

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 October 2002

## **Indian tea workers strike for holiday bonus**

Tea plantation workers across the Indian state of Assam remain on strike after walking off the job early this week. The dispute erupted when employers refused to pay the annual Durga Hindu festival holiday bonus in advance. Early payment has been the practice in the past and workers have come to rely on it.

Employers claim that they are unable to advance the 20 percent bonus because of the fall in tea prices over the last three years. The strike has brought work at the plantations to a complete standstill. Assam plantations account for almost half of India's tea production.

## **Indian bus workers demand permanency**

Day workers at AMTS, the public transport service in Ahmadabad in the western Indian state of Gujarat, have begun an indefinite strike to demand that they be made permanent employees. The workers are employed at the Sarangpur, Wadaj, Vasna depots and the Lal Darwaja main terminus. AMTS management has called for police to be used against the strikers' picket lines.

## **Pakistani municipal workers demand bonus payment**

Sanitary workers, drivers and machine operators at the Karachi Municipal Council struck on September 26 in opposition to the non-payment of overtime and other allowances. According to reports, the total amount outstanding is about 70 million rupees (\$US1.67 million). The workers are also demanding an increase in their overtime and allowance rate.

## **Sri Lankan medical practitioners strike over pay**

About 1,550 registered and assistant medical practitioners in Sri Lanka went on strike on October 4 demanding an end to anomalies in their salary arrangements. By October 6, the strike had closed services at 65 maternal clinics, 167 rural hospitals and 404 central dispensaries affecting some 100,000 patients.

In a separate dispute, doctors and nurses at the public hospital in Kuliyaipitiya, 75 kilometres from Colombo, demonstrated on October 2 to demand the government resolve the inadequate water supply to the hospital. The problem affects patients and staff in 11 wards, including the hospital's intensive care unit.

## **Sacked Thai reporters reinstated**

A group of journalists sacked by iTV, Thailand's only non-government owned television station, have been reinstated

with back pay. The reinstatements are in line with a court ruling handed down at the end of September. The 21 workers were dismissed on February 6, 2001, one day after they had established a union and held an inaugural general meeting. The journalists had also complained about editorial interference by management.

The company denied that the sackings were over the union issue and claimed they were necessary because of financial losses. It has announced its intention to appeal the reinstatement order in the Supreme Court.

## **Japanese shipyard workers win compensation**

Former workers from the United States Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan have won a protracted legal battle for compensation for pneumoconiosis, lung cancer and other diseases caused by exposure to asbestos. The plaintiffs, some who had worked at the base for more than 40 years, were awarded 231 million yen (approximately \$US1.9 million) on October 7 in the Yokohama District Court. The lawsuit was filed in 1999 by nine workers and by the relatives of three other workers who had already died from asbestos-related diseases.

The presiding judge found that the Japanese government had failed to fulfill its responsibility to maintain safety at the facility and had never seriously attempted to make the US government deal with the problem of asbestos dust at the base.

## **South Australian packaging workers renew pickets**

Workers at NCI Packaging in Adelaide have re-established a picket at the plant after talks failed to resolve a dispute over the sacking of union members.

In accordance with an order issued by the Industrial Relations Commission, the striking workers reported for work on October 4, but were stopped from entering the plant by a large contingent of police called in by management. A union spokesman said that the company had no intention of negotiating a settlement and therefore workers had decided to resume industrial action.

The dispute erupted last week when the NCI issued termination notices to 40 workers, about 25 percent of its workforce. According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, most of those terminated were members of the union. Many of the sacked employees had also complained about working conditions.

Although the company claims the sackings resulted from a

lack of work, it is still employing casuals and offering overtime. The sacked workers are demanding immediate reinstatement.

### **Visy employees oppose non-union contract**

Printing and metal workers employed by Visy Industries across Australia stopped work this week for 24 hours against the company's move to impose individual non-union work contracts at its Wodonga plant in Victoria. Visy is refusing to negotiate a new work contract for Wodonga with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which covers the majority of Visy employees.

The AMWU wants Visy to negotiate a certified 12-month agreement, with a clause for compulsory negotiations three months prior to expiry. Delegates plan to call report-back meetings in a few days.

### **Hotel workers strike over redundancies**

About 100 employees from the Hilton Hotel in Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on October 6 over the company's plan to close the hotel for renovation in November and lay off 500 workers. The hotel has not guaranteed it will re-employ the displaced workers when the hotel reopens in 2004. While full-time staff will receive a minimum redundancy equal to eight week's pay, many casual workers who have 10 years service will get nothing.

### **Bus drivers oppose sacking**

About 130 bus drivers at Busway, which operates in the outer western Sydney suburbs of Blacktown and Mount Druitt, walked off the job for 24 hours on October 9 over the sacking of a co-worker. Management alleged that the dismissed driver had been recorded on the bus videotape taking money from the fare box.

A spokesperson from the New South Wales Transport Workers Union said that drivers were concerned that the cameras were being used to monitor their work performance. They had only agreed to the installation of surveillance cameras for driver and passenger safety.

### **New Zealand nurses set to strike next week**

More than 4,000 nurses at 16 New Zealand hospitals will begin a series of four-hour rolling strikes on October 15. The nurses are objecting to health board proposals to put senior nurses on separate employment contracts from other employees. The NZ Nurses' Association and Public Service Association spent most of last week in mediated talks in an attempt to avert the strikes, but were unable to reach an agreement. Industrial action was endorsed by 95 percent of the nurses in recent ballots.

The stoppages will be spread over next two weeks and will affect hospitals in Northland, Tauranga, Rotorua, Taupo, Whakatane and Gisborne.

### **Health workers reject pay offer**

Allied Health workers at Midcentral Health, Palmerston North have rejected the latest pay offer made by the District Health Board and voted to escalate their current industrial

action from October 21. In the meantime, they will continue to work-to-rule and withhold statistics.

The escalated action will involve the withdrawal of therapy services for all medical and rehabilitation services for two weeks and the withdrawal of all therapy, surgical and orthopedic services for two weeks from November 4.

Therapists are concerned about the standard of patient care when they have to cover staff vacancies for prolonged periods. There are insufficient numbers of therapists employed at Midcentral and the only way to attract and retain extra staff is through paying improved wages. Public health sector pay rates for therapists have traditionally fallen behind other sectors and the gap is widening.

### **ANZ bank staff vote on pay offer**

ANZ bank branches in New Zealand closed on October 4 when union members stopped work to discuss stalled pay negotiations. About 1,800 members of the Financial Sector Union (Finsec) attended meetings after talks on a new collective work agreement broke down. Workers were angry that the bank only offered a 3 percent pay rise for the first year and 3.25 percent for the second year of a two-year contract. The rise did not match those given to bank workers by the Bank of New Zealand and WestpacTrust.

### **Sackings at Kinleith paper mill to proceed**

Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) confirmed this week that it will halve the workforce at the Kinleith paper mill as soon as it finishes two weeks of compulsory talks with the unions. The company's decision will mean that 380 permanent jobs will be destroyed and mill maintenance handed over to international engineering company ABB. The contract company will only employ 190 and is expected to recruit about 150 of the redundant CHH maintenance staff.

The mill unions have consistently suppressed any industrial action to defend jobs and turned to the courts to enforce their right to be "consulted" over the mill's restructuring. The Engineers' Union complained that the CHH announcement breached a "gagging agreement" reached in mediation to keep any decision under wraps until the unions had a chance to sell it to their members. One union official was reported in the press saying that CHH "broke ranks on us".

The company and unions will spend the next two weeks discussing how the sackings, including a further 120 in other departments, will be carried out.

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