

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 March 2000

## Picket attacked by police in Philippines

On March 10, 30 hotel workers were injured when police brutally attacked and demolished a picket line outside the prestigious Manila Hotel at Intramuros, in the Philippines. Some 100 police used truncheons and water cannon against the members of the Manila Hotel Employees Association (MHEA). Another 10 workers and a number of students who were supporting the pickets were arrested.

The following day the police detained 11 more strikers claiming that they had hurled stones at them during the previous day's clash. The authorities decided to move against the picket because it had become a centre for mobilising support for the striking hotel workers. Only days before, women from the KMU Labor Centre and from the women's organisation GABRIELA, as well as students, had joined the picket line.

The workers went on strike on February 10 after the hotel management sacked union officials and other union activists to intimidate workers into withdrawing their demands for improved salaries and working conditions. The hotel's management contains a number of former police and army officers.

There have been repeated police attacks on the strikers. Three days into the strike police, including members of the Special Operations Action Team, used batons in an attack on 300 picketing workers and arrested 12. The next day the police broke up a 200-strong rally staged by members of the union and labour group Callusing Mayo No. Four of the rally's organisers were arrested and later charged with illegal assembly and physical violence against police.

The hotel workers and their supporters held a press conference on March 11 and declared that they would reestablish the picket.

## Chinese workers killed in fireworks explosion

On March 1, 33 workers were killed and 10 others injured when an explosion tore apart a fireworks factory in Pingxiang, Jiangxi province. Two of the injured workers remain in a critical condition.

One of the factory owners died in the morning blast. The other owner was away on business when the explosion occurred and police are looking for him. A spokesman for the Pingxiang fire brigade said an investigation was continuing and the provincial government had dispatched a team to conduct inquiries.

The factory, which has been in operation for five years, was unlicensed. Provincial authorities had not moved to close the premises down. Fireworks workshops are notoriously unsafe and explosions causing multiply deaths are a common occurrence.

## Korean steel workers march against job cuts

A contingent of workers sacked by Sammi Steel earlier this year marched through the streets of Daejeon, one of the largest cities in South Korea, on March 11. At the same time, another group of 40 steelworkers marched into Chongju.

The marchers who were joined by other workers and supporters staged rallies in both cities. The demonstrations are part of a two-week long march to Seoul in protest against layoffs. The marches began on March 7 in Pusan, in the southeastern corner of South Korea and later divided

along two different routes. The marchers are due to arrive in Seoul on March 18 and will participate in a rally organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, the second largest peak union body.

## Indian farm workers demonstrate for improved conditions

Thousands of farm workers staged mass demonstrations outside government offices throughout the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on March 14, demanding the full implementation of the Kolappan Committee's recommendations for an improvement in their living conditions. Hundreds were arrested, including scores of women workers, after State police clashed with the protesters. The demonstrations were organised by the Communist Party of India (CPI).

The Kolappan recommendations include: trade union rights, a minimum wage for farm workers, as well as a range of conditions such as old age pensions, maternity leave, compensation for accidents and other health benefits.

A day before the Tamil Nadu demonstrations, representatives from 43 national organisations representing millions of farm workers met in New Delhi. The meeting issued an appeal to farmer organisations, including those attached to the CPI and other political parties, to organise demonstrations in all states.

General secretary of the All India Khet Mazdoor Union (All India Agricultural Laborers Union) said that promises by several state governments to introduce legislation to extend and protect the rights and conditions of agricultural workers had not been fulfilled.

Despite the fact that the CPI organised the protests in Tamil Nadu, the party itself bears a central responsibility for the conditions of farm workers. During the former national United Front coalition government CPI leader Chaturanan Mishra was the Union Minister for Agriculture.

## Railway workers pay docked in New Delhi

Booking staff in rail stations in New Delhi threatened to take industrial action this week because many have had their salaries docked. Their employer, the RBI, began deducting the money months ago alleging that the staff had been accepting fake banknotes. Most of the forgeries are 500 rupee notes. The company claims that over 50,000 rupees in fake currency are taken every month.

Booking staff are under tremendous pressure because of the large volume of people wishing to purchase tickets and the fake notes are extremely difficult to tell apart from genuine currency. In many branches the workers are now refusing to accept 500 rupee notes.

## Sri Lankan metal workers picket

Over 500 metal workers locked out by Amico, a metal products company in Rathmalana, Colombo, picketed outside the Labor Department on March 14 to demand the company reopen the factory and negotiate a log of claims.

The workers were locked out on March 3 after they began a work-to-rule campaign and imposed a ban on overtime. The previous day the company had suspended two union leaders. The workers are demanding that Amico recognise the union, give permanency for contract and casual workers and give a common salary increment for all employees.

Amico informed the Assistant Labor Commissioner of Western Colombo that it could not grant the workers' demands because the company was "unprofitable". However, management rejected a demand by the workforce that it open its account books for investigation.

Current pay rates at the company are only \$US65 per month for permanent workers, while casual workers receive between \$US1.50 and \$US2 a day.

#### **Construction companies lockout workers in Victoria**

Building employers in Victoria have threatened to extend the lockout they began on Wednesday for three months, to defeat a campaign by building workers for the reduction of the working week to 36-hours and 24 per cent pay rise over the next three years. Employers have carried out a series of previous lockouts, mainly barring construction workers entering work sites for weekend overtime.

The dispute began earlier this year following the termination of the previous enterprise bargaining agreement governing working conditions in Victoria's construction industry. While media reports give the impression that the union is waging an aggressive militant campaign, industrial action so far has been limited to a one-day strike on February 7 and a series of protest stoppages.

Bans imposed at key sporting venues early in the campaign, including the new Docklands football stadium and the Grand Prix track, were lifted to enable major events to proceed without a hitch. The unions claim that 400 smaller subcontractors have already signed up for the 36-hour week.

The union is also preparing to exempt some major employers from future industrial action. Prior to the present lockout the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) held talks on a separate deal with a number of leading companies, including Multiplex, Grocon, Bovis Lend Lease, Walter Constructions and Probuild. The deal includes a 37-hour week, giving workers an extra 9 days off per year, and 15 per cent pay rise.

However, the extra days off will be phased in over two years, three days this year and six at the end of next year, and they will be grouped around existing industry shut-down periods "in order to minimise disruption to the industry".

Federation Square, the \$260 million Multiplex project in Melbourne, already operates with a 36-hour week. A deal governing conditions on the site was struck between Multiplex and the CFMEU last year under the auspices of the former Kennett Liberal government. The shorter week is directly tied to productivity. If the project is ahead of schedule then workers are awarded the extra days off.

The move for a 36-hour week is popular among building workers because it would give them an extra day off each month. Construction workers are presently forced to work excessive amounts of overtime to meet schedules and improve their take home pay. Some are working on average between 50 and 70 hours per week. The extended hours have been a factor in the large death and accident toll on building sites. Last year 12 workers were killed on construction sites in Victoria.

#### **Broadcasting journalists strike**

More than 600 journalists struck for 24 hours on March 15 after negotiations broke down with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) over a new enterprise agreement. The journalists' union, which covers about 25 percent of the broadcaster's staff and journalists, claimed they had no choice but to strike after 18 months of failed negotiations.

The other signatory to the current agreement, the Community and Public Sector Union—which represents non-journalists and about 75 percent of the ABC employees—has not supported the strike. The CPSU secretary, Graeme Thomson, said the union was close to striking a separate agreement with the ABC and saw no reason to join in industrial action.

#### **Sweatshop conditions exposed in New Zealand**

The Employment Tribunal in Auckland this week began investigating claims made by four Thai women that they were "underpaid, mistreated

and forced to endure long hours and substandard living conditions" while working at a garment factory in Glen Eden. Wiliwan Sivoravona, a Thai businesswoman, owns the factory. Sivoravona operated two backyard garment workshops in New Zealand under the names of KC Fashions and Sivoravong Fashions.

One of the woman workers, Panja Hirikokul, told the Tribunal she was recruited in February 1997, when a man in her village yelled through a loudspeaker that a New Zealand firm was looking for workers. All four women had been told that they would only be required to work from 8am to 5pm and would earn up to \$NZ2,000 a month. They were also told that their food and accommodation would be free. However, on arriving in New Zealand they were taken to a three-bedroom house to live with nine other workers and forced to work 70 hours a week.

The women had their passports taken from them and made to sign a blank piece of paper, later used to falsify work-related documents. They were also told to sign a pay book containing inaccurate figures. Sivoravona told the women that she had a friend working in immigration who would inform her of any complaints.

On average, the workers received only \$575 a month. One worker received no pay for six months because she owed Sivoravona for her visa and airfare. She had to rely on other workers to feed her on Sundays, a day when no meals were provided. When her leg became infected and was badly swollen, she was carried to a van and taken to the factory to do "light work".

The Department of Labor closed one of the factories belonging to Sivoravona down after a raid last October, but she continued operations at the other. The women's testimonies at the Tribunal reveal the atrocious conditions experienced by many migrant workers who are lured overseas by promises of decent pay and free housing.

#### **PNG health workers vote to strike**

The Papua New Guinea Community Health Workers Association (CHWA), covering over 4,000 workers, went on strike this week in an attempt to force the government to pay outstanding back-pay.

A CHWA spokesman said the government had failed to honor a "memorandum of understanding" it signed with the union last August promising to pay in the second fortnight of January this year. He said members would not return to work until every worker was paid and the records of such payments were forwarded to the association's office.

Workers in nine districts across the country—Morobe, West and East Sepik, Eastern and Western Highlands, Enga, Gulf, Central and National Capital district—overwhelmingly endorsed the recommendation for strike action.

#### **Mine workers stood down in New Caledonia**

Societe Le Nickel (SLN), a New Caledonia mining company, stood-down 200 workers from its mining sites in Kouaoua and Nepoui this week. The company action followed three months of protests and work bans by members of SOENC (Workers Employees Union) after the company threatened to cut jobs.

Industrial action has erupted on and off since January, when workers prevented the loading of nickel ore cargo at New Caledonia's only smelter in Doniambo, near Noumea. The company stood down the workers this week after they refused to release a vessel carrying 8,000 tons of nickel ore.

After talks between SLN and SOENC this week failed to reach an agreement, the New Caledonian government said it would intervene in the dispute and has now appointed a team of "conciliators" to meet with the parties.



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