

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 June 2000

## **Sri Lankan rubber factory suspends 47 workers using emergency laws**

Ratnayaka Rubber Industries (RRI) has suspended 47 workers after a two-and-a-half-month strike was ended on June 5 under the government's emergency laws banning strikes and other union activities.

The factory, which relines used car tyres, is situated in Boralasgamuwa, a suburb of Colombo. Workers were forced to end their campaign by the All Ceylon Mercantile and Industrial Workers Union (ACMIW) and its leader S. Siriwardena. The ACMIW is affiliated to the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), which is a partner of the ruling Peoples Alliance.

The suspended workers who were active in the strike, have to face a disciplinary investigation. If convicted they are likely to be sacked. Upon resuming work management changed a number of conditions for workers. Washing up time after work was reduced from one hour to 15 minutes, tea breaks were stopped and tea is now served on the factory floor during work. Workers are no longer allowed to answer incoming calls or meet visitors during working hours.

These measures have been imposed despite an assurance given by management to the union not to harass any worker. After a picketing and poster campaign that lasted for two weeks, workers began their strike on March 14 demanding a salary increase of 500 rupee (\$US7). Management responded to the strike by issuing letters sacking workers. Workers refused to bow down to management's intimidation but the leaders of the ACMIWU blocked the strikers from obtaining support from other union members.

## **Filipino maids in Hong Kong rally against government**

About 150 Filipino maids held a protest rally last Sunday in Hong Kong's central business district

protesting what they say is the squandering of their money by the Philippines government on festivities whilst ignoring their problems.

Every Sunday tens of thousands of Filipino maids gather in Hong Kong's CBD. For many it is their only day off. Around 140,000 Filipinos work as maids under strict conditions. Connie Bragas-Regalado, chairwoman of United Filipinos, said the Philippines consulate had been imposing higher fees on migrant workers while cutting down on services such as providing accommodation for unemployed workers stranded in Hong Kong. "Officials indulge in luxury," she said, citing the dinner and fashion show held last week to mark Migrants Day.

Migrants Day supposedly celebrates the contributions and difficulties of about six million overseas Filipino workers who send back billions of dollars to the Philippines each year.

## **South Korean union officials on hunger strike**

Lee Pu-yong, head of the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (KTU), began his 12th day of a hunger strike last Sunday after negotiations with the Ministry of Education over a 15.2 percent wage rise broke down. Ten other representatives of the KTU joined him four days earlier as the hunger strike continued in a street behind the Government Complex in Seoul.

The 70,000-strong KTU is also demanding that teachers be allowed to

participate in union activity during working hours, reversing a ban imposed by the government last July. The KTU is seeking the establishment of a joint committee to discuss educational policy with government officials. The government has rejected all of the KTU's demands. The KTU is part of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, which began widespread strike action last week demanding wage rises and a 5-day working week.

Meanwhile, the Korean Union of Teaching and Educational Workers voted to have representatives participate in a sit-in on June 7. The union, which has a membership of 30,000, is also demanding a consultative committee with the government.

## **Indian university teachers and staff continue strike**

Teachers and staff at the Bhupendra Narayan Mandal University have been on an indefinite strike since May 5 against the refusal of campus management to pay teachers a wage entitlement owing since March last year. The strike has closed all of the university's 27 colleges.

In an effort to intimidate the strikers the management has locked out the strikers and the university's vice-chancellor is offering some teachers the money owing to them to try and end the dispute whilst strike leaders have been transferred out of the university.

## **Indonesian bus workers strike**

Bus crews at the Baranangsiang bus terminal in Bogor went on strike on Monday against a policy by the terminal authority that benefits buses from the rival Kramat Djati bus company. Under the new policy, Kramat Djati buses have been allocated a special lane that allows them to pick up passengers without lining up with the other buses. The policy was bought in without discussion with other bus crews, and the protesters accused the company of bribing terminal officials with up to Rp100 million.

The protesters also called on officials to abolish fees for parking at the terminal overnight, Rp 12,000, and for entering and leaving, Rp 2,000.

During the protest, bus crews parked their buses in front of the gates to prevent any vehicles entering, and threw rocks at the terminal manager's office and a fee collection booth. Dozens of police were called in to contain the protest, and thousands of passengers were left stranded. At a meeting with bus operators later in the day, Bogor councillors agreed to cancel the special lane and eliminate illegal levies.

## **Chinese factory fire kills eight**

A factory fire last Saturday in the southern port city of Xiamen killed eight female workers. The fire began at around 3 am at the Xiamen Fuji Electrochemical plant whilst 252 people were working. The cause of the fire, which began in a northern part of the factory, has not been made public although a preliminary investigation has been conducted. The Public Security Ministry has admitted that factory fires and explosions have become frequent phenomena across China. In the first quarter of this year, 971 people have been killed in 36,832 fires.

## **Australian bank workers strike over wages and staff**

Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) workers held a 24-hour strike yesterday, closing, 1,080 branches across the country. Bank workers are protesting against low staffing levels and demanding a wage increase of

13 percent over two years as part of a new enterprise agreement. Talks between the Finance Sector Union (FSU) and the bank have broken down.

A FSU spokesperson said CBA workers were paid 6 percent less than other bank employees and were forced to bear the brunt of customer complaints over the long queues that have become common inside banks. The CBA has offered staff a two percent pay rise with performance bonuses. The union said the CBA was understaffing its branches to force customers to use the Internet and telephone for banking. A survey of 150 branches found that half had about 15 percent fewer staff than the CBA's own staffing model. Over the last two years, the CBA has made record profits and continues to cut staffing levels nationally.

#### **Public hospital doctors begin stoppages**

Doctors from Ballarat and Frankston hospitals in Victoria have initiated rolling stoppages without the support of the Australian Medical Association (AMA). The stoppages are in response to changes made to the tax system that would force public hospital doctors and specialists to take up to a 30 percent pay cut. The tax changes are due to be implemented on July 1 with the introduction of a Goods and Services Tax.

The Victorian AMA president, Michael Sedgley, said the association was not behind the stoppages but admitted that the AMA could be forced by members to call mass meetings if the dispute was not resolved by the end of the week.

#### **Food workers strike over unfair sacking**

Three hundred and eighty production workers at the McCain food factory in the central Victorian town of Ballarat went on strike last Friday after a union shop steward, Robert Cook, was sacked. Workers immediately set up a picket line outside McCain's french fry production plant and also blocked the pizza production plant entry.

Cook was sacked after 25 years of service with the company. He was involved in a heated altercation with management and walked out of a meeting. Cook was denied union representation when subsequently questioned by management. The matter is due to be heard by the Industrial Relations Commission.

#### **BHP granted injunction to stop iron ore workers strike**

Around 500 iron ore workers in Western Australia's Pilbara region were due to hold a 24-hour strike on Wednesday and a series of rolling stoppages at BHP's Port Hedland and Mt. Newman mines after the Construction, Forestry, Metalworkers and Engineers Union (CFMEU) was unsuccessful in modifying an agreement offered by the company in March.

Company/union negotiations were abruptly stopped on Monday when BHP won an injunction to stop the strike action pending the outcome of a hearing in the Federal Court on Wednesday. On Wednesday evening the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) subsequently lost an appeal to overturn the injunction. The CFMEU agreed to halt industrial action.

BHP is continuing its push to sign workers up to individual contracts. Although many workers oppose the agreements, others have seen only a marginal difference in pay and conditions between BHP's workplace agreements and the enterprise agreements offered by the union. BHP has been able to substantially increase productivity through individual agreements at its other sites. At Hamersley production has increased by up to 12 percent.

BHP is stepping up its campaign of intimidation through the courts and at its sites. On Monday, ten workers from BHP's hot briquetted iron project at Port Hedland were sacked. They were employed by the South West contracting agency and were dismissed after attending a union meeting on health and safety. Two of the ten were injured workers.

At the meeting, workers raised concerns about site dangers and the company's ill treatment of those who had raised complaints. The contractor has since offered to rehire the workers to avert industrial action.

#### **Truck drivers end blockade**

A two-week-long blockade of major Victorian roads by long distance

truck drivers has been called off after union officials from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) claimed that the federal government had gone part of the way to satisfy the driver's demands. Drivers voted for a four-week moratorium on blockades as union officials meet with the Federal Transport Minister next week.

The truck drivers had been protesting at low cartage rates, late payments and lack of industry regulation. The government has since announced it will not legislate to improve working conditions for owner-drivers.

#### **Australian garbage workers hold stop work meetings**

Garbage workers in New South Wales attended stop work meetings on Thursday and Friday to discuss safety concerns in the industry. A worker had been forced to organise and pay for his own blood tests after being injured when struck by a needle. His employer offered no counselling after the incident.

His injury is the latest in a series of needle-stick injuries. One of the demands raised is that workers in the industry be provided with hepatitis B shots when they commence employment.

The meetings demanded that government authorities implement better safety standards for garbage workers. A combined delegates meeting is being held next Wednesday and it is expected that a strike involving 2,000 waste workers across the state will be called.

#### **Chicken process workers strike**

Over 1,000 Steggle's chicken-processing workers at the company's Newcastle plant walked off the job on Tuesday for 24 hours to protest a collapse in pay negotiations. Steggle's has rejected a proposed enterprise agreement negotiated over the last four months.

The striking workers included truck drivers, process workers, catchers, maintenance workers, clerks and electricians. They held a meeting on Wednesday demanding the company respond to their claims. They returned to work that afternoon and the company has listed the dispute in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

#### **Australian bakery workers end 24-hour strike**

Workers at the Sunicrust bread factory in the Victorian town of Ballarat ended a 24-hour strike last Friday after negotiations resumed between the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and management over a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The strike was called after negotiations underway since last November, broke down.

#### **PNG teachers continue campaigns over wages and conditions**

Teachers from the New Guinea Islands held a meeting in East New Britain last Saturday and voted to withdraw their services at the beginning of the third term if the government does not consider their demand for a 100 percent pay rise. Teachers rejected Education Minister Dr John Waiko's assurance that he would deal with their case in the new financial year. Teachers said that if they did not receive a positive response from the minister another meeting would be held and strike action would begin on July 17.

In the Eastern Highlands province over 200 teachers demonstrated in front of the Yanepa Building before presenting two petitions to Governor Peti Lafanama demanding a 200 percent salary increase for all teachers, from elementary to secondary schools. The teachers are also demanding a 100 percent rise in higher duty allowances and questioned the provincial administrator on the payment of fare entitlements, owing since 1994.

These actions followed a boycott last month by teachers in the Western Highlands pressing for a 200 per cent wage rise and demands from teachers in the Morobe Province and the Mamose region seeking a 100 percent rise.

The demand for pay increases is almost unanimous throughout Papua New Guinea with teachers in most provinces demanding increases of 100 to 200 percent. The Teachers Association has submitted a claim to the government for an increase of just 55 percent.

#### **New Zealand timber workers picket to defend jobs**

Workers in the New Zealand forestry town of Tokoroa picketed a

sawmill plant owned by Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) this week in an attempt to defend their jobs. The workers claim that CHH, the region's largest employer and one of New Zealand's major companies, is trying to force them into redundancy as it implements plans to shift part of its operations south to its Taupo site.

Planning and processing workers at the Tokoroa plant were handed voluntary redundancy notices in April and told to sign them within two days. Union delegate Megan Jones-Mamanu said 19 process workers were handed notices on April 7 stating that their jobs would end two days later.

Workers last week organised a march through Tokoroa to protest the job losses. Sawmill worker Robert Popata said the redundancies would hit the town hard. "We've had families working here for three generations. It will be a real blow for the community".

Maurice Reid, general manager of CHH's wood products division, claimed the Tokoroa sawmill was ill-equipped to deal with the type and volume of work the company required. Despite the fact that the job losses were long expected and followed a series of other redundancies in the industry, unions have organised no campaign to defend these or any other jobs.

When the workers at Tokoroa were handed the notices, their union merely sought an interim injunction to slow down the immediate sackings on the grounds that the proper redundancy procedures had not been followed. Once this had been clarified, the company got the go-ahead to carry through the job cuts and two weeks ago announced that 30 staff would lose their jobs.

The union then moved to divert workers into another dispute over terms of the redundancies, claiming that a new interpretation of the relevant clauses meant that a maximum payment for 20 years' service would be made, when some workers affected had been there for almost 40 years. The union has made no attempt to organise any timber workers at any of CHH's other sites, including Taupo, in any action to defend the jobs.



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