

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 March 2004

## Thousands demonstrate in Thailand against privatisation

On March 10, tens of thousands of state government workers and private sector unionists demonstrated in front of Government House in Thailand in opposition to the privatisation plans of the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. The crowd chanted “Privatisation—no” and “Will we sell?—no”.

The protest was part of a campaign to force the Thaksin cabinet to drop its plans to sell a number of highly profitable state enterprises, including water, ports and public transport. Last year, the government succeeded in privatising parts of the country’s airlines, telecommunication carrier, postal services, airports and petroleum industry.

Thaksin is pushing ahead with the privatisation agenda despite having pledged three years ago, when campaigning to become prime minister, that he would not sell state enterprises. The promise was a ploy to win public sector workers’ support. Last week, the government was forced to shelve the part-privatisation of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) in the face of widespread opposition.

## Six textile workers detained in China

International labour organisations are calling for the release of six textile workers detained by the Chinese authorities on February 8.

The six were arrested during a strike at the Tieshu Textile Factory in the city of Suizhou, when armed police violently attacked a protest outside of the plant. The strikers were demanding the payment of over 200 million yuan (\$US24 million) in unpaid wages, redundancy pay, share options and other entitlements owed to them after the factory went bankrupt.

Three other Tieshu workers—Wei Yiming, Shen Bing and Chen Xiuhua—are currently undergoing a 21-month “re-education through labour” program as punishment for protest activities.

## Striking Filipino seafarers threatened with the sack

On March 11, striking Filipino seafarers employed by one of the Philippines’ largest shipping lines, Sulpicio Lines, rejected a return-to-work order issued by the Department of Labor and Employment (Dole). A union official claimed that at least 21 Sulpicio vessels had been prevented from leaving port since the strike began on March 9.

A company spokesman said that if the seamen failed to end the strike they would be sacked and replaced. Management also threatened to call on Dole to deploy police to force the seamen back to work. The strike was called after Sulpicio failed to implement the conditions of a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) signed with the workers to end a strike last year.

## Sri Lankan public servants demand pay increases

Thousands of public sector workers in Sri Lanka picketed in front of government buildings in Central Colombo and several other cities on

March 11. They are demanding the abolition of salary anomalies in the public sector and salary increases in line with those recently given to the health sector workers.

Picketing took place in centres such as Kandy, Galle, Anuradhapura, Matara, Kurunegala, Kalutara, Peradeniya, Badulla and Gampaha. The workers are threatening strikes and other industrial action that may disrupt the forthcoming national elections on April 2.

In a separate dispute, administrative service officers demonstrated across the country on March 10, as part of a campaign to demand the immediate implementation of a new salary structure. The current caretaker government claims it cannot make the decision to spend the 210 million rupees required to fund the salary increase. President Chandrika Kumaratunga dismissed the previous United National Front government on February 7.

## Sri Lankan tax officers strike for staff increase

Sri Lankan tax officers and assessors went on strike for two days on March 4, demanding the government amend the inland revenue laws and fill all present staff vacancies. Before the strike, the officers conducted a work-to-rule campaign over five days. The Inland Revenue Service Association claims it is planning an indefinite strike if the demands are not met.

## Pakistani teachers protest over conditions

Hundreds of government primary teachers across Pakistan’s Sindh province boycotted classes and took part in demonstrations on March 6. The teachers are campaigning for a charter of demands, including an end to contract hiring, the repeal of a new insurance policy that increases the cost on workers and the restoration of a quota for the employment of teachers’ children.

In Shikarpur, teachers marched from the Lakhi Gate Boys primary school to the press club, while teachers demonstrated in Dadu and Khairpur, also rallying outside the local press clubs. Around 500 teachers held a protest rally in Kandiaro. Teachers across the Sindh province held similar protests on February 24.

## Australian rail maintenance workers strike against testing

About 500 New South Wales (NSW) rail maintenance workers walked off the job across the state on March 7 for 24 hours after negotiations with the NSW Rail Corp before the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) failed to settle a dispute over compulsory drug and alcohol testing.

A union spokesperson said there had been attempts for months to raise workers’ concerns over the intrusive tests. The IRC ordered the striking workers back to work.

## State TAFE teachers strike over fee rises

NSW Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers waked off the job for 24 hours on March 10 over increased course fees. A large fee rise has put vital courses outside the reach of many students.

A protest rally was held in Sydney, followed by a march on Parliament House. Well-attended rallies took place in the regional centres of Wollongong, Newcastle, Lismore, Port Macquarie, Orange, Albury and Wagga Wagga, with delegations taking part from schools and local TAFE colleges.

#### **Western Australia nurses demand improved security**

Nurses from the Swan District Mental Health Service in Perth's outer suburbs held a stopwork meeting this week to demand action after a patient attacked a nurse and social worker. The 43-year-old female nurse is still in a coma, while the male social worker was beaten and lost some teeth. A doctor had been assaulted two weeks earlier.

The nurses are demanding properly trained security guards for hospitals, provision of duress alarms and mobile phones, closed circuit television monitoring and protection barriers.

The lack of adequate security is a symptom of the under-funding of mental health services. The Australian Medical Association and the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) said the attacks were "symptomatic of bed and staff shortages".

This week, a teenage patient who was under the influence of drugs assaulted a nurse at Princess Margaret Childrens Hospital. Five weeks ago, nurses in Broome, in the state's north, threatened to boycott night shift in the public hospital's casualty department due the lack of adequate security staff. The hospital's duress alarm system was inactive when an assault on one nurse took place.

The ANF is calling for a government inquiry into the incidents. The WA Health Minister stated that while there would be a review, there was "no indication of a system error".

#### **South Australian bus drivers set to strike**

Bus drivers at Transitplus in Adelaide, South Australia are due to strike for five days on March 15 in support of a 12-month work agreement and 4 percent pay increase. The decision to strike follows the breakdown of negotiations when the company decided it would wait to see the outcome of a pay dispute at another bus company, Southlink. Earlier, Transitplus had offered drivers only 10.5 percent over three years.

Transitplus now intends to ask the Industrial Relations Commission to intervene to stop the strike going ahead.

#### **SA public servants plan to strike**

About 15,000 public servants in South Australia (SA) are planning to strike for 24 hours on March 26 for improved pay and conditions. Child protection offices and workers in dental services, nature reserves, libraries and public housing offices will take part in the strike. Essential services will be maintained at hospitals and pathology labs.

The workers have rejected a state government pay offer of just 4 percent over two years for public servants earning less than \$43,000 annually, and 3.5 percent over the same period for the remaining employees.

Industrial Relations Minister Michael Wright warned this week that he would call on the Industrial Relations Commission to stop the industrial action, claiming that the union did not give official notice of its intention to strike.

#### **New Zealand port workers stop over work contract**

About 200 workers employed by Lyttelton Port in Christchurch stopped work on March 5 over negotiations on a new employment contract for the port's container terminal operations.

The present collective contract is due for renewal, after being ratified 12 months ago. When adopted, it opened the way for the

round-the-clock operation of the terminal. The protracted dispute over the old contract left a \$NZ3 million hole in the port's accounts and forced the resignation of the company's chairman and chief executive.

Neither the company nor the unions have released detailed claims. The company has previously said it is not seeking any "material change" to the terms of the contract. Workers, however, are concerned at the port's increased use of permanent part-time labour.

#### **NZ University staff foreshadow strike action**

Academic and general staff at all eight New Zealand universities are planning 10 days strike action for a national collective employment agreement. At a series of stop-work meetings held over the past fortnight, staff overwhelmingly rejected current pay offers and voted to begin a campaign of protests from March 15. They foreshadowed five days of strike action in April and another five in June.

The university unions are seeking a single collective agreement to replace more than 13 site agreements for academic and general staff. They also want pay rises of up to 10 percent per annum over the next three years. Employers have made pay offers of between 2 and 2.8 percent and all have refused to agree to national employment agreements.

A spokesperson for the Association of University Staff (AUS) said more than 95 percent of those at the well-attended meetings supported protest action, with many wanting to strike immediately. However, the AUS will hold off balloting on recommendations for the initial round of strikes until after the protests.

#### **NZ metal workers reject pay offer**

New Zealand manufacturing workers covered by the key Metals and Manufacturing Industries Agreement rejected a 2.5 percent pay offer in a series of stop-work meetings this week. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union issued a 14-day notice of more stopwork meetings, saying it would not settle any agreements below 3.5 percent.

Talks between the union and the Employers and Manufacturers Association, representing the 43 "original parties" to the contract, broke down last week. The Metals, as the agreement is called, is the leading employment agreement in the private sector. It sets the wages and conditions for 2,500 workers directly and thousands more indirectly.

#### **Papua New Guinea health workers vote to strike**

Members of the 6,000-strong Community Health Workers Association have held meetings during the past week, with the majority voting to strike over the non-payment of allowances. The union's salary claim dates back to 1989 and covers an outstanding domestic market allowance, overtime claims and shift allowances. The workers were demanding an assurance from the Health Department by March 12 for a 10.7 million kina (\$US3.3 million) payout or they would walk off the job.



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