had been dismissed was "symptomatic of an endemic problem within the board and with the approach the board takes to industrial relations".

He claimed the management undertook reorganisation and restructuring without any consultation with the workforce. After discussing the issue at a mass meeting the workers decided to remain on strike until September 22.

New Zealand health workers' strikes called off

The New Zealand Public Service Association (PSA) has called off strike action by health workers employed by the Southland District Health Board (DHB), after accepting the board's latest

pay offer.

About 100 staff at Invercargill and Queenstown hospitals planned to start two weeks of industrial action from September 22, but the board came up with a new pay offer after last-ditch mediation talks this week. The latest offer of 3 percent is about double the amount initially offered by the board.

A PSA spokesman admitted the settlement was not an outright victory and that the union had "conceded a hell of a lot". He said claims for improved conditions were abandoned and the focus was almost solely on a pay increase. Staff covered under the contract includes occupational therapists, technicians, physiotherapists, psychologists and pharmacists.

The NZ Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) also cancelled strike action planned for September 19 by South Island nurses after a settlement was reached in mediation talks this week. About 3,000 nurses, midwives and health assistants were to strike in support of their claim for pay parity with their North Island counterparts. The NZNO will recommend members endorse the proposed settlement in forthcoming ratification meetings. Details of the agreement have not been released.

Fiji cannery workers continue their fight against PAFCO

A strike by 350 workers at state-owned Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO), on the island of Levuka, has entered its seventh week. The strike began on August 4. Despite the refusal of the Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union to back their struggle, the workers have vowed to continue their fight for improved wages and working conditions. PAFCO management is refusing to negotiate on employees' demands claiming that the strike is illegal.

The workers, mainly indigenous women, are amongst the lowest paid in Fiji. Over the past eight years there have been a string of arbitration rulings ordering the company to improve pay and working conditions but both the government and the employer have appealed these decisions.

PAFCO chief executive officer Mitieli Baleivanualala justified paying wages as low as \$US42 dollars per month, claiming that the workers "don't really need to spend that much because they live in villages."

Two non-government organisations, the Pacific Network on Globalization (PANG) and the Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy, this week called for an international consumer boycott of PAFCO products.



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