

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 November 1999

## **Sri Lankan plantation workers stop closure**

Chelsi Estate management announced at the end of October that they would reopen the estate's tea factory, which was closed last February after they claimed it was unprofitable. The announcement came after more than 600 plantation workers went on strike on October 18 to protest the closure. The Malwaththa Plantation Company owns the estate.

Despite the company's promise, workers are distrustful that management will keep its word. One worker said: "We have no confidence that the factory will be reopened as promised. Our union leaders have done nothing to stop the closure and defend our jobs". The majority of workers on the estate are covered by Ceylon Workers Congress lead by S. Thondaman, a minister in the Sri Lankan government.

## **Burmese workers in Thailand deported**

The owners of 150 factories in the Tak region have sacked thousands of Burmese workers to avoid being charged with harboring "illegal labour". The layoffs took place this week just ahead of a government crack down.

The provincial governor, Nira Vajjanaphum, ordered a force of 2,000 policemen, soldiers, government officials and "volunteers" into the area to conduct a roundup. Compounds and tents were set up at Ban Rim Moei on the Burma border to detain the workers who were seized before being deported. There have been reports that a number of protests by Burmese workers have broken out.

Some 75,000 workers are "illegally" employed in industry, trade and farming in the region and another 20,000 are working as domestics.

## **Hong Kong housing staff boycott elections duties**

Over 3,000 public sector workers and their supporters held a noisy rally at the Chater Garden in central Hong Kong this week to protest the government's plan to privatise the Housing Department and axe jobs.

One speaker told the rally. "If privatisation goes ahead, the quality of public housing will deteriorate. Contracting

out the work of the Housing Department will put the lives of public housing tenants in danger."

The workers warned they would escalate industrial action including banning work for the District Board elections due on 28 November. The workers handle all the promotional work for the candidates, from processing their bookings for public appearance to distributing and displaying their promotional material.

A spokesman for the workers said that further action was inevitable: "We have already stated our stand on the issue clearly and held large-scale demonstrations on four other occasions, but there is still no response from the management," he said.

## **Estrada government faces widespread protests**

Members of the Confederation for the Unity Recognition and Advancement of Government Employees (Courage), that covers public sector workers in the Philippines, will launch protests on November 8 to oppose the scrapping of the year-end 7,200 peso amelioration pay by the Estrada government.

The workers will stage pickets outside the House of Representatives and the Senate to launch the campaign and many workers have announced that they will impose go slows in their respective areas before then.

On November 16 the public sector workers will join their colleagues employed in the country's private enterprises in mass rallies in 36 provinces, including Metro Manila, to press for a 3,000 peso across-the-board monthly wage increase and the rolling back of oil prices.

The government has repeatedly refused to consider any of the demands. President Estrada said this week: "I've already explained to them that we are still in a crisis, and that we have to sacrifice."

Representatives of several labour organisations including Bayan, Kilusang Mayo Uno, the CIU and Courage, will meet early next week to consider if they will call a nationwide strike.

## **Patrick's threatens sackings**

Patrick Stevedoring threatened this week to sack or suspend workers at its Port Botany terminal in Sydney if they continued a go-slow over safety. The workers claim that much of the equipment at the terminal is unsafe and this has resulted in a number of accidents.

Over the past few days 17 of the 25 straddle cranes on the site have been sent to the maintenance depot for safety reasons.

Last year Patricks was at the centre of a protracted dispute after it sacked its entire national workforce and replaced it with scab labour.

### **Rail workers oppose job cuts**

More than 100 rail workers went on strike on Thursday in opposition to plans by Queensland Rail and the state Labor government to slash 2,500 jobs over the next five years. The strike hit freight and haulage services on the Bowen Basin coal line between Moranbah and Dysart and the coal loading port of Hay Point.

Strike action is expected to follow in other regions throughout the state in the coming days. A union spokesman confirmed that they had received phone calls from rail workers in Gladstone, Coppabella and other country centres indicating that they are planning work stoppages early next week.

### **Australian miners strike over job cuts**

Miners at the Rio Tinto owned Mount Thorley open cut coal mine, near Singleton in the NSW's Hunter Valley, struck for 24 hours on Thursday in opposition to management plans to retrench 100 workers from the 220-strong workforce. The sackings will take place over the next two weeks.

The mine was the site of a series of protest strikes in 1996 when the company cut 240 jobs as part of restructuring its Hunter Valley operations. Even though miners at Mount Thorley's sister mine, Hunter Valley No 1, were engaged in a protracted strike over job cuts at that time, the mining union kept the disputes isolated. The union later struck deals with the company allowing the downsizing to go ahead.

### **Queensland worker injured**

The Queensland Department of Workplace Health and Safety is investigating what it termed a "horror industrial accident" at an engineering workshop in the northern town of Mackay.

A worker's legs were badly mangled this week after he was trapped in a mining machine under repair at the plant. Ambulance officers reported that the injured man was suspended more than three metres above the ground for over an hour before emergency crews could free him. He

was rushed to the Mackay Base Hospital for emergency surgery and is reported to be in a "stable" condition.

### **Teachers push for pay increase**

Teachers in New South Wales public schools will stop work for half a day next Friday and attend meetings to decide on further action to press the state Labor government for a 7.5 percent pay increase. Over 10,000 teachers, currently marking student's Higher School Certificate exams, held a two-day strike this week over the claim and are planning to suspend work on marking the remaining exam papers.

The government has refused to budge on its offer of an annual 2 percent increase over the next four years.

A spokesman for teachers in the State's Catholic Schools announced this week that they will join the public sector campaign after the Catholic Education Office said that it intended to conduct its wage negotiations on the basis of the Government's proposal. The Catholic schoolteachers will hold half-day stop work meetings in two weeks time. The government has now referred the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission.

### **New Zealand health workers protest**

About 125 nurses and midwives from the Masterton Hospital, in Wairarapa, staged a noisy march and a rally on Wednesday to protest staff shortages and poor working conditions. The nurses went on strike earlier this week and have been picketing hospital gates.

The hospital management axed 10 full-time jobs last year in an attempt to cut \$2 million from the Wairarapa Health Department's deficit.

One nurse told the rally that the cuts forced them to stay late on duty, miss meal breaks and work extra shifts. Some staff have also had rostered-days-off and holidays cancelled. "This leads to tiredness, stress and sickness, all of which lead to unsafe practices," she warned.

Another nurse said: "The strike is not about money but about patient safety and working conditions. We do not want to continue working in situations where we end a shift without a major catastrophe only by good luck. We are serious about the safety concerns we have raised with them."

The strike has seen elective surgery at the hospital cancelled and "non-essential services" cut back.



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