

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## **Philippines hospital picket line attacked**

Police and members from the Squatters Prevention Encroachment Elimination Division (SPEED) last week demolished a tent and confiscated placards on a picket line outside the Metro Cebu Community Hospital, in Cebu City. The order to remove the picket came after discussions between the hospital administrator and the city's mayor.

The picket leader Perla Nava and two other workers were arrested when they attempted to resist the attack. All three were charged with violating city ordinances against "vending, obstruction and littering". Nava said the SPEED officials had used lead pipes to attack pickets.

She said 107 workers have maintained a regular picket outside the hospital since 1996 after they were sacked for wearing red armbands at work to protest the refusal of hospital management to recognise their union and to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement.

## **Shemberg workers ordered to end sit-in**

The Philippines National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) this week issued a restraining order against striking workers at the Shemberg Marketing Corporation in Cebu City.

The order prohibits the strikers from obstructing operations at the company's plants, intimidating or threatening non-striking workers and preventing access to all Shemberg facilities.

The NLRC order also instructs strikers to "vacate, leave and stay out" of a water treatment plant they have been occupying for more than two weeks. The plant supplies water to many of Shemberg's work places. The sit-in has already paralysed many areas of production.

The NLRC order stated that while there was constitutional protection of the right to strike and picket, "this right is subject to limitation". The commission said that it was forced to act because the strike had resulted in "tremendous losses" for the company.

Last week workers rejected an appeal from the local mayor

to take their case to the National Conciliation and Mediation Board and stated that they intended to continue to picket until Shemberg's managing director returned from overseas for direct negotiations. The strikers are protesting the company's harsh treatment of its workers and are seeking improved working conditions.

## **Indonesian garment workers strike**

Around 6,000 workers of PT Golden Flower, a garment factory in Semarang, Central Java struck against the company on Tuesday. They demanded an improvement in their payment system so that their retirement, health and work safety benefits, and food and transportation subsidies are guaranteed by the company. They also demanded an end to the management's arrogant treatment.

## **Candy and biscuit factory workers dismissed**

In Tangerang, West Java, 1,300 workers of PT Mayora Indah, a candy and biscuit factory struck on Tuesday. They demonstrated in front of the Department of Labor and stayed through the evening, refusing to go home until their future was decided.

The workers were sacked after demanding a wage rise. They company accused them of being troublemakers and refused to continue their employment, or even pay them compensation.

## **Indonesian workers protest for wages**

Last week more than 1,000 Indonesian textile workers who are fighting for a wage increase, staged a demonstration outside the regional governor's office in Medan, Sumatra, about 1,425 north west of Jakarta. The workers, employed by Pt Rija Mitra, continued their protest despite the presence of scores of riot police and civilian militia.

## **Mine explosion in China**

A huge gas explosion ripped through a coal mine in China's northeastern province of Shaanxi last week, killing 41 people and injuring 12. The China Coal Daily reported that the explosion occurred while 96 workers from a construction firm were setting up the mine.

Some 291 people have died in coal mine accidents since the beginning of March, with deaths from gas explosions accounting for 71 percent, or 190, of the fatalities, the

newspaper said. Thousands of coal miners are killed each year in Chinese mine accidents.

### **Contract workers walk out**

Engineering and maintenance contract workers at BHP's Port Kembla steel plant went on strike for 24 hours this week. A meeting of the 400 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union instructed the unions to seek direct negotiations with BHP to demand the company change a new "contract rationalization process".

The unions claim that the process will allow BHP to downgrade the price of contracts and thereby force contractors to continuously review wages and working conditions. A union spokesman said: "As a result of this process contract worker are committed to an ongoing campaign to protect conditions." He said contractors who "refused to support the introduction of industrial standards by May 24 could face protracted industrial action".

### **Esso workers strike over gas leaks**

Over 100 construction workers walked off the job last Friday at Esso's Longford oil and gas refinery in Victoria after discovering a gas leak. Workers said the amount of gas leaking was sufficient to cause another serious explosion. The refinery was recently the site of a massive blast that cost two workers their lives and left the entire state without gas for over two weeks.

While the management claimed that the strike was not over safety and was being used to pressure the company on other industrial issues, Bill Shorten from the Australian Workers Union said the plant was unsafe. "Until Esso makes it safe so that people can escape if there is a gas leak, then there can be no guarantee that people will come to work," he said. The striking workers say they will remain off the job until conditions are safe.

### **Victorian nurses threaten to strike**

Victorian nurses this week threatened to take statewide strike action to force the State's Liberal government to agree to improved severance pay for staff.

An Australian Nurses Federation spokesman said the strike proposal also opposed cuts to nursing numbers and the government's plan to privatise some health services. Two hospitals in the Southern Health Network have been badly effected by staff cuts. At the Dandenong Hospital in Melbourne's southeast, one in every five beds has been closed.

### **Maritime union agrees on job cuts**

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) concluded a deal with BHP Steel this week that will allow the company to slash its workforce at the port of Whyalla, in South Australia, from 68 to just eight by next year.

The agreement is the outcome of protracted closed-door

negotiations begun almost two years ago when BHP announced its intention to close its steel exporting service at Whyalla.

### **PNG University staff protest over sacking**

Accounting staff at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby went on strike this week to protest the sacking of the university's bursar Weusi Tafawa. The University Council alleged that Tafawa had mismanaged university funds.

The striking staff are demanding that Tafawa, who has been serving at the university for ten and half years, be immediately reinstated. A spokesman for the strikers said the sacking was part of a campaign of "witch-hunting and unethical behaviour" by the university's chancellor and vice-chancellor.

### **Jobs go in Fiji restructuring**

Over 400 Civil Aviation (CAAF) workers at Nadi International Airport in Fiji were sacked this week after being refused employment by Airports Fiji, the company that took over the airport's services after they were privatised.

Over the past two months the CAAF workers have staged a series of strikes and protest actions to defend their jobs and have refused to accept a redundancy pay out. A management spokesman said the CAAF was not prepared to maintain staff "who have not opted to take the voluntary redundancy package."

In the same week the government announced major restructuring plans for the Fiji Sugar Corporation that will eventually see half the 3,200 strong workforce made redundant. A Corporation official said "massive lay offs are inevitable because of low sugar prices".

There were over 600 job losses in the private and public sectors in Fiji last year and another 700 workers in the power and aviation sectors are expected to lose their jobs in the coming months.



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