

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 May 2001

## **Sri Lankan railway workers demand reinstatement**

Railway workers protested this week to demand the reinstatement of 131 maintenance staff suspended after a lightning strike by several workshops in Colombo on May 3.

The strike was called to demand the payment of salaries before the *wesak poya* holiday on May 7. Though the rail authorities had agreed to the early payment, they reneged and threatened to leave workers without funds during the holiday period.

The government declared the strike illegal, invoking emergency laws deeming the railways an essential service. Police arrested the 131 workers and charged them with disrupting railway transport, unlawful assembly and rioting. Those arrested were each forced to pay a 25,000 rupee bond to secure their release. Rail authorities suspended the workers after they were released from custody.

A workers' spokesman said those arrested worked on night shift and had not participated in the strike. The transport minister and rail management have refused to reinstate the workers labelling them as "saboteurs".

## **Medical officers in Sri Lanka launch one-day strike**

Assistant Medical Officers and Registered Medical Officers in Sri Lanka called an all-island one-day strike on May 21. The medical officers are demanding improved conditions, including a standard duty roster in all hospitals. Services at 850 rural hospitals were affected by the strike. The medical officers have maintained a work-to-rule and sick-leave campaign since May 10.

## **Police attack power workers in India**

Police assaulted striking workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation in the southern state of Tamil Nadu on May 22. Twenty eight workers were injured in the savage attack. Some 15,000 workers started a work-to-rule campaign on May 17 demanding wage rises.

Negotiations over the pay increase, which is outstanding since 1997, broke down this week. The strike has seriously affected power supply across the state with the Tamil Nadu government forced to request temporary power supply from the adjoining state of Kerala.

## **Sacked Pakistani workers demand compensation**

A large number of former employees of the Sindh Road Transport Corporation in Pakistan demonstrated outside the Hyderabad Press Club on May 21. The workers were sacked 18 months ago and denied severance pay. A spokesman from the action committee formed to campaign for their benefits said that many of the workers' families were starving. The Sindh provincial government failed to honour a promise made last year to pay the outstanding money by December 6.

## **Pedicab drivers protest work ban in Indonesia**

Hundreds of becak (pedicab) drivers demonstrated in central Jakarta on May 23 over government legislation banning pedicabs from the city area.

The protest was called when the Jakarta High Court upheld the verdict of a lower court to enforce the ban. The decision will bar the drivers from being able to collect more lucrative fares in the downtown business and tourist districts, causing a sharp drop in their earnings.

Pedicab drivers and other self-employed transport providers will also be

hit when the government implements a 30 percent fuel price increase on June 15.

## **Indonesian teachers protest over allowance cut**

Police clashed with thousands of teachers rallying outside the Teaching and Education Agency office (DPP) in Central Sulawesi, Indonesia on Wednesday. The teachers are demanding the restoration of 200,000 rupiah (\$US18) cut from their monthly training allowance last year.

The police moved in when some of the protesters attempted to enter the office after the head of the agency, Rais Lamakampali, refused to meet with their representatives.

One of the protesters, Asnidar, a teacher at a state junior high school, said the training allowance had been reduced after the teachers were awarded scholarships to continue their studies. "We only accepted the scholarship program following assurances that it would not affect our allowance," she said.

## **Hong Kong poultry workers demand income protection**

About 50 workers employed to slaughter chickens in retail outlets demonstrated outside central government offices in Hong Kong this week demanding compensation for loss of earnings caused by the culling of avian flu-infected poultry.

A government compensation scheme, introduced during the last chicken flu outbreak in 1997, covers all chicken wholesalers, stall operators and farm owners. It provides nothing for affected wage workers. The workers demanded that the government pay them two-thirds of their daily income while the culling continues.

One poultry worker said: "I do not understand why the workers are excluded. How are we going to live with poultry markets closed until July to stop the spread of flu?" A government spokesman said the administration would not grant any assistance to the workers, declaring "employers are responsible for their welfare".

## **Australian workers fight for entitlements**

Thirty workers sacked from Champion Forms in the Sydney suburb of Marrickville last week have begun picketing the plant to demand the payment of more than \$300,000 owing in wages and other entitlements. The company also sacked 60 workers from its Melbourne plant after it was placed in the hands of an administrator on May 1.

Management told workers at the Sydney factory that they were employed under a different company structure and had no claim to the proceeds from the sale of Champion's assets. The administrator has put the Marrickville property up for sale but unions say they have placed bans on any construction at the site until the outstanding entitlements are paid.

## **Target staff meet on job losses**

More than 350 workers employed by Target's warehouse and distribution centre in Geelong, Victoria, attended a stop-work meeting on May 22 to discuss the company's plans to shed hundreds of jobs. The proposed downsizing is part of a cost-cutting program by Target's parent Coles Myer. The centre currently employs about 850 people.

Coles Myer announced this week that the job cuts were an attempt to shore up profits after worse than expected Christmas retail sales.

Australian Services Union president Martin Foley said the job losses were expected to come from among office support staff, such as those employed in buying, distribution and store administration.

#### **BHP steelworkers extend strike**

Thousands of steelworkers at BHP Port Kembla voted on May 24 to extend a 48-hour strike by a further 24 hours. The walkout by 4,000 workers on May 22 was triggered by the company's decision to enter into a five-year agreement with contracting firm Serco to take-over BHP's Protective Services Department.

After taking control of the department, Serco plans to re-hire some of the ambulance, fire and security workers at the plant on individual non-union contracts. The company said it will only re-employ 50 of the 86 protective services workers currently employed by BHP and will cut wages by 30 percent. The changes are due to be implemented on June 18.

Since the strike began, the workers have manned six picket lines around the plant and another was set up at Port Kembla Harbour to stop BHP's *Iron Monarch* from being loaded. Seamen have refused to cross the picket lines.

Earlier this year, workers at Port Kembla held a series of strikes against BHP's plans to contract out its maintenance work, threatening 400 jobs. A spokesman for BHP admitted this week that "several hundred jobs" across the plant would be shed as a result of a decision to spin off the remainder of its steel assets following BHP's recent \$A57 billion merger with Billiton.

#### **Fruit pickers fight for back pay**

Three itinerant fruit pickers have launched a legal case against Texas Mangoes to force the Queensland fruit growing company to pay them \$12,000 owing in back pay.

Owners Lawrence Hines and Leone Stalder admitted to paying under award wages but said that they were not breaking the law. However, workers told the hearing of the Magistrates Court in Townsville that they had been paid "slave wages" for long hours, had been housed in sub-standard sleeping quarters, refused raincoats and were sacked without notice.

One worker, Paul Chivers, said he was paid \$320 dollars for doing 157 hours work and that he and the other workers had deductions from their pay after management falsely accused them of damaging a fruit washing machine. Local fruit picker Terry Collins said Texas Mango management denied him access to a phone and he was forced to walk 16km to his home after he quit working for the company.

#### **New Zealand journalists and printers on strike over contracts**

Journalists employed by the New Zealand Press Association (NZPA) struck for one day on May 24 and protested outside the company headquarters in downtown Wellington. The strike is part of an industrial campaign launched three weeks ago against management attempts to force some staff out of a collective employment contract. NZPA wants to exclude filing editors, desk editors, branch office staff and all salaried staff from the agreement.

Industrial stoppages also continue at newspapers owned by two of NZPA's largest shareholders, INL and Wilson and Horton. Stopwork meetings were held this week in Timaru over INL's refusal to negotiate a national collective agreement at its newspapers. Separate talks for an editorial collective agreement have stalled at the Wilson and Horton-owned *NZ Herald*, where the management wants to exclude 28 positions from the collective agreement.

Newspaper printers have also begun strike action over their contracts. At the INL-owned Christchurch Press, press operators walked out on May 18 in protest over the management's refusal to negotiate a national collective employment agreement.

#### **Union moves to settle New Zealand firefighters' dispute**

The Professional Firefighters Union and the NZ Fire Service Commission have begun discussions to settle a firefighters pay dispute by

June 30, according to statements issued this week by both parties. Last month, firefighters overwhelmingly voted to reject the commission's latest pay offer.

The commission had previously offered a pay rise of between 6 percent and 9.5 percent if firefighters increase the time they spend performing extra tasks such as cleaning by 48 percent. The union's national secretary Derek Best attempted to sell the package as being "at the limits" of what the Labour-Alliance government could offer. Professional firefighters have not had a pay rise since 1991.

Having rejected the deal the firefighters voted for further industrial action. Best said this week that "everyone" was keen to see a settlement reached soon. He confirmed the talks had been going ahead but refused to be more specific. Firefighters are maintaining bans on non-operational overtime and the use of computers.

#### **Court case begins over picket line killing**

A legal case over the killing of waterfront picket Christine Clarke at the New Zealand port of Lyttelton on December 29, 1999, went before the High Court in Christchurch this week. Fifty-two year old businessman Derek Powell was charged with culpable homicide after running Clarke over with his four-wheel drive vehicle.

Clarke, the 45-year-old wife of a wharf worker, was struck by Powell's car while picketing with port workers against a decision by the Lyttelton Port Company to contract out its coal loading operations. She died in hospital two days later.

Witnesses told the court that on the second day of the picket, Powell had driven his sports utility at high speed toward the picket line. He braked heavily, stopping just short of the pickets. He then nudged his car forward to about 15 centimetres from the picketing workers' legs.

After being warned by a picket leader to be careful and keep his speed down, Powell accelerated and drove straight into the picket. Clarke, who had been standing in front of the vehicle, was carried a short distance before falling and hitting her head on the road.

The court was told that the defence would claim that Powell accelerated because he had been abused and assaulted by the pickets. He had wanted to get past the picket line because he had "customers to keep happy". The picketers denied that there had been any physical altercation between Powell and anyone on the line. The case is continuing.



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