

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 October 2003

Workers clash with armed police at India Jute Mill

Tensions among workers at the India Jute Mill at Serampore in Hooghly, West Bengal exploded on October 6 after management posted a provocative notice announcing that wages would be linked to productivity. The mill had just reopened after being closed for three months. Employees saw the latest move by management as an attempt to drive down the already poor wages and impose speed-up.

Workers responded to the provocation by storming the mill office and management staff quarters. Some time later a large contingent of police armed with lathi (long bamboo poles) arrived at the mill. Angered by the show of force, workers hurled stones, iron rods and machine parts. The police launched a vicious lathi-charge on the crowd and eventually arrested 125 workers. The authorities have warned of further arrests.

Jute mill owners in West Bengal have implemented a series of attacks on workers' conditions. In February this year they froze an employees' dearness allowance, failed to make gratuity payments and stopped paying several bonuses. At the same time, workers at the state-owned National Jute Manufacturers Corporation have not been regularly paid their wages. This is despite the industry registering 62 percent export growth in 2002-2003.

This week 15 unions representing jute workers announced they intend to serve a strike notice on November 15 as part of a campaign for improved wages and working conditions.

Sri Lankan tax and custom officers protest against privatisation

Taxation officers attached to the Inland Revenue Department and custom and excise employees picketed the Inland Revenue Department head office in Colombo during lunchtime on October 7. The 600 employees are demanding an end to the privatisation of government institutions, withdrawal of a proposed new Inland Revenue Act and a pay rise in line with cost-of-living increases. A group of workers marched to the Ministry of Finance to hand over a letter outlining the demands.

Under the proposed Inland Revenue Act inland revenue and customs and excise departments will be integrated into a new State Revenue Authority. Workers believe the new body will benefit wealthy and corporate tax evaders.

After the picket striking officers marched to Fort railway station to join other government workers also protesting against privatisation and demanding the withdrawal of repressive labour laws.

Pakistani sanitary workers demand payment of back wages

Sanitary workers at the Warah Taluka Municipal Council in Pakistan struck on October 4 demanding the payment of their last three months' salaries. The strikers held a march and observed a token hunger strike. A council official visited the workers and urged them to call off the protest. They rejected the call, declaring that they would continue the strike until outstanding salaries were paid.

Construction union threatens strike in Bangladesh

On October 8, the construction industry union in Bangladesh (INSUB) threatened a national strike to push the government to accept a 10-point log of claims by October 22. The claims include a minimum wage for

skilled and unskilled construction workers, compensation and free medical treatment for injured workers, a guaranteed minimum of eight hours work daily, introduction of an old-age allowance and the provision of housing.

A union spokesman told media representatives at the Dhaka Reporters Unity office that 240 INSUB branches covering thousands of union members would participate in the strike.

Indonesian workers threaten to storm factory

On October 9, the labour union covering 9,643 workers who were suspended in July this year from state-owned aircraft maker PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) in Bandung have threatened to storm the plant's compound if they are not allowed to return to work within a week. About 2,000 workers rallied at the plant on the previous day demanding entry.

The threat followed a Bandung State Administrative Court ruling on October 7 ordering PTDI to revoke the suspensions on the grounds that they violated the 2002 Manpower Law. The law states that companies must consult with workers and the local Manpower and Transmigration Office at least seven days before taking any action on sackings or suspensions.

The workers were due to return to work on October 8 but were blocked from entering the plant by police and air force personnel. Management said it would appeal the court's decision and announced that it was sacking 3,900 workers, claiming they had failed to register for a selection test to rejoin the company.

Workers to strike against mass sackings in the Philippines

Fifty thousand members of the Parido ng Manggagawa (PM) and the Bukluran ng Manggagawang (BMP), two peak union bodies in the Philippines, will strike on October 13. The one-day stoppage is to protest against a number of garment industry closures, including the shutdown on September 28 of Novelty Philippines, one of the country's largest producers of baby clothes. The closure resulted in the sacking of 2,365 workers.

There are approximately 1,200 garment and textile companies in the Philippines employing about 400,000 workers. Over 6,000 workers have been laid off from the industry over recent months while thousands more have been put on reduced hours.

While the October 13 protest will involve employees from a range of industries, over one third will come from garment and textile firms in Metro Manila, Central Luzan and Southern Tagalog. They will gather outside company premises on the morning of the protest and then proceed to a mass rally near the palace of the Philippines president.

Australian building workers rally against new labour laws

Thousands of building workers across the country stopped work on October 6 to protest against the introduction of new legislation by the Howard government.

The new law limits all building industry strikes to 14 days, followed by a compulsory 21-day cooling off period. It introduces secret ballots before strikes and fines of \$110,000 for unions and \$22,000 for individuals involved in so-called illegal strikes. It places limitations on collective bargaining and on union officials' right of entry to building sites and

establishes a new building and construction commission with extensive powers to police the industry. The legislation is based on recommendations from the recently completed \$60 million Royal Commission into the Building Industry, established by the Federal government in 2001.

Over 10,000 construction workers rallied in Melbourne, 7,000 in Sydney, 1,500 in Brisbane and 2,000 in Perth. Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union leaders told the rallies that the legislation could be defeated by appealing to the Democrats, Greens and independents to block its passage through the upper house.

Health workers and patients rally against cuts in Western Australia

Hundreds of health workers and their supporters protested outside Parliament House in Perth, Western Australia's capital, against proposed budget cuts that would affect the funding for six vital mental health programs.

The government has threatened to cut up to \$11.7 million from non-government health organisations that service thousands of people with mental health problems. The Mental Health Consumer Advocacy Program has already lost its \$105,000 annual funding, leaving 400 people with mental illnesses with no representation.

Western Australia's Mental Health Association spokeswoman Sheryl Carmody said the cuts to community mental health services "will result in more pressure on acute care hospitals and emergency departments". Many ill people will suffer increased stress and further mental problems due to the program closures.

Public servants and teachers push for wage increases

Western Australian public servants threatened this week to place bans on revenue collection in protest at the State Labor government's refusal to grant an 18.9 percent pay increase over three years. The union reduced its original claim of 30 percent but to date the government has offered only 9 percent over three years, despite recently giving the police pay increases of up to 17.9 percent.

This week, the Australian Education Union (AEU) signaled it was backing away from its demand for 30 percent pay increase over three years. On October 8, AEU deputy president Mike Keely said that the original claim "was there to be negotiated". He indicated that if the government made concessions on reduced class sizes and increased preparation time of primary teachers, the union would "look more favourably on the package".

Education and Training Minister Alan Carpenter declared that, "teachers had already seen the government's best offer". The offer remains a 9 percent pay increase over 2.5 years.

In a separate dispute, education assistants, cleaners, and gardeners in WA's public schools are threatening an industrial campaign to win a 15 percent pay increase over 2.5 years and improvements in working conditions.

The 6,000 workers in 770 schools across the state have given the WA Education Department an October 14 deadline to meet the demands and have scheduled stop-work meetings to begin on October 15. The meetings will consider forms of industrial action.

Deal ends managers' strike

A six-week strike by managers and supervisors at Ferro Corporation, a glaze and powder coating manufacturer in Melbourne, ended this week. The 35 staff went on strike in early September in opposition to new employment agreements that reduced redundancy entitlements worth \$3.4 million. The US-based company threatened to sack anyone who refused to sign an agreement.

The Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia (APESMA) agreed to end the strike after a deal that will see redundancy packages shrink, but not by the amount originally demanded by Ferro. Under the agreement, managerial staff will receive on average \$58,000 each in redundancy entitlements, compared an average of

\$80,000 under the previous agreement.

Wool workers sacked after five-month lockout

Geelong Wool Combing officially closed last week and sacked the 150 workers it had locked out for more than five months. The workers were locked out for refusing to accept a 25 percent wage cut and the introduction of a seven-day working roster. They have been picketing the plant continuously since the lockout.

This week, the Textile, Footwear and Clothing Union went to the Industrial Relations Commission to seek an order directing the company to pay a correct termination package. A union spokesman claimed that the company was "trying to skimp" on the money owed to the workers by ignoring the entitlements that had accrued since they were locked out. As a result of the company's actions, some workers have lost their homes. The union has no plans to oppose the plant closure or to defend jobs.

University staff strike against government attacks

Academics and staff at the University of Sydney went on strike for 24 hours on October 7, shutting down services in most faculties. The workers are protesting threats by the Howard government to withhold a \$404 million funding package to universities nationally unless they agree to include new industrial relations changes in enterprise agreements presently being negotiated.

The proposed changes include forcing university management to offer staff individual contracts, ending all limits on hiring casual and limited-term contract staff, and the introduction of performance pay systems.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) branch at the University of Sydney called the strike after the administration backed away from signing a proposed work agreement after the government's announcement on funding. It is the first time in four years that Sydney university staff have gone on strike. A national walkout of university general and academic staff to oppose the government's proposals is planned for October 16.

State health workers oppose privatisation

Over 20,000 health workers from public hospitals in New South Wales (NSW) held statewide stop-work protest meetings on October 7. The workers were opposing plans by the NSW Health Department to privatise a number of the non-clinical services in the Hunter Valley.

According to the Health Services Union, recommendations in a recently released Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal report open the door for the amalgamation and contracting out of some of the services in the area. A union spokesman said that the stop-work meetings were called to warn the state Labor government that it should not "progress with any kind of outsourcing".

Waterside workers demand job security

Waterside workers employed at P&O Ports at White Bay in Sydney voted this week to sit-in at the facility when the company closes it at the end of the year and moves to shared facilities with Patrick Stevedores at the congested Darling Harbour. P&O decided to close White Bay after the NSW Labor government announced last weekend that it intends to end all container shipping in Sydney Harbour and relocate it to Newcastle and Port Kembla by 2012.

The Maritime Union of Australia is demanding that P&O Ports guarantee the employment and conditions of the 120 workers at White Bay before any move. Half of the workers are casuals.

New Zealand nurses plan strike

Nurses at Oamaru Hospital plan to strike on October 20 in the first of a series of stoppages for a pay claim. The NZ Nurses' Association is seeking a 7.5 percent wage increase over two years to bring the Oamaru nurses into line with a multiple employer collective agreement in other district health board hospitals (DHBs) throughout the South Island. The Waitaki Health Services, which administers the hospital, is pressing the Otago DHB to fund the increase.

Airline workers in Caledonia end strike

A strike by over 100 workers at AirCalin, which began on September 27 and caused major disruptions to flights in and out of Noumea's La Tontouta international airport, ended this week. The airline made a number of concessions, including an agreement to provide workers with recuperation leave, improved medical insurance coverage for overseas trips and discount tickets in business class. The strike was called by the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers and the commercial and navigation staff union which represents hostesses, stewards and commercial staff.



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