

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 October 2003

Indian tea estate workers gunned down

The Assam Tea Protection Security Force (ATPSF), a private task force established in the Assam tea gardens, opened fire on a demonstration of 1,000 tea estate workers on the evening of September 29, killing five men and injuring nine others. A day after the shootings management locked out the estate workers

The peaceful demonstration took place at Khobong tea estate in upper Assam's Tinsukia district, about 520 kilometres east of the state's main city of Guwahati. Workers were demanding that the traditional bonus for the forthcoming Durga pooja Hindu festival be increased from 15 to 20 percent of the basic wage.

Assam tea estate workers organised a 12-hour strike on October 1, the day of the workers' funerals, to protest the killings. In an attempt to calm the situation, administration transferred all ATPSF assigned to the estate out of the area.

Assam estates produce more than half of India's tea. The industry is currently facing a slump with tea selling below the prices of three years ago.

Sri Lankan railway workers demand job security

More than 10,000 Sri Lankan railway workers, including engine drivers, controllers, guards and stationmasters, launched a two-day strike from midnight September 30 for job security and union rights. The workers also want a 75 percent pay increase and benefits in line with those given to public servants, including a pension and compensation scheme.

The strike brought trains to a virtual standstill. All rail station offices and ticket counters were closed. Representatives of the Joint Railway Federation of 60 trade unions that organised the action have been in negotiations with Transport Minister Tilak Marapana for more a month but the talks have failed to resolve the dispute.

A union spokesman said the strike was mainly in support of demands for job security. It follows growing uncertainty over employment after the establishment of a new Railway Authority. There are also concerns that the move could lead to privatisation. The government called in retired employees to run the trains and also deployed armed forces in an attempt to counter the strike. One train operating during the industrial action derailed near central Colombo.

Power workers protest privatisation in Pakistan

Power workers throughout Pakistan held a national protest on October 1 against the proposed privatisation of the Jamshoro powerhouse and

Faisalabad Electric Supply Company (FESCO). Workers believe any sell-off will lead to job losses and higher electricity costs. Employees condemned the government at meetings throughout Pakistan and demanded that the plans be dropped.

Pakistan Wapda Hydro-Electric Central Labour Union members rallied outside the Lahore Press Club where speakers demanded the government construct new dams and power stations to ensure the supply of low cost electricity. They also called for the restoration of an efficiency allowance and the transfer of surplus employees from the Faisalabad Engineering Academy and Tarbela Powerhouse to positions near their homes.

Pakistani sugar mill workers hold one-day strike

Workers at the Army Welfare Sugar Mill (AWSM) in Badin, in Pakistan's Sindh district, launched a strike on September 24 for union recognition, withdrawal of defamation lawsuits by management against unionists, payment of a bonus for the previous year and the allocation of 25 million rupees (approximately \$US500,000) for the provision of basic facilities at the mill. Workers and their supporters rallied outside the mill's main gate and staged marches and rallies through the streets of Badin.

Texmaco workers demonstrate in three Indonesian cities

Workers from the bankrupt PT Texmaco Group in Indonesia are continuing to protest against layoffs and suspensions. On October 1 thousands of Texmaco workers held demonstrations in three cities demanding the reinstatement of 1,540 workers laid off between January and September this year and of 2,550 other workers who were suspended.

About 1,000 Texmaco workers demonstrated outside the Indonesian Bank Restructuring Agency (IBRA) building in Jakarta, demanding it intervene to overcome the company's financial difficulties. Another 2,000 from Texmaco subsidiary PT Wastra Indah Batu protested outside government buildings in Malang, while more than 3,000 rallied in the Central Java capital of Semarang.

Texmaco, which employs 8,000 people in five subsidiaries, owes \$US3.4 billion to IBRA and \$US1 billion to foreign bondholders. The company's main textile unit, PT Polysindo Eka Perkasa, owes another \$700 million. The company claims it needs at least \$25 million in fresh working capital to survive but the central government and IBRA have refused to inject any new funds.

Indonesian manufacturing workers protest over forced leave

Up to 4,000 workers at PT Maspion in the Sidoarjo, East Java, went on

strike on September 29 and rallied in the compound outside the plant. The company, which employs 6,000 people, manufactures household products.

The workers are demanding the right to refuse three months leave being offered by the company to employees with more than six years service. They are demanding a cash payment instead. Management made the offer because the firm is suffering a shortage of orders.

According to workers, they are entitled to compensation under the 2003-2005 "Mutual Working Agreement", which was signed by the employer and the All-Indonesia Workers Union (SPSI) and governs working conditions at the plant. Management renege on the agreement by making the leave compulsory and ruling out any compensation payment.

Employees ended their protest after more than 200 police arrived on the scene but continued strike action over the next day.

Taiwanese teachers protest against heavy workload

On September 28, thousands of Taiwan teachers were joined by workers from Chunghwa Telecom and other industries in a demonstration against the increases in class sizes and the burgeoning workload in schools. The 10,000-strong protest was organised by the National Teachers Association (NTA). Teachers called on parents not to send their children to schools with overcrowded classrooms.

Australian university workers to strike

University academic and general staff across Australia voted last week for a 24-hour nationwide strike on October 16. The action will affect 38 universities.

The dispute is over the Federal government's planned changes to the higher education industrial relations system, which effectively removes restrictions on the cutting of salaries and conditions of academics and university staff. The government scheme would see workers pressured into signing individual contracts, abolish all limits on the hire of casual and limited-term contract staff, and introduce performance pay systems. Other provisions will allow the Industrial Relations Commission to outlaw industrial action by university staff if it is deemed to seriously disadvantage third parties.

The government has threatened to withhold a \$404 million funding package unless universities agree to implement the new system.

Staff attending the National Tertiary Education Union conference in Melbourne voted in favor of the strike and a spokesperson warned of "further disruptions" unless the government abandoned its agenda. A spokesperson for the Queensland University of Technology Student Guild said students would support the strike because they recognise how "detrimental" the government proposals are.

Workers oppose redundancy package

Ballantyne Confectionery in South Melbourne rallied outside the company's head office on October 2 to protest against redundancy arrangements. The company recently announced it intended to close its Melbourne plant by December this year, at the cost of 60 jobs.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) food division claims it has found a "discriminatory" clause in the Ballantyne Confectionery workplace agreement that excludes any workers of retirement age, or those receiving compensation payments for injury, from receiving redundancy. The union plans to take the case to the Equal

Opportunities Commission.

An AMWU spokesperson said: "Effectively the workers who have given the most to this company, many of whom have been working here for 10 or 15 years, will be walking away with nothing." The AMWU has not explained why the union signed an agreement containing the discriminatory clauses in the first place.

Public sector workers to impose work bans

Members of the Community and Public Sector Union and the Civil Service Association employed in Western Australia state government departments will begin implementing work bans next week. The unions want a 30 percent pay rise over three years and an extra 12 percent for lower-paid public servants. The state Labor government has offered only 9 percent.

Industrial action could include bans on issuing licenses for vehicles, boats, driving, fishing and diving. Workers may also refuse to conduct land title searches, collect stamp duty or process mining royalties. A union spokesman said the bans would widen "until the government made an acceptable offer". He warned that union members could ban issuing licenses for the transport of dangerous goods. "That could have a big impact. It covers fuel and some mining activities, all flammable liquids," he said.

New Zealand ferry services hit by strike

Ferries transporting cars, passengers and freight between New Zealand's North and South Islands were hit by a five-hour wildcat strike on September 30. Cooks and stewards walked off the job after the owners Tranz Rail refused to provide extra staff to cope with increased passenger traffic. The increases were due to school holidays and the cancellation of some ferries because of rough seas.

Workers on the ferry *Arahura* refused to set sail when confronted with 800 passengers, many of whom were stranded after the early morning cancellation of the *Lynx* catamaran crossings. Tranz Rail successfully sought an urgent court ruling to force workers back on duty, enabling the *Arahura* to sail later in the day. Another ferry, the *Aratere*, with about 300 passengers, was forced to wait in Wellington harbour for about two hours while the court case was heard. Later sailings of both vessels were also cancelled.

According to a Maritime Union spokesman, the company should provide an extra steward once passenger numbers pass 500 but it has a history of leaving the ships short-handed. The problem was worsened by the management policy of putting more staff to work at food and beverage counters, rather than assign them to deck duty. The union went into mediated talks with Tranz Rail over the following two days while the court order preventing further industrial action remained in force.

New Zealand special needs educators impose bans

More than 600 New Zealand special education therapists, teachers and advisors have imposed a series of work bans in support of a five percent pay increase. The workers are refusing to take on new students or to

process information on student needs. They have also banned overtime and using their own cars for work-related tasks.

A spokesperson for the workers said they were reluctant to take industrial action because of the impact on pupils with learning or other disabilities. The Ministry of Education's 1.4 percent pay offer, however, left workers with "little choice". The group includes psychologists, speech language and occupational therapists, physiotherapists, early intervention teachers and advisors who work with deaf and Maori students.

New Caledonia airline workers strike for improved conditions

A strike by over 100 workers employed by New Caledonia's international carrier, AirCalin, is causing major disruptions to flights in and out of Noumea's La Tontouta international airport. The strike was called on September 27 after negotiations for better conditions relating to benefits, allowances and holidays broke down. An earlier offer by management to deal with a set of "urgent issues" raised by employees within the next three months was rejected by the unions.

Of its 120 staff, AirCalin is left with just 10 hostesses and stewards to maintain operations. Management is looking at using chartered aircraft and crews from regional carriers, such as Air New Zealand, to reduce the impact of the strike.

PNG union calls off industrial action

On October 1, the Papua New Guinea Communication Workers Union (CWU) called an end to a series of nationwide half-day work stoppages it began on September 29. The CWU, which covers Telekom PNG, Pacific Mobile Communications (B-Mobile) and PostPNG staff, called the industrial action to put pressure on the Independent Public Business Corporation (IPBC), the PNG government's privatisation body. The union is calling on the body to guarantee employees will not be made redundant when Telekom PNG is privatised.

Telekom workers fear they will share the same fate as PNG Banking Corporation staff. After the bank was privatised, it merged with Bank South Pacific and most workers were laid off. The CWU called off industrial action after IPBC negotiators assured them that the Telekom sale was different and would create jobs and provide employment security.

PNG dockers return to work

Members of the Port Moresby-based PNG Maritime Workers Industrial Union resumed work on September 30 after being on strike for 24 hours. They were protesting delays by the Arbitration Tribunal in handing down a decision on their claim for a 20 percent pay increase and a review of part-paid maternity leave. Workers walked-out in March over the same issue.

The Labour Department and Arbitration Tribunal have consistently failed to facilitate a hearing to consider the list of demands, which were first tabled by the workers during a six-day nationwide strike in June last year. Threats by the union during October and November 2002 to call an indefinite strike were called off after the then Governor-General Sir Silas Atopare ordered arbitration to deal with issue. Tribunal chairman Rex

Avosa urged employees to return to work this week with promises that a decision would handed down by October 3.

Fiji air traffic controllers sacked after jobs out-sourced

All 19 workers at Airports Fiji Air Traffic Management (AFL/ATM) were sacked on September 30 when the state-owned AFL contracted out all air traffic control services to the private company, Strategic Air Services Limited (SASL). The dismissed workers were paid one-month's salary and told by AFL chief executive officer Ratu Sakuisa Tuisolia to report to work at SASL for "gainful employment".

Management has taken official identity cards from the sacked staff and threatened that if they are found on the premises they will be arrested. Although the Transport Workers Union says it is opposed to the sackings, its only response to date has been to write to ATM's CEO urging him not to proceed with the outsourcing.



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