

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 August 1999

## **Thai garment workers demand pay increase**

Workers at Triumph International (Thailand) went on strike last week over a pay dispute. The company offered increases of 4 to 6 percent over the next three years but the workers are demanding at least 8 percent. In an attempt to intimidate the strikers the company has filed a lawsuit with the Labour Court to force the workers to pay damages worth 21 million baht for the strike.

Strikers set up a picket outside the factory after holding a 500-strong protest rally in front of Government House. Workers claimed that thugs with dogs attended the rally and attempted to disrupt the protest.

## **Two workers killed in Philippines building collapse**

Two building workers were killed and 12 others are missing after a four-storey apartment building under construction in Cebu City collapsed without warning. The workers had been spending the night in the building after they had finished work. The death toll could have been much higher but only 36 workers out of 70 had stayed overnight.

Cebu City Mayor Alvin Garcia directed the Office of the Building Official (OBO) to investigate whether the contractor and owner of the building had violated the national building code. According to the OBO's initial assessment, the building collapsed because its pillars were weak.

"The cables used for the columns, beams and flooring were too small," she said. She reported that the building has structural defects because 20-millimetre cables instead of 25-millimetre cables had been used in its construction.

The contractor's building engineer at first attempted to pass off the collapse as "a stroke of bad luck" but was forced to admit that the columns supporting the whole structure were weak, too high and not reinforced by lateral support.

## **PNG health workers end strike**

A week-long strike by over 6,000 community health

workers in Papua New Guinea was closed down this week after union leaders signed an agreement with the government and the health services management.

The workers went on strike to demand the payment of over 40 million kina owed to them for the services they carried out for the public health system before they were incorporated as employees in a public service restructure at the end of 1989.

While the new agreement, known as the Memorandum of Understanding, assures the workers that they will receive their payment, a government spokesman said this week that it would not be possible to meet the demand until the new year because of the "current economic situation".

Under the memorandum the union has agreed to cooperate with the Health Department to collect data on all workers and to single out those they consider are "too old" for service and who should be retrenched.

The union is actively encouraging workers to accept retrenchments. A leading union official said that while he could not say when all the workers would receive their back payments he had been assured by the government that those accepting redundancy would be paid immediately they "leave their place of work".

## **Mass rallies oppose new industrial laws**

Over 50,000 workers and supporters marched in Melbourne on Thursday to oppose the Howard government's "second wave" industrial legislation that will further undermine workers' rights and working conditions. Another 10,000 marched in Adelaide on the same day.

The legislation currently before parliament will end the closed union shop and allow employers to strip away what remains of award working conditions.

The main theme of both protests was to put pressure on the Australian Democrats to block the legislation when it comes before the Senate. Led by union officials, marchers

chanted: "Just say no".

Australian Council of Trade Unions president Jennie George told the Melbourne rally that the "Democrats had better decide which side they are on". However, a message read to the rally from the Democrats leader Meg Lees promised only to oppose the legislation "in its present form," not reject it outright. Earlier, the Democrats' workplace relations spokesman Andrew Murray said the party "would not write it (the legislation) off" because that "just makes the process worthless."

### **South Australian nurses picket**

Nurses at the Flinders Medical Centre in South Australia set up a picket outside one of the hospital's wards last Tuesday to block the removal of furniture and equipment ordered by the centre's management. The ward, along with other services, has been earmarked for closure to cut costs. A nurse's spokeswoman said the action was the beginning of a campaign to prevent the further closure of beds and may be extended to other hospitals.

Doctors at the centre voted to back the nurse's action. The Australian Nursing Federation said the reduction of beds at the Flinders centre was part of a widespread restructuring of the state's public health system to deliver cost cutting worth more than \$50 million.

### **Rail station staff stop work**

CityRail station staff in Sydney held a two-hour stoppage this week and refused to check tickets or collect fares. The workers, including stationmasters, assistants and ticket sellers, protested against planned job cuts across city stations.

A spokesman for the Australian Services Union said the stoppage was designed to make commuters aware of how the Authority's plan to close numbers of stations and booking facilities will impact on customer services.

### **Contract workers' picket hits Shell**

Workers employed by contract company Danum United on the Shell oil refinery site at Geelong in Victoria have been on strike for over a week. The dispute erupted over the refusal of Danum United to meet a claim for improved wages and working conditions. The workers have set up a picket line outside the refinery and are blocking fuel tankers from entering and leaving.

Shell has made an application for a Supreme Court injunction to force the strikers to lift the picket. A spokesman for Shell said if the picket continues it could lead to the closure of the refinery by next Monday and 25 percent of Victorian motorists would be affected by fuel shortages by the end of the month.

### **Technical college teachers plan strike**

Technical college teachers across New South Wales are planning a series of strikes beginning early next month to oppose the restructuring plans of the state Labor government. Two weeks ago the Education Department unveiled its plan to cut more than 630 positions from the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges.

In the Hunter region, which has 3,000 students, the plan would see over 60 teaching jobs slashed and 50 administrative support positions destroyed.

This week Hunter Valley teachers voted to go on strike for 24 hours. A spokesman for the Teachers Federation said this would be followed by a statewide 48-hour stoppage if the government did not back away from the downsizing. He said the government cuts were aimed at "the erosion of vocational education".

### **New Zealand whitegoods workers demand pay rise**

Workers employed by appliance manufacturer Fisher and Paykel in Auckland, New Zealand, say they intend to take further industrial action in support of a 5.5 percent pay claim. At the beginning of the month the 1,500 workers went on strike for 24 hours and 500 workers picketed the company's main plant in East Tamaki.

The Auckland regional secretary of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union Mike Sweeny said negotiations between the company and the union had broken down when management offered a pay increase of \$12 a week, way below that demanded by the workers.

### **Tutors angry over pay offer**

Tutors at the Southland Polytechnic, in New Zealand, walked off the job last week to protest the attempt by management to stall negotiations for a new work contract. The teachers voted for the 24-hour strike after holding a two-hour meeting to decide a course of action. The striking tutors held a mid-day march in central Invercargill to win public support.

A union spokesman said the tutors had been reluctant to take industrial action but had become extremely angry over a management offer and stalling tactics. The tutors are demanding a 4 percent pay increase spread over two years but the management has offered to pay only a \$800 once-off payment.



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