

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 June 2001

## Indonesian workers battle police

Thousands of workers protesting against changes to Indonesia's labour laws clashed with police in major cities across the country on June 13. Proclaimed at the beginning of June, the legislation allows employers to cut severance pay and compensation entitlements for laid off and retired workers and makes it easier for companies to dismiss staff.

Over 2,000 workers in Jakarta battled with riot police who barred their way to the presidential palace. Police in Surabaya, the country's second largest city, fired live rounds and tear gas to disperse a crowd of 3,000 attempting to march into the city. Seven demonstrators were arrested and one worker was hospitalised. There were also clashes in Bandung, West Java, where workers stoned police and set fire to at least 18 government cars.

A Minister of Manpower spokesman said this week that the government was "striving to create a climate for investment". As well as sharp cuts in working conditions, the government also wants to cut company taxes and reduce electricity rates and fuel costs.

## Hong Kong truck drivers protest handling fees

More than 100 truck drivers in Hong Kong staged protests on June 12 in opposition to a \$HK40.00 (\$US5.13) cargo handling fee imposed by ferry owners Mid-Stream Operators at the Kwai Chung container terminal. Mid-Stream transports cargo between the dockside and moored ships. The drivers presently have to pay the handling fees to Mid-Stream out of their own pocket and then reclaim it from haulage companies.

About 60 trucks held up traffic between the terminal and the Cross Harbour Tunnel, one of Hong Kong's busy highways. Drivers also staged smaller protests in other locations throughout the day. The drivers went ahead with the action despite a police decision to refuse a permit for the demonstration.

## Drivers protest government fees in China

Small truck owners demonstrated on June 13 against government fees in Changchun, the capital of Jilin province in northeast China. Holding banners reading "we want to survive" the truck owners blockaded a main highway in the Shuanfuyang district.

The drivers say that the charges "gobble up" almost half of their annual income. They earn between 5,000-6,000 yuan a year (\$600-\$720), and pay 2,000 yuan in fees. Many of the drivers were laid off from state-owned industries during restructuring or privatisations.

## Pakistani bank workers oppose layoffs

Bank workers in Pakistan have launched industrial action in protest over plans by three major banks to destroy thousands of jobs. The state-owned National Bank of Pakistan is planning to forcibly retire 5,000 employees as part of the government's privatisation process,

Habib Bank Limited (HBL) will lay off 12,500 workers and the United Bank Limited (UBL) will shed staff through a "voluntary separation scheme".

The workers at UBL launched an indefinite strike on June 11, after staging a series of two-hour daily work stoppages. Strikers shut down all UBL branches in Faisalabad, preventing management opening the banks' main doors. A number of branch managers who also could lose their jobs in the cutbacks joined strikers demonstrating outside newspaper offices and bank branches on June 12.

Senior bank management at UBL banned 19 leaders of the UBL Employees Action Committee from entering bank premises and gave district authorities information on 60 employees involved in the strike action. Police raided the homes of workers named, arresting 12. The strikers have demanded the release of all those arrested and an end to the police intervention into the dispute.

HBL workers who struck for 24 hours on June 11 are continuing daily three-hour "pen down" stop work action. Besides protesting layoffs, the workers are also angry that their wages have been frozen since 1993 and employee applications for loans are subject to discrimination. Union leaders and action committee members at HBL's main branch in Faisalabad accused the government of implementing International Monetary Fund and World Bank demands.

Workers at the National Bank of Pakistan are due to take industrial action soon, according to a statement issued this week.

## Workers in Sri Lanka defend union rights

Nearly 8,000 members of Sri Lanka's Ceylon Mercantile Union (CMU) staged a half-day strike this week in protest over a series of union victimisations.

Company attacks on union rights include the suspension of the secretary, president and two members of the CMU branch at Ceylon Oxygen, the dismissal of eight union workers in Ceylon Cold Stores and the sudden transfer of union members at Colombo Commercial Company. The transfers followed a campaign by workers against bonus cuts.

Sri Lankan big businesses organisations launched the anti-union campaign after demanding the government speedily end labour disputes and remove all restrictions on employer "rights" to hire and fire.

## Sri Lankan government doctors strike in war zones

Government doctors in war zones in the northern and eastern provinces began an indefinite strike on June 11 to demand that the government pay them a "risk allowance" for working in a dangerous environment. All hospital services in the provinces, apart from emergencies, have been brought to a standstill by the strike.

According to the Government Medical Officers Association, the government has continuously rejected the demand even though

doctors in the war-torn areas suffer severe hardships and risk their lives. The doctors are also angry over delays in the delivery of drugs and other essential medical supplies.

#### **Indian doctors demonstrate for salary increment**

Doctors in the south Indian state of Andra Pradesh demonstrated on June 12 to demand the government implement recommendations by its own Task Force Committee to pay salary increases to doctors in state-run hospitals.

A spokesman for the Andra Pradesh Government Doctors Association said that although the committee had submitted its report some time ago the government remained silent on the issue. "We have no other option left but to protest," he said.

#### **CSR locks out sugar mill workers**

Sugar producer CSR locked out over 1,000 workers from its seven mills in Queensland this week on the eve of the cane-crushing season. The company has been threatening a lockout since the end of May, after workers imposed overtime bans over a new work agreement. The workers want a three percent wage rise and guarantees that there will be no further redundancies. The company claims the wage rise is totally unacceptable and has refused to lift the lockout until the union ends all industrial action.

#### **Aged care workers fight wage cut**

Aged care workers at the former state-run Forrest Lodge nursing home in Bunbury, south of Perth, are fighting attempts by private provider Moran Health Care Group to cut their wages. The company plans to close the facility and relocate the staff and aged residents to a new site. The 30 workers are refusing to be transferred until a satisfactory agreement on wages and conditions is reached.

Forrest Lodge was sold to Moran by the former Western Australian Liberal government last year. The company now wants to cut wages by \$1.50 an hour, claiming this is in line with private sector pay rates. The cut would mean a wage reduction of \$50 to \$150 a fortnight. The workers are demanding that their pay rates and working conditions remain the same.

#### **Sacked workers picket plant**

Workers from Metro Shelving in the Sydney suburb of Revesby began picketing the plant this week to demand reinstatement. The 50 workers were sacked without notice on March 28 after management met with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union to discuss health and safety issues. The company is presently operating with contract labour.

While an Industrial Relations Commission hearing has ruled out reinstatement the union is planning to appeal this decision before a full bench of the commission.

#### **Workers strike after legionnaires disease found in hospital**

Building workers on several sites at the inner city Alfred Hospital in Melbourne walked off the job on June 13 after the death of two people and five confirmed cases of legionnaires disease.

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union safety officer Pat Preston said building work at the Alfred Hospital would not start until an independent expert examined the health risk to workers.

Hospital cleaners, orderlies and support staff met last week and agreed to a union and management request not to go on strike. The workers agreed that hospital management be allowed time to test all staff for symptoms of disease.

#### **ABC radio staff strike over sacking**

More than 50 ABC radio staff staged a 24-hour strike on June 12 in support of department head Roz Cheney whose job was abolished while she was on a month's holiday. On return to work Cheney was

given 30 minutes to leave the building in the Sydney suburb of Ultimo. Cheney had worked at the ABC for 30 years as a broadcaster, radio arts editor and department head.

Workers rallied outside ABC offices in Sydney in protest over the sacking. Radio staff said that Cheney's dismissal was connected to cost cutting by ABC Radio management who have already axed several programs and destroyed dozens of jobs in the last year.

#### **New Zealand fish processing workers demand wage parity**

Fish processing workers at the Sanford Fisheries Bluff and Timaru salmon processing sites on New Zealand's South Island walked off the job on June 11 over the lack of progress in employment contract negotiations. The workers returned to work the same day after being issued with suspension notices.

The workers are campaigning for a multi-site agreement with equal pay rates at both plants. Bluff employees earn much less than those at the Timaru site and with a starting rate of \$NZ9.42 an hour are the lowest paid workers in the Sanford group. Some of the workers have not had a pay increase for five years.

Contract negotiations have been underway since January this year when the previous contract expired. Sanford has rejected all proposals of a multi-site agreement, despite operating a joint contract at its Auckland and Tauranga plants in the North Island.

#### **New Zealand journalists launch four-day strike**

Journalists at New Zealand's biggest daily metropolitan newspaper, the *NZ Herald*, went on strike again this week after another breakdown in negotiations over employment contracts. The 130 journalists walked out on June 12, declaring that they intended to stay out until the weekend. Last week the union called off a strike after three days to recommence talks with management.

The dispute, which has been running for more than a month, is over employer attempts to force 30 staff off a collective employment contract. The current strike is the fourth by *NZ Herald* journalists and follows a 13-hour strike on Sunday by workers at the NZ Press Association, also over collective coverage.

On June 14, journalists, printers and other staff at daily newspapers owned by the Murdoch-controlled INL chain demonstrated outside the company shareholder's meeting in Wellington. The newspaper workers say that there is a concerted campaign by major newspaper employers to remove senior editorial staff and salaried workers from collective employment contracts.

#### **PNG workers resist office closure**

Workers at the PNG Electricity Commission in Gerehu, a suburb of Port Moresby, are resisting attempts by the government to transfer them to a new work location at Garden City in the suburb of Boroko. They have begun a campaign to secure their entitlements, including severance pay. The workers have officially complained to authorities that there is not enough room at the Boroko office and overcrowding could jeopardise health and safety.

The workers were ordered leave the Gerehu office this week after officers from the government's Privatisation Commission closed down the premises and removed records and office equipment. The offices were then trashed.



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