

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 August 1999

Sri Lankan garment workers face trial

The management of International Dresses, a garment factory in the Ratmalana industrial area, 15 kilometres south of Colombo, has filed a court action against 15 sacked workers. The workers were arrested and charged with “unlawfully writing” on walls at the plant.

The workers, sacked in April for organising a union, were conducting a poster campaign against their dismissals. At the time of the sackings, the predominantly female 850-strong workforce went on strike for a month.

However, the union covering the garment workers, an affiliate of the Lanka Sama

Samaja Party (LSSP), struck a deal with the company that allowed the sacked workers to be reinstated pending the outcome a “disciplinary inquiry”. On the advice of the union the workers ended their strike but the 15 workers were again laid off three months later.

The company is now seeking damages from the 15 workers worth Rs 2,500. They are out on bail and a court hearing has been set for September 22.

Street hawkers protest

About 600 street hawkers in Piliyandala, 20 kilometres from Colombo, established a picket line on August 12 after the state authorities ordered in bulldozers to dismantle their huts and stalls. Hawkers who resisted were attacked and brutally beaten by riot police. At least six were taken into custody.

The vicious operation was carried out jointly by officers of the local divisional secretariat and the police. The hawkers were issued with “notices to quit” just one night before the attack took place.

Hawkers have been trading in the area for more than 30 years. They have no other means of earning a livelihood. They mainly sell fruit and vegetables, peanuts, betel leaves and clothes. Most are in debt to local banks.

Workers suffer food poisoning

More than 100 workers employed at the Jinwun Lanka Garment Factory in the Ekala Industrial Colony, a major

industrial area to the north of Colombo City, suffered food poisoning last week after eating food supplied by the company. Twenty-eight suffered severe stomach pains and were rushed to Ragama Hospital.

Earlier in the month, about 100 workers at Katunayake Garments, in the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, became sick after eating the lunch provided at the factory. They were treated at the nearby Negombo Hospital for stomach ache and vomiting. As well, 35 workers at the Easin Lanka Factory, near the Katunayake Free Trade Zone, became ill after drinking water supplied at the workplace.

Food poisoning is common among workers in the Free Trade Zones because managements constantly attempt to cut costs, with little regard for workers' health.

Thai power workers protest sell off

Thai power workers held a three-day hunger strike this week in a lead up to a mass rally planned for the end of the month. The workers are renewing their protest campaign against the government's decision to privatise the massive Ratchaburi power plant, still under construction.

A union spokesman said thousands of power workers from Bangkok and outlying provinces are expected to turn out for the rally. The union has appealed to the public to tie red ribbons on their cars in a sign of support.

The government plans to use some of the proceeds from the sale to fund a new round of redundancies from the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). The Authority wants to shed another 678 workers in the new fiscal year beginning in October. Over 1,799 jobs have been cut from the electricity company's 30,651-strong workforce since 1995.

Jakarta protest over hunger striker's death

About 100 young workers, students and labor activists staged a rally outside the House of Representatives in central Jakarta on Wednesday to demand an investigation into the death of female worker Juju Juliah. The protesters had earlier marched through the city from the Ministry of

Manpower.

A spokesman for the protesters said the action was a show of solidarity with Juju Juliah, an employee of the Jakarta-based PT Rimba Aristama, who died earlier this month during a hungry strike against the company's repressive working conditions.

A large contingent of riot police blocked the demonstrators from reaching the legislative building. The protest was organised by the National Front for the Struggle of Indonesian Workers and the Student League for Democracy.

Workers protest against industrial laws

Some 10,000 workers demonstrated in Sydney on Tuesday against the federal government's "second wave" industrial legislation, currently before parliament. The new laws aim to end the closed union shop and wipe out what is left of award working conditions.

Workers marched through the city from Hyde Park to a rally outside Prime Minister John Howard's office. Though Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) president Jennie George and NSW Labor Council secretary Michael Costa led the march, neither addressed the rally. Instead the platform was given over to workers organised to speak by the union bureaucracy.

The following day, the ACTU rally outside Parliament House in Canberra, the site of a large demonstration against the first Industrial Relations Bill in 1996, only attracted a few hundred demonstrators.

Mark Smith, a metal worker who attended the Sydney rally, told WWS: "I have no confidence that the Democrats will do anything to stop the legislation. I've been working in the railways for 14 years and I have been to lots of union demonstrations in that time and nothing changes."

NSW teachers stop work

Teachers from New South Wales public schools and technical colleges walked off the job for two hours on Friday. They attended statewide membership meetings over the Carr Labor government's refusal to discuss a new wage agreement. The teachers are seeking a pay increase along the lines of the 7.5 percent rise gained by private school teachers.

The government has refused to begin negotiations even though the current pay agreement expired two months ago. Education Minister John Aquilina said this week the government would not even consider a pay rise unless teachers first agreed to a series of trade-offs.

Print workers locked out

Twenty production workers employed at the Maitland

Mercury newspaper, near Newcastle, were locked out this week after protracted negotiations over an enterprise bargaining agreement broke down.

In response, the workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union print division, set up a picket after first attempting to push their way into the office building to confront management.

The union has been discussing the new work agreement with the company for five months. During the dispute the management attempted to recruit non-union labour to produce the next edition of the newspaper. The workers were allowed to return to work on Thursday.

Contract workers end strike

Dannum United workers ended a three-week long strike on Wednesday after the company agreed to pay income insurance and a 4 percent pay increase for the next 12 months.

The contract workers, employed to carry out work at the Shell oil refinery in Geelong, have been picketing the plant since the outbreak of the dispute. A Shell spokesman said the industrial action had cost the company \$1 million in lost production.

Passenger drivers strike

More than 100 drivers of passenger motor vehicles (PMVs) in Papua New Guinea's Central District, east of Port Moresby, began a three-day strike last Tuesday. The drivers are attempting to force government authorities to do something about the condition of the Magi Highway that has sharply deteriorated after continuous heavy rain.

Spokesman for the drivers, Waea Iamge, said many of the highways in the electorate needed urgent maintenance work. "The Magi Highway is so bad, that sometimes the passengers have to off-load their cargoes and carry them past the bad parts. This was the only way to allow vehicles to get through safely,"

A meeting of drivers demanded that the Works Department and Central District Governor Opa Taureka explain what would be done to repair the highway. The strike will affect Madubu, Omen, Kapari, Kupiano and Maiyaguru villages and those at the end of Magi Highway who rely on PMVs to bring their goods to the city markets.



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