

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

18 September 1999

## Indian bus workers protest

Workers at the UP State Road Transport Corporation in the northeastern Indian city of Lucknow held a mass meeting this week to protest against the state government's attempts to privatise the industry. The workers threatened to take indefinite industrial action if the government refuses to abandon its plan.

Workers from other state industries and unions, including the Roadways Employees Joint Board, UP Road Employees Union and the UP Transport Corporation, joined the rally.

## Indian paramedics protest

Paramedics in Lucknow, India are threatening widespread industrial action over the non-payment of wage arrears and threats to abolish their penalty rates.

At a rally this week the workers gave the state government notice that if it did not act on the issues by next Thursday they would launch an industrial campaign beginning with a 24-hour strike.

A spokesman for the paramedics said the pay arrears stretched back to January 1996. Despite assurances given by government officials in August that the back money would be paid, the workers had received nothing.

## Sri Lankan Hotel workers demand improved conditions

Workers of Coral Gardens Hotel at Hikkaduwa, in one of Sri Lanka's major tourist beach centres, staged a three-day picket last week to protest against poor working conditions.

Members of the Food Drink and Tobacco Workers Union are demanding an end to the management's practice of deducting payment for broken items from workers' salaries. They are also calling for sick leave entitlements for new recruits and permanency for contract workers.

The John Keells Group, one of Sri Lanka's blue chip hospitality companies, owns the hotel. Workers from other hotels in the group turned out to support the action at Coral Gardens.

## Plantation staff members in a token strike

Over 200 staff employed on eight estates belonging to the Hapugastanna Plantation Company held a token strike last week to protest against a physical attack by an estate manager on a worker. The same manager had been involved in provocations against striking workers on the company's

Passara estates last October.

A delegation of workers went to the company headquarters and demanded a proper investigation into the attack and the suspension of the manager from his position. The delegation warned of an island-wide strike of plantation workers.

## Closures cause hardship

Some 1,600 workers in the Kurunegala district in Sri Lanka's northwestern province have lost their jobs because of factory closures. The East West Garment Factory employing 1,200 workers, and the Serendib desiccated coconut factory with a workforce of 400, both closed down operations last month.

Kurunegala district, predominantly a rural area, already has a large pool of unemployed people who were forced out of their traditional agriculture-based livelihood.

## Garment workers denounce sackings

This week 150 workers employed at the Damien Lanka garment factory in Negombo, 25 miles north of Colombo, were sacked without reason. Another 100 workers are tipped to face the same fate in coming days.

When angry workers confronted the company's general manager factory demanding that an explanation, he arrogantly claimed that these types of dismissals are "a normal occurrence" in industry.

## University students protest repression

Some 500 students of Ruhunu University, the largest in southern Sri Lanka, staged a "Satyagraha" (a sit-in protest) in front of the University Grant Commission Office in Colombo. The action was part of a campaign launched in mid-August to protest repression by the university authorities.

According to the president of the Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF), the organisers of the protest, the university's Vice Chancellor has suspended 238 students during past two and half years, Some of the suspensions have been found by courts to be illegal. On August 21, the Vice Chancellor ordered the removal of 162 students from the Eliyakande student hostel in order to accommodate other students that he personally favoured.

The students have called for the Vice Chancellor's immediate removal, saying they will continue the action until they receive an acceptable response. Students from

other universities have pledged support.

### **Korean power unions protest sell off**

Trade unions covering workers in power-related companies in South Korea this week threatened to strike to oppose the government's public sector-restructuring program. The plan includes selling off power-generation companies to overseas investors.

The unions, who have members in key power companies, including Korea Heavy Industries and Construction and Korea Power Engineering warned of "an all-out struggle against the government".

A rally at the Seoul Station plaza at the beginning of October is expected to draw up to 15,000 participants.

### **Chinese miners clash with police**

Over 5,000 miners who were blockading the rail line that runs between Beijing and the Inner Mongolian city of Baotou, clashed with riot police on Monday night.

The workers from the Xiahuayuan mine in Zhangjiakou, Hebei province were protesting against their pit being declared bankrupt by the authorities. The workers are demanding that the government overturn the bankruptcy and pay outstanding wages owed to them for nine months.

The miners had taken over the rail line for 15 hours before more than 600 police were sent to breakup the protest. Miners were injured and at least two were taken to hospital for treatment.

The police were forced to release one worker they had detained after being pelted with stones hurled by angry miners.

### **Tourism workers hold rally**

About 400 Tourism Authority of Thailand (TAT) staff rallied outside their workplace in Bangkok on Thursday, demanding the government provide funds for a permanent head office.

A spokesman for the workers, Krich Nondharidh, said that in the past few years TAT had moved its head office four times. The continual movement had caused major inconveniences to staff in relocation and other expenses.

The rental lease on the present office is due to expire this year but the staff are demanding that they continue to work there until a permanent suitable office is available.

### **Melbourne Toyota workers defy court**

Toyota's plants at Port Melbourne and Altona in Victoria ground to a halt last week when the management stood down nearly 3,000 line production workers. The stand-downs occurred after negotiation failed to resolve a six-day strike by 200 maintenance workers seeking a 21 percent pay increase over the next three years.

The striking workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU),

rejected a company offer of a 10.5 percent increase over 30 months and dismissed a recommendation from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to return to work and conduct a secret ballot.

The continuing strike has produced tension within the AMWU. The leadership of the union's vehicle builders division, which represents the stood-down production workers, is demanding that the company pay offer be accepted. But the metal division officials have not been able to convince the maintenance workers.

The maintenance unions are still working to push through the company offer and close down the strike. CEPU state organiser John Cleary this week described the claim as "an ambit one" and said the unions and management were "not a long way apart".

### **Bus union curtails pay campaign**

Government bus services in Sydney and Newcastle were canceled for six hours on Friday when drivers held a stopwork meeting to discuss the outcome of negotiations for a new work agreement, including a 4 percent pay increase.

The workers are angry that State Transit has made an application to the Arbitration Commission for the removal of 47 conditions, including sick pay, annual leave loading and some penalty rates, in exchange for the pay increase.

A union spokesman said that it would not rule out further stoppages if the Authority persisted with the application. However, he assured media representatives that Friday's action was "scheduled in off peak hours to cause minimum inconvenience". Union members in the state's rail, ferry and private bus services continued to work throughout the stoppage.

### **Newcastle University academics to strike**

Academic staff at Newcastle University will begin half-day rolling strikes from next month if the management does not deliver a suitable pay offer.

Academics are seeking a wage rise in line with the 14 percent over three years recently agreed to at the Sydney University.

### **Nurses impose bans**

Nurses at Melbourne's Frankston hospital have imposed work bans in protest against staff shortages. The bans will close one in every five beds in the hospital.

Most wards have vacancies for nine nursing positions, or 25 percent of the staff normally required to maintain full services.



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