

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 November 2000

## Indonesian footwear workers fight victimisation

Workers at PT Garuda Mas Perkasa, which produces Swallow brand rubber thongs in Medan, North Sumatra, are continuing a campaign for the reinstatement of two workers sacked earlier this year. The management has refused to rehire Budi Santoso and M. Nur or recognise their union, the Prosperity Trade Union (SBSI).

Workers carrying placards denouncing company discrimination against the SBSI and its members held a protest outside the plant last Friday and then stormed the residence of the firm's director Alexander Effendy. Effendy eventually agreed to meet a delegation but ruled out reinstating the trade unionists. He said the company would only recognise the state-sponsored All-Indonesia Workers Union Federation.

The workers have staged three previous demonstrations to gain union recognition. On June 15 they marched from the plant to the North Sumatra provisional legislative council to demand action to force the company to reinstate the sacked unionists. Councillors refused to meet a delegation.

## Armed thugs attack protest outside Indonesian plastics business

On November 1 a gang of company thugs armed with sickles attacked 150 workers protesting outside the PT Mepoli Industry Top, an Indonesian plastics business in Tandes, West Surabaya. Six workers were injured, with one receiving a deep leg wound.

The demonstration was called to demand the reinstatement of eight workers who were arbitrarily dismissed three months ago. Eyewitnesses said the armed men emerged from the factory compound and attacked the protest.

Marpaung, one of the protesting workers, said, "There was a conspiracy between management and the police. The police officers guarding the demonstration just watched the assault without attempting to stop it."

Sudarto, chairman of the labour division of the Surabaya Legal Aid Institute, condemned the police for failing to prevent the attack. There had been at least two other attacks by company thugs over the previous three months, she said, "first at Mardi Santosa Hospital in Bubutan, the Maspion workers protest and now the Mepoli incident".

## Thai company refuses to reinstate sacked workers

Over 1,000 police were placed on stand-by at local stations as workers from Thai Durable Textile plant staged a protest outside the company premises in Bangkok on October 27. The protest was called after the management refused to abide by a Labor Ministry order to reinstate all 600 workers who were sacked last year after striking for improved pay and welfare benefits.

The management refused to rehire 390 workers, who were mainly union members, claiming that their work contracts had expired before the ministry issued its order. The workers who were reinstated have not begun work. The union has not mobilised the support of other workers in the area, however, and is instead demanding that the Labor Ministry take legal action.

Meanwhile, the Central Labor Court this week ordered British-Thai Textile Co. Ltd. in Samut Sakhon to fully pay workers it suspended in January last year. The workers had only been paid 50 percent of their

normal wages.

## Indian government workers strike for higher pay

Members of the Karnataka branch of the State Government Daily Wages Employees Federation held a strike and protest rally outside the deputy commissioner's office this week demanding a wage increase. The workers complain that their wages have not improved since 1996. The state's Home Minister promised to resolve the issue within six months but nothing has been done. The workers have given the state authorities four weeks to address their concerns or they plan to hold an indefinite strike.

## Workers in Maharashtra state demand pay increase

Workers at Ispat Profiles Ltd. in the western Indian state of Maharashtra held a protest this week to demand higher wages. A new wage agreement was to be signed last July, but after 26 rounds of talks between management and union, no agreement is pending. The workers are demanding an increase of 2,151 rupees per annum in line with the last rise they received in 1996, but the management has offered only 1,700 rupees.

The workers have been guarding the gates of the factory and the housing colony of the senior company employees to ensure that they do not remove machinery from the plant and close production. In retaliation the management has disrupted the telephone and water services to the workers' housing colony. Two police constables have been assigned to patrol the factory gate.

## Sri Lankan bus workers launch a lightning strike

Workers at Colombo Metropolitan Bus Company's Angoda bus depot went on strike on October 30 demanding immediate release of a fellow driver from police custody. The driver was arrested that day following a dispute between the conductor issuing tickets at the Colombo Central Bus Stand and a soldier. When the driver intervened, a gang of army personnel physically attacked both the driver and conductor. Even though the conductor managed to escape, the driver was severely beaten.

When the police were called they took no action against the army personnel and arrested the driver instead. He was detained for five hours, not allowed to make a complaint and given no medical treatment until the protest forced his release.

## Union leaders condemn striking Victorian power strikers

Trade union leaders in Victoria joined employer groups and state politicians to condemn workers at power stations in the Latrobe Valley who staged a snap strike on Thursday. The workers were protesting over restructuring plans that threaten hundreds of jobs and against the lack of progress in negotiations for a new work agreement.

The workers walked off the job after learning that their employer, Yallourn Energy, planned to lock out the entire workforce to push through a plan to retrench 262 workers at its mining operations and impose wide-ranging changes to work practices in its power stations. The company is planning to sell or lease the mine and operate it using casual labour and new technology.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said it had not condoned the strike and Victorian Trades Hall secretary Leigh Hubbard said it was "unacceptable for a group of unionists to take action

without warning the union movement”.

The state Labor government immediately imposed power restriction, including limiting the use of air-conditioners, dishwashers, washing machines and pool heaters. The entirely unnecessary move was designed to turn public opinion against the strikers.

The power workers also learnt this week that the former Australian Council of Trade Unions secretary Bill Kelty had been secretly advising Yallourn Energy on how to implement the mining job cuts. Kelty is a director of Linfox, which is linked to the sale of the company's mine.

The striking workers, members of the LaTrobe Valley branch of the CFMEU, have attempted to negotiate a new work agreement with the company for over 18 months.

#### **Australian workers protest over oven factory closure**

Workers from the Email oven-manufacturing factory in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick held a demonstration outside the plant last week to protest the decision to close the factory within 15 months, destroying 520 jobs. The workers held placards and signs denouncing the company's relocation to Adelaide in South Australia. The new factory will employ only 340 workers.

Email is also closing its dishwasher manufacturing plant in the Melbourne suburb of Bayswater next month with the loss of 120 jobs. Earlier this year Email closed its Hoover factory in Sydney.

The company's decision to consolidate production in South Australia is part of a \$35 million restructuring plan. The Victorian Labor government claims that South Australian government had offered the company \$2 million, as well as lower taxes and operating costs, to move to Adelaide.

In recent years the unions covering Email workers have agreed to trade-offs and productivity deals, insisting that if the company remained profitable, workers would have a future. Only last month union leaders signed a new enterprise work agreement with Email that included a no-strike clause.

The Australian Workers Union has signaled that it will not mount a campaign to defend the jobs, but will simply push for a better redundancy deal.

#### **Brownbuilt workers still locked out**

Between 30 and 40 furniture workers occupied Brownbuilt's South Oakleigh factory in Melbourne on Thursday morning but were quickly evicted by police. The workers have manned a 24-hour picket outside the factory since being locked out on September 22 when negotiations over a new work agreement, including a 15 percent pay increase, broke down.

Asgedom Wondim, a press shop worker who took part in the occupation, said he had been unable to pay his bills and faces eviction after falling behind in the rent. “I have nothing, and they have locked us out,” he said. “If we had gone on strike they would have ordered us back to work, but nothing stops them locking us out.”

Brownbuilt, which also sells office furniture and supermarket shelving under the NAMCO name, was sold to Adelaide-based company John Shearer two years ago. John Shearer is part of the Arrowcrest group.

#### **Coffs Harbour nurses call for strike action**

Mental health nurses at the Coffs Harbour base hospital in New South Wales will strike for 24 hours on Friday if the Area Health Service fails to address outstanding occupational health and safety concerns. The nurses are asking for more staff to improve safety when handling patients.

The Nurses Association said the staff voted to only service the 13 beds in the main mental health unit and to impose work bans in other areas. The management has placed the dispute before the NSW Industrial Relations Commission.

#### **Combined strike at University of Western Sydney**

More than 2,300 academic and general staff at the University of Western Sydney (UWS) walked off the job for half a day on November 1 to fight for better pay and conditions and against the destruction of jobs and services in a restructure. The UWS administration is merging its three

federated universities into one, placing the campuses at Bankstown, Werrington, Kingswood, Blacktown, Campbelltown, Parramatta and Richmond under a one-management structure.

Originally presented to staff as a means of reducing administrative triplication, it has since become clear that the plan will eliminate at least 250 jobs, including teaching positions, mainly at the lowest pay scales. The administration has refused to rule out forced retrenchments in the future and loyal staff face being removed by being relocated to distant campuses.

Student unions have supported the strike action because the amalgamation is also being used to eliminate courses and student services. Staff and students set up strong picket lines at all campus gates on November 1 and plan to do so again for a full day on November 9, cancelling classes for the 25,000 students.

The two trade unions involved in the dispute, the National Tertiary Education Union and the Community and Public Sector Union, have said they will impose bans on the transmission of exam and end-of-year results if the dispute is not resolved.

The cost-cutting at UWS is part of a wider process, whereby successive federal governments have reduced funding for tertiary education and forced universities to compete with each other in attracting fee-paying students or business-related research grants. As in the UWS strike, however, the unions have split their memberships along university lines, negotiating separate enterprise agreements with each institution.

#### **PNG nurses stop work over lack of security**

More than 250 nurses in Madang, Papua New Guinea stopped work for two hours on October 27 to discuss a campaign to win improved security measures at hospitals and the provision of dormitory accommodation to allow nurses to remain on site after duty. In the short term, the nurses are demanding security escorts for nurses on night duty.

The action is part of a campaign by nurses in the Highlands districts to force the government to improve hospital security. Two weeks ago, following strike action by nurses, doctors and other medical staff, the government agreed to release funds to build a dormitory at Mount Hagan hospital and to provide transport home for night shift nurses. The campaign has been provoked by repeated assaults, rapes and robberies of nurses returning home to their villages after night shift work.



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