

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 January 2000

Army deployed to break power strike in India

Army engineers have begun taking over the operation of power stations as part of a concerted attempt to break the strike by some 95,000 power workers in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. The workers struck on January 14 against state government plans to privatise electricity distribution and eliminate hundreds of jobs at the Uttar Pradesh State Electricity Board.

As four of the state's six power plants shut down and power shortages spread, the Uttar Pradesh government banned the strike for six months under the Essential Services Maintenance Act and requested that the national government deploy troops outside power installations. Six union leaders were arrested on Monday and charged with "causing public disorder" and "disrupting essential services". Reports estimate that between 3,000 and 6,000 workers were arrested on Tuesday in confrontations between strikers and police.

The government has refused to negotiate with power unions and declared it will dismiss the workforce if it does not return to work. Already 65 engineers have been sacked.

Workers have responded by seeking broader support across India. Power workers in six bordering states have imposed work-to-rule bans to disrupt attempts to import electricity to Uttar Pradesh. Protest rallies have been scheduled for January 21. Engineers from a private company brought in to man the power plants have condemned the arrests and other "repressive measures" and threatened to join the strike.

Indian dock workers strike

In further evidence of rising class tensions in India, 100,000 dock workers around the country took strike action on Tuesday to demand higher wages. At least 11 ports, including the major port of Calcutta, have been effectively closed. The national government has deployed the navy to maintain tug boat services and

other navigation tasks and used police baton charges to disperse picketing strikers.

Frustrations have broken out over a government decision last April that pay rates would only be revised every 10 years. Among the workers' demands are wage revision every five years and payment of a rental allowance.

In an open call for state repression, Tarun Das, the director-general of the employers' Confederation of Indian Industry, declared in an interview with AFP: "While the government is expected to be just and fair and reasonable, we can't just be giving in, giving in, giving in. We should handle it like the way Mrs. Thatcher broke the miners strike in Britain when she was in power."

Public servants in Kashmir arrested

On January 15 police in the Indian state of Kashmir arrested 100 striking public servants as they assembled for a protest rally in the city of Jammu. About 300,000 public servants have been on strike for three weeks, demanding the payment of outstanding allowances.

The state government this week threatened to begin mass layoffs if the strike was not ended. It has insisted it cannot afford to meet the workers' demands because of the large proportion of the state budget allocated to police operations against Kashmiri separatists.

Ansett Australia baggage handlers end strike

Baggage handlers at Ansett Australia and its subsidiary Kendall Airlines in Tasmania returned to work on Monday, ending a 48-hour strike over sackings. The handlers walked off the job on January 14 after the company dismissed 20 Tasmanian workers and announced it would replace them with contract labour. On Saturday, baggage handlers in Sydney went on strike in support.

The Transport Workers Union called off the industrial action after Ansett management agreed not to proceed

with an injunction in the Supreme Court for damages against the union. The dispute is presently before the Industrial Relations Commission.

Even though union officials claim that their central concern is jobs, they have indicated that they will accept a reduction in working conditions to assist the company cut costs. At the beginning of the dispute, the union's Federal secretary John Allen said: "We believe we can provide employment with Ansett for our workers on a cost competitive basis, however Ansett are not prepared to sit down and negotiate with us."

PNG aircraft engineers reinstated with no guarantees

The Papua New Guinea national airline Air Niugini announced last Friday that it would comply with a National Court order to reinstate 56 of the 96 engineers who were sacked in August 1999 during a strike over unpaid wages. After the dismissals the union worked to confine the sacked workers to a petition campaign and to taking legal action to demand reinstatement.

The court order did not stipulate when the company has to comply with its direction or guarantee that the engineers will be re-employed in their previous positions. The presiding judge warned the engineers against taking any action to gain reinstatement with their former entitlements. The union has accepted the settlement even though management is still using the contract labour it took on during the dispute.

PNG teachers demand unpaid entitlements

On January 14 over 100 teachers marched to the Department of Education building in Konedobu, in the Central Province of Papua New Guinea, to demand the payment of leave entitlements owing to them. Some 160 teachers have been stranded at their schools since December 10, waiting for the entitlements to be paid, including return airfares to their homes. Teachers who are hired to teach away from their home provinces are entitled to travel expenses in the Christmas break.

The provincial education director for Central Province told the marchers that their demands had been presented to the Treasury Secretary and that the money they were owed would be released the next day. But when the teachers returned to the office on January 15 they were turned away.

A spokesman for the teachers said they were determined to get their entitlements before the school year starts in two weeks time. "This problem of delayed

leave entitlements has happened repeatedly in the last six years and we have usually kept quiet about it. We are tired of being neglected and we will take action if nothing is done."



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