

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

3 July 1999

## **Bangladesh steel workers fight closure**

More than 1,800 workers at the state-owned Chittagong steel mill in Bangladesh last week launched a campaign, including a 24-hour hartal, or general strike, on June 30 against the plant's closure. The government intends to lay off the workers over the next two years.

The mill has been in operation since 1967, with a workforce of over 3,247 in 1995. In that year more than 1,200 workers were retrenched, leaving only 1,800 for production. The mill was established to meet the country's needs for quality steel products. Sales have declined because of competition from lower grade steel.

## **Philippines government intervenes in Honda strike**

The Philippines Acting Labor Secretary Felicisimo Joson last week ordered 600 striking workers at the Honda motorcycle assembly plant to return to work. The Labor Department also ordered the company to temporarily reinstate sacked workers, pending a decision on whether their dismissal was valid.

Workers have been on strike since May 19 when the company decided to contract out some parts of its operation. The company responded by firing 223 union members. The dispute is highly sensitive, as Honda has threatened to move the plant to Thailand. Philippines President Joseph Estrada, in Japan last month to attract foreign investors, urged Honda executives not to relocate the plant. He also told the media that industrial disputes in the Philippines create "fear among foreign investors".

## **Indonesian garment workers strike**

About 300 workers of PT Yuti Tolia in Tangerang, West Java, went on strike on June 30. The factory produces women's underwear.

The workers, mainly women, put forward 13 demands. One of the main demands was to be paid a regular monthly wage instead being hired by contracts, which means that they are paid only for days worked. Another demand was to be treated with respect by the

management and male security guards, who often seek to take sexual advantage of the women.

One worker said that she had been working for the company for nine years but had still not received a regular wage.

## **Meatworkers' lockout continues**

Beef processor G&K O'Connor in Pakenham, near Melbourne, has locked out 300 members of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union. The dispute started in November 1998, when the union tried to negotiate a new enterprise agreement. The company refused to negotiate and demanded a 10 to 17.5 percent pay cut.

The workers rejected the pay cut and continued to work according to the previous agreement while continuing negotiations. But the company locked out its entire union workforce on March 19.

The meat industry is seasonal and at this time of the year there are often partial shutdowns. In this case, however, the company is using a lockout to deny workers all payments, including long service leave and annual leave, while it demands that workers agree to the pay cuts if they want to go back to work. O'Connors is using lawyers who were involved in last year's waterfront confrontation.

The union shop committee, which is organising food vouchers, is appealing for donations.

## **WA construction workers strike over unsafe water**

Some 300 construction workers, members of the Australian Metal Workers Union, took strike action late last week to protest over the failure of Worsley Alumina to provide safe drinking water on Western Australia's biggest construction site. The water on site was found to be contaminated. The workers demanded that the company provide bottled water until the site's treatment and filtration plant was complete.

Worsley Alumina has threatened legal action against the striking workers and claimed it was providing safe water supplies, transported by truck from the town of

Collie. However, according to AMWU officials, there are no regulations or codes governing the transportation of drinking water. They are also concerned that the contaminated supplies are still being used for washing hands, emergency showers and medical purposes such as eyewashes.

### **Health workers consider action over pay**

Allied health workers, including hospital orderlies, cleaners and catering staff, employed in Perth's metropolitan public hospitals are considering taking legal action over the failure of negotiations with the Health Department to grant a 20 percent pay rise over three years, guarantee job security and implement one agreement to cover workers in all Western Australia's public hospitals.

The Health Department has opposed the demands and offered a 7 percent increase over two years, conditional on the trade-off of penalty rates and conditions. The trade-offs being demanded include the abolition of penalties paid to workers on sick leave, the removal of all allowances such as infectious handling allowances, a reduction in afternoon and night shift penalty rates, a decrease in Sunday penalty rates and a reduction in tea breaks from 15 to 10 minutes.

For allied health workers, who on average earn under \$30,000 a year, with the inclusion of penalty rates, the trade-offs would mean trying to live on the poverty line.

Pressure has mounted for industrial action, despite the reluctance of union officials. LHMU industrial officer Noel Whitehead said this week that his members were already poorly paid and many would find industrial action crippling, but feeling was strong.

### **Miner crushed to death in mine accident**

A 38 year-old miner was crushed to death last Friday morning at the Cooranbong underground coalmine in Lake Macquarie, New South Wales. The worker, who was carrying out repair work, died at 12:30am after he was pinned to a machine and crushed by hydraulic rams. He died shortly after ambulance officers arrived. Production at the Powercoal plant was suspended whilst investigations proceeded into the death.

### **Atco workers continue strike action**

Two hundred workers at the Atco electrical transformer plant in Tullamarine, Victoria are entering the fourth week of strike action. The workers, members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) began their

strike on June 16 in support of a claim against the company for a wage increase, English lessons and better redundancy provisions.

The workers claim that they are entitled share in Atco profits, which have increased over the last period. They are demanding that the present hourly wage of \$10.85 be increased and that English language lessons are provided for employees. There are 25 different nationalities employed at the plant. Negotiations between the AWU and management have so far stalled.



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