

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 June 2000

## **Sri Lankan factory workers demand union recognition**

Some 250 workers from the Synthetic factory at Sapugaskanda in Colombo suburbs picketed in front of the Labor Ministry on June 14, demanding recognition of their union, the Inter Company Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP).

Situated near a government owned oil-refining plant, the factory area has been declared a "high security zone" due to the ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka. Police have used this designation to prevent the workers picketing or protesting for their demands at the factory proper.

The factory was originally owned by the state Petroleum Corporation, producing canvas, fishing nets and mosquito nets. As part of a privatisation program, it was sold to a South Korean entrepreneur in 1992. Production was changed to Chaptal cloth, used in the manufacture of umbrellas, and productivity was driven up by job cutting.

The working conditions in the factory have deteriorated markedly since the privatisation. New workers have been recruited as casuals. Their pay rate is only 2,550 rupees per month (\$US34) and they are denied any extra allowances. The monthly wage of a permanent worker is 3,070 rupees (\$US41). Some workers have been employed for four years as casuals, despite company agreements to grant permanency after two years. Female workers are forced to work night shifts, but there is only one rest room for about 300 women workers and it is closed down at night.

The workers do not have basic health and industrial protection equipment and many workers have fallen sick due to the poisonous chemicals used in the factory. Workers allege that the death of one of their co-workers three months ago, Choolathissa Kuruppu Arachchi, was due to chemical poisoning. Recently, four workers have cut their hands at the factory. No worker in the plant has been given compensation for work-related illness or industrial accidents.

## **Teachers protest in Hong Kong**

Over 6,000 teachers held a protest march last Saturday to the government headquarters in central Hong Kong. They were protesting against the government's plans to introduce a benchmark test for English teachers. The teachers demanded the government apologise for trying to introduce the tests and that they scrap the exams.

The teachers are outraged over plans by the Education and Manpower Bureau to force 14,000 English and 4,300 Putonghua teachers to take these tests in October. A petition signed by more than 37,000 teachers was handed to government representatives after the march. Despite government assurances, teachers fear that those that fail the test will be dismissed.

## **Philippine students picket universities over fee increases**

Students held simultaneous pickets as classes at the tertiary level opened in Metro Manila last Tuesday. Hundreds of students picketed the gates of universities along the University Belt on C.M. Recto Street and Taft Avenue. Mass actions were also held at the University of the Philippines in Diliman, Quezon City.

They were led by a number of student representative groups including Anakbayan, the Union of Students of the Philippines (NUSP) and the

College Editors Guild of the Philippines (CEGP).

Since February, students have been protesting against increases in tuition fees and budget cuts to education. In the University of the East, 10 student leaders who participated in last semester's protest are now facing a one-year suspension and expulsion from the university. Despite student boycotts at eight Metro Manila universities last semester, 80 schools in Metro Manila raised their tuition fees by an average of 15 percent. Increases have been introduced in 420 campuses across the country.

## **Indonesian minivan drivers strike**

Hundreds of public minivan drivers struck on Monday over plans by the City Land and Transport Agency (DLLAJ) to allow another 40 minivans to work the same routes as them. The drivers say that there are currently 1,500 minivans competing for fares on the 15-kilometre route of Parung Semplank Bogor.

The drivers were also angered by the poorly advertised 200-rupee increase in the bus fare on June 1. They held the authorities responsible for the fact that passengers had refused to pay the increase and vented their anger on the drivers.

During Monday's strike, the drivers parked their minivans along Jl Semeru and refused to take any passengers. On Tuesday they were joined by bus crews from four other routes who parked along the Kedung Halang intersection.

Thousands of commuters were forced to find alternative transportation during the strike, with motorcycle taxis, pedicabs and horse and carriage drivers increasing their fares substantially to take advantage of the bus shortage. Police attacked commuters who set alight tyres on major roads in protest.

Negotiations between DLLAJ and drivers reached a stalemate on Tuesday with drivers refusing to talk any further and threatening to destroy their vehicles.

## **South Korean hotel workers begin strike**

Workers at the Seoul Lotte Hotel began strike action on Friday last week, demanding a 17 percent wage increase, the promotion of casual workers to full time status and the abolition of a unilateral arbitration system in worker-management negotiations. The 1,500-room hotel operates with 40 percent of staff working as casuals.

The vote for a walkout won 95 percent support among workers. The Lotte Hotel was the press centre for more than 1,000 local and foreign journalists who were in Seoul this week to cover the North/South Korean Summit Meeting. The government also had conference rooms booked in the hotel. The strike meant that none of the rooms were serviced or any of the banquets prepared. Only a skeleton staff remained on hand to assist with the press centre.

## **Japanese chemical plant explosion kills three**

An explosion last Saturday evening at the Nisshim Chemical Company 65 miles north of Tokyo killed four workers and left 28 injured.

Hundreds of residents in the area were evacuated and a nearby highway closed after fears that the blast had released toxic chemical gases. So great was the force of the explosion that the entire plant was destroyed and

windows from vehicles and houses several hundred metres away were shattered.

Nisshim produces agricultural chemicals, pharmaceuticals and sulphuric acid with a hydroxylamine compound that is unstable and prone to explode at temperatures around 130 degrees Celsius. The blast took place whilst workers were mixing hydroxylamine with a water solution at a plant distillery tower. Hydroxylamine is used to remove oxygen from other substances.

Zoning laws in Japan are not stringent and it is common to have houses built in close proximity to chemical and industrial plants. An investigation is currently in progress as the plant had a similar explosion two years ago.

#### **Eight-year old Indian maid murdered**

Early last week, a 26-year old research scholar and father of a three-year-old was arrested for the murder of an eight-year old girl who was working for him as a domestic servant. The New Delhi scholar has been accused of inflicting 27 injuries to the girl by beating her with a stick. One of the blows to the head subsequently caused internal bleeding.

This case is one of many involving violence in New Delhi towards domestic servants, many of them young children. In November last year, a 10-year old servant hung himself from a ceiling fan after assaulting his employer's two-year-old son. He had left written messages about his ill-treatment before he killed himself.

In the same month a 15-year old girl also hung herself. Her employer was charged with abetting suicide after it was discovered that he had beaten and harassed the girl before her death.

Another teenage servant in Delhi survived a serious assault, including a fall from a third-floor roof, after his employer accused him of stealing. The employer has been charged with attempted murder. Another 12-year old servant was rescued last week after it was discovered he had been locked in a room for months by his West Delhi employer.

#### **Australian school teachers strike and hold mass meetings**

Thousands of teachers throughout Queensland went on strike on Wednesday and attended meetings, over the state government's refusal to agree to their demands for a new enterprise agreement. The teachers' log of claims includes a pay-rise, better working conditions and reduced class sizes.

There were 68 meetings held across the state. Over 3,000 teachers attended the meeting at Brisbane's Festival Hall. Hundreds of teachers marched on Education House after the meeting and to the office of the state Labor Education Minister Dean Wells. Teachers have seen the state school system deteriorating for many years, with special needs students getting little support, funding cuts and class sizes getting larger.

The government had tried to prevent the strike by issuing an application to remove protected action status from the strike and to order a ban on current and future actions by the teachers union. The application was rejected by the Industrial Relations Commission.

Last weekend, the Queensland Teachers Union had offered to defer the strike if the government was prepared to make commitments on working conditions and offered a pay rise of four percent. At the meetings, the union only proposed that a ballot be held next month on another 24-hour strike, if their demands had not been met.

#### **Bank merger leads to staff cuts in Tasmania**

Bank staff in Tasmania face an uncertain future with last Wednesday's merger of the Colonial Trust Bank and the Commonwealth Bank. Up to 80 staff at the Colonial bank's processing unit in Hobart have been told to accept redundancy packages or lower graded jobs. The processing unit is to be closed and moved interstate.

The Finance Sector Union (FSU) has not opposed the job destruction, but instead claimed that the redundancies were not properly handled. The matter went before the Industrial Relations Commission last week in Melbourne and the workers were given two more weeks to make a decision as to whether they would accept the lower graded positions.

The job cuts are just the tip of the iceberg of what is to come as the Commonwealth and Colonial banks carry out massive restructuring throughout the country. A FSU Tasmanian branch spokesperson contacted by the WWSW claimed that hundreds of jobs will be eliminated over the coming period and that up to 19 bank branches could close as a result.

#### **Union agreement at South Australian university leads to job cuts**

What has been termed as a breakthrough in negotiations by the union on a new pay agreement at the University of South Australia has resulted in the elimination of 130 jobs.

The agreement sets down a 12 percent pay rise over three years and was reached after a long running pay dispute between the Public Service Association (PSA) and university management. PSA official Peter Christopher claimed that while the details had not been worked out yet, the offer was what the union had been seeking and would probably be accepted.

Christopher defended the job losses by saying "the university has always had provision in some areas for certain jobs, no longer required, not to be replaced".

#### **Victorian nurses demand improved working conditions**

Nurses in Victoria are demanding the return of the 40-hour-week with an extra rostered day off a month and an eight percent pay rise a year. This claim will cover over 20,000 public hospital nurses.

The pay claim comes after years of deteriorating working conditions, with increasing casualisation of the workforce and an exodus of 6,000 nurses from the public hospital system since 1992. Overall 20,000 registered nurses have left the profession. This has led to a shortage of nurses and on any given day 100 beds are closed due to the lack of staff.

The nurses are fighting for a fixed nurse-patient ratio of no more than four patients per nurse. They are also demanding pay increases for additional qualifications, 12-weeks of paid maternity leave, two-week parental leave for partners and the return of paid study leave that had been abolished. The current enterprise agreement is due to expire in September.

#### **Nurses stop work at Canberra Hospital**

Heart surgery for five people has been cancelled as the Canberra Hospital continues to struggle with staff shortages and patient demands. The Australian Nursing Federation has called for 100 extra nurses at the hospital and held several stop work meetings last week to discuss the issue.

The hospital capacity for intensive care patients is 10 but this was exceeded last week. An ANF official said it was a very serious move to cancel heart surgery at any hospital. The dispute at Canberra Hospital has been long running and extra nurses are urgently needed. Last Easter the hospital was at capacity and patients were being sent to wherever a bed was available in the hospital, not necessarily to the correct ward for their problem.

#### **Westrail freight train drivers told to do shunting duties**

Freight train drivers in Kwinana and Geraldton in Western Australia have struck for a week against attempts by Westrail to have drivers perform shunting duties at depots. Under the present agreements, drivers are not expected to perform shunting operations.

The WA Industrial Relations Commission ordered drivers back to work last Friday until the issue is arbitrated in July. The Rail, Tram and Bus Union recommended a return to work despite the implications of the court order. To circumvent the strike, Alcoa used trucks to deliver bauxite to its Kwinana refinery from its Pinjarra mine, normally delivered by rail.

#### **Construction workers fight against individual contracts**

Seventy construction workers on the Kwinana Freeway extension in Western Australia have gone on strike till June 19 against Theiss Contractors' workplace agreements and attempts by the company to force workers to sign individual contracts.

The freeway workers were joined on Tuesday by another 40 building workers from the second Narrows Bridge and Belltower, who walked off

the job for 24 hours to show their opposition to the introduction of workplace agreements

#### **New Zealand veterinarians strike**

Veterinarians employed in New Zealand's meat processing works held a two-day strike last week in support of a claim for pay rises of between 12 and 14.5 percent. The 148 vets, members of the National Union of Public Employees, have been in dispute with their employer, the Ministry of Agriculture, for over twelve months.

The vets say the pay rises are needed to bring them up to parity with those working in normal veterinary practices. The meat companies are pressing the government to resist the pay claim, and have instead proposed a pay rise of 6 percent, but only if the vets agree to give up similar amounts they get in allowances for such things as clothing.

Because the vets are required to certify any meat destined for export, their strike succeeded in closing all but a handful of the country's meat processing plants. The Meat Industry Association (MIA) said the strikes cost the meat companies up to \$14 million a day, as employers were required to continue making minimum payments to some 20,000 meat workers stood down from work. However, the country's biggest meat company, Richmond, refused to pay its 4,000 processing workers for the two strike days. Richmond, based in Hawkes Bay and the central lower North Island, was forced to close most of its nine plants.

According to the MIA, \$25-\$30 million in export contracts have had to be deferred. The veterinarians have gone back into negotiations this week but have indicated they are prepared to continue industrial action if their claims are not met.

#### **Papua New Guinea students boycott classes against cuts in subsidies**

Students at the University of Goroka last Monday began a one week boycott of classes to protest against the university's refusal to defer the Tertiary Education Subsidy Assistance Scheme (Tesus).

Tesus has been the subject of previous student protests since the government implemented it in place of the National Scholarship Scheme (Natchol) at the start of the year. Tesus is a progressive grading system that determines assistance according to student performance. Student leaders say Tesus is unfair and discriminates against students from rural or poor backgrounds.

Unitech students in March were unsuccessful with a petition they presented to Education Minister, Dr John Waiko, requesting that the introduction of the schemes be delayed. Spokesman and Student Representative Council president, Lawrence N'drombut, said under the Tesus points system Unitech's cut off is set at 65 percent. Those above this point pay fees from K150 (\$US65.95) to K1050 (\$US433.65), while those below it pay between K3,750 and K7,500. N'drombut said that only five students at the university qualify to pay only K150.

University of Goroka, Student Representative Council president, Ruben Kapili, said on Monday: "we are giving the Government and University Council until this Friday to defer the Tesus, or we will withdraw from studies next Monday."



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