

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 August 1999

Pakistan workers appeal for support

Employees at the Pak-Suzuki Motor Co in Karachi have issued an urgent appeal calling on workers internationally to support their struggle to defend basic rights. Since July last year 90 workers have been fighting for reinstatement after they were sacked for organising a trade union at the plant. The company locked out the 90 workers and used police to stop them entering the work site.

The workers formed the Pak Suzuki Motor Co Star Workers Union to fight the company's refusal to give 850 casual workers at the plant full time jobs and to provide them with medical facilities, annual leave and work insurance. Only 400 employees out of a total workforce of 1,250 are permanent.

Despite repeated requests from the dismissed workers to the Labor Department that it investigate their grievances, nothing has been done. In fact, it has been over seven years since anyone from the Department has even visited the plant. Workers suspect that officials have been bought off with bribes.

Those workers who remain at the plant work under very repressive conditions with the management carrying out a campaign to intimidate and victimise anyone who shows support or sympathy for those who were dismissed.

Workers everywhere are urged to support the sacked Suzuki employees and send faxes demanding their immediate reinstatement and that the company cease interfering with their democratic right to organise.

Faxes should be sent to Japan to Mr Osamu Suzuki, at +81-053-448 9365, or phone the company at +81 053-440-2438.

Copies should be sent to:

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Indian workers stage mass protest

Thousands of workers from a number of companies in the southern Indian city of Bangalore, staged a mass protest this week against repressive government labour policies. They included workers from Kirloskar Electrical Co, SKF, Kamala Dial Factory and GKW.

The demonstration was organized by the All India Trade Union Congress and culminated in a mass meeting in Freedom Fighters Park in the city. Union leaders attacked state government policies as "anti-worker" and accused politicians of always siding with the employers against workers who went on strike. The union officials' only perspective was to call for talks with government and employer representatives.

Indonesian oil workers end strike

Over 8,000 Indonesian oil workers at PT Tripatra, a contractor for Caltex Petroleum, in central Sumatra, ended a six-week long strike earlier this month. The strike had erupted when the company failed to implement

a directive from the Ministry of Manpower to make the workforce permanent and pay compensation.

The company responded to the walkout by firing the workers two weeks into the strike. At the same time, despite the company's disregard for the Department's directive, the government provided security forces to intimidate the strikers. In one incident the security officers fired tear gas and rubber bullets into a crowd of workers, hitting one in the head. Other workers were repeatedly struck with batons.

On August 6 the Indonesian Prosperity Trade Union (SBSI) called off the strike after government representatives brokered a deal with the company to reinstate the sacked workers. Under the deal the workers will not be made permanent, nor will the company consider any of the other claims, until the present contract between PT Tripatra and Caltex expires in 2003. Despite the outcome, SBSI chairman Muchtar Pakpahan claimed the union had worked "to bring the strike to a just conclusion".

Cooperative workers continue strike

Over 4,000 workers from the National Livestock Cooperatives Federation (NLCF) rallied in Yoido, Seoul, for the fourth consecutive day on Wednesday. The workers went on strike late last week to protest the decision of the South Korean government to integrate the livestock cooperatives with the National Agricultural Cooperative Federation to cut costs and jobs.

The strike erupted after the NLCF union president Shin Koo Bum attempted to commit suicide in protest against the integration bill that was recently ratified by the National Assembly.

Throughout the week strikers clashed with armed riot police who attempted to break up rallies and sit-downs outside the National Assembly Building, in Yoido Park and at the Myongdong Cathedral. At one point the government deployed 5,000 police in and around Yoido in an attempt to intimidate the strikers. The strikers issued a press statement demanding the end to police repression and the release of 200 workers arrested earlier this week.

Seamen and dockers defend union rights

Seafarers and dockworkers in Cebu, in the Philippines, are considering further industrial action if Trans-Asia Shipping Line refuses to reinstate the 21 union officials it sacked last month. A union spokesman warned this week that the dispute could be widened to other ports.

The 21 officials, 19 from the Philippines Seafarers Union (PSU) and two from the dock workers union, were dismissed after a weeklong strike to demand that the company recognise the PSU. Trans Asia is demanding that the seamen join the Federation of Sea and Land-based Unions, an employer-sponsored organisation.

During the strike Trans-Asia hired thugs to attack workers and break up their picket line outside the company headquarters. Some workers were approached by company officials and thugs and asked to sign papers renouncing their membership of the PSU.

Following the sackings on July 24 the Labor Department directed the 750 striking workers to return to work and ordered the company to reinstate the union officials. Even though the workers have been back on

the job for over three weeks the company has disregarded the Department's order and the sacked men remain off the job.

Fiji shipbuilding workers demand entitlements

Some 50 workers sacked earlier this month from Shipbuilding (Fiji) Limited in Suva, Fiji, are continuing their fight for redundancy entitlements. The workers received "stand-down" letters after the company announced it had insufficient work to keep them employed. Despite earlier assurances from the management that they would not lose any benefits, the stand-down letters stated that as casuals the workers were not entitled to a redundancy package. The workers immediately lodged a trade dispute with the Ministry of Labour.

While claiming to be "sympathetic" to the plight of the sacked workers, newly-elected Prime Minister, Mahendra Chaudhry, (also Minister for Public Enterprises), issued a statement saying that the government could not guarantee the jobs of the remaining 90 workers and that the recent lay offs were just the "tip of the iceberg"

Shipbuilding (Fiji) Limited was once a state-owned enterprise but is now 51 percent privatised. The new shareholder, Carpenters MCI, still owes the government more than \$US3 million and has not met several of its obligations under the sale and purchase agreement.

Australian building workers go out

Building workers on three Lend Lease projects in Sydney went on strike for 48 hours on Wednesday to protest against a tax dodge operated by one of the company's contractors, which has cost building workers thousands of dollars. The company, SJP Formwork, paid workers "cash-in-hand" for weekend overtime but did not pay the tax due on the payments, leaving 400 of its employees with a combined tax bill of approximately \$4 million.

Work was brought to a standstill at the Jackson's Landing site at Pymont, at Castle Hill and at the Fox Studios site at Moore Park, where about 1,000 workers are employed. Strikers staged a protest outside Lend Lease's headquarters at Australia Square, in the heart of Sydney, to demand that the company meet the outstanding tax payments

Rail strikes on agenda

Countrylink rail offices in New South Wales could be hit by industrial action next week as workers protest against planned job losses.

According to a statement by Mick Schmitzer of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, strike action by intrastate train services personnel is likely when State Rail releases further details of a restructuring plan.

The union believes that the plan involves outsourcing a number of Countrylink services and the elimination of many full-time positions, with some displaced workers being rehired on a part-time basis. The union has called on State Rail to clarify its position on how many permanent jobs will go and how many hours will be available to part-time workers.

Another union spokesman accused the Carr Labor government of endorsing the State Rail plan, breaching an election pledge.

Canberra nurses fight for jobs

Nurses from medical wards at the Canberra Hospital, in Australia's capital, walked off the job for two hours as part of their campaign of rolling work stoppages for improved staffing levels. About 80 nurses staged a noisy protest rally in front of the hospital. This was followed by stoppages by staff in the hospital's surgical wards.

The nurses are demanding that the Australia Capital Territory's Health Minister Michael Moore meet with union representatives to resolve the staffing issue. Moore has refused to begin discussions unless all industrial action ceases.

Moore attacked the stoppages, saying: "Now is the time to stop the industrial action, the points been made and nurses should get back to work." The nurses union has been seeking negotiations for over 12 months.

Textile workers stop

Textile workers at the Braybrook Manufacturing plant in Sunshine in

Melbourne's west stopped work on Thursday to protest threatened retrenchments. The company makes shirts for the well-known brand name, Pelaco. The 70 women workers fear they could lose their jobs within two weeks.

A union spokeswoman said the women could also lose their entitlements, such as long service leave and annual leave, if a recently appointed administrators fail to sell the company.

"Our members are very, very distressed. They believed if they did the right thing by the company, the company would do the right thing by them. They are facing, after a lifetime of work, that they might not have a job and may never get another one," she said.

Contract workers strike over safety

Fifteen contract workers at BHP sites walked off the BHP Nelson Point site at Port Hedland this week over safety conditions.

The workers, employed by rigging and scaffolding company Excel Group, downed tools over the contractor's failure to report accidents at BHP sites.

Australian Workers Union north-west organiser Paul Asplin said workers were "fed up with what they claim is the employer's persistent denial and mishandling of safety incidents". Only a few weeks ago a worker was temporarily blinded at the site but the company did not report the incident.

Workers pointed to two other recent incidents at BHP's Hot Briquetted Iron Plant in which five workers were injured. In one incident a fire broke out, leading to the evacuation of 250 workers.

Whitegoods workers not happy with pay outcome

Workers employed by appliance manufacturer Fisher and Paykel in Auckland and Dunedin, New Zealand, this week agreed to end their industrial campaign 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 workers endorsed a union recommendation that they accept a revised management offer of 3.25 percent. Previously the company had only offered to pay workers a \$12 per week increase. Despite urging by union officials, the recommendation to accept the new offer was carried at the membership meeting by only a narrow margin with 44 percent of the workforce voting in opposition.

The Auckland regional secretary of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union Mike Sweeny admitted that the majority of workers "were still not happy" with the outcome.



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