

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 July 2001

## Indonesian workers demand severance pay

Over 700 workers sacked in June by PT Bertoni Sari Jaya, a shoe manufacturer in the Manis Industrial Zone in Tangerang, demonstrated outside the regional manpower office on July 23 to demand severance pay.

The company closed the plant and dismissed the entire 1,200-strong workforce on June 30 claiming “financial problems”. Company president Andrianto Wijaya promised to pay the workers’ entitlements by July 9, but the company has delayed payment on two occasions and a spokesperson for the workers said recently that management had moved some assets to its factories in Serpong and Tangerang.

One worker at the demonstration told the press: “We have been to the manufacturer’s office but none of the company management will meet with us to clarify the reason for the persistent delays. We are tired of the promises and we don’t have anything to feed our families.”

## Indonesia workers protest victimisation

Workers at PT Royal Kori Indah, a false eyelash manufacturer in Purbalingga in Central Java, occupied the factory on July 20 to protest the sacking of All Indonesian Workers Union local chairman Arif Gunawan. Police were called to the plant but no arrests were made.

While management claim Arif resigned of his own accord, the union official was sacked when the workers initiated industrial action for increased transport allowances. The strikers allege that the company has a history of victimising union members.

## South Korean workers demand release of union activists

Nearly 12,000 workers marched through Seoul on July 21 to protest the South Korean government’s suppression of union rights and to demand the release of hundreds of jailed unionists. The demonstrators also demanded that the government withdraw an arrest warrant for Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) president Dan Byong-ho.

After a two-hour rally, the workers, led by young activists wearing masks to avoid police identification, marched down a busy eight-lane boulevard shouting “Down with the Kim Dae-jung government”. Thousands of riot police were on standby but there were no reported clashes.

Despite the continuing arrests of union members, the KCTU issued a statement saying it is seeking a meeting between Dan and President Kim Dae-jung “to end the tedious standoff with the government.”

## Migrant workers protest exploitation in Hong Kong

Indonesian migrants working as domestics in Hong Kong marched on July 20 to protest their exploitation by employers, labour recruitment agencies and the Indonesian government. Carrying banners, the maids marched from Victoria Park to the Indonesian consulate chanting, “We are not commodities, we are human beings”.

Hong Kong migrant worker regulations stipulate that recruiting agencies can only charge recruits \$HK367 (\$US46) but many end up paying a great deal more. According to the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers (AIMW), some workers are forced to pay between \$HK1,000 and \$25,000 to get a job.

According to AIMW, about 80 percent of all Indonesian domestic workers in Hong Kong are paid below the legislated \$HK3,670 monthly minimum wage. Over a period of 10 months last year the Hong Kong labor department handled 1,786 complaints from migrant domestic workers over pay and contractual arrangements.

An AIMW spokesperson said: “The majority of the 59,000 Indonesian migrant workers in Hong Kong face exploitation and abuse at the hands of their money-grabbing employment agencies, fraudulent employers and a corrupt consulate. Although remittances from migrant workers make a substantial contribution to the Indonesian economy, the consulate and the government fail to adequately protect the basic rights of workers abroad.”

## Indian public servants strike against government “reforms”

Millions of state and federal government employees in India held a one-day strike on July 25 to protest against the federal government’s plans to push ahead with privatisations of state-owned enterprises and changes to labour laws which will make it easier for employers to sack workers.

Over two million workers joined the strike in the western state of Maharashtra, one of the country’s most industrialised regions. A union spokesman said the action had affected almost all government offices in the east and south of the country.

Schools, colleges, government departments and hospitals in the country’s financial capital Bombay were deserted. Senior government officials, who are not union members, wore black badges to work in solidarity with the junior and middle-level employees.

## Indian university teachers demonstrate over salary arrears

University teachers demonstrated on July 20 in front of the Mahatma Gandhi memorial in Bangalore, the capital of the southern state of Karnataka, demanding the payment of salary arrears owing to them since 1996.

The teachers are also demanding the retention of examination remuneration and the approval of new promotion guidelines. They are also seeking teacher representation on the Karnataka State University Board, the Senate and the Academic Council. The protest was organised by the University Teachers’ Association.

## Pakistan bank employees strike against restructuring

Employees of the National Bank of Pakistan staged a token strike on July 25 to demand that the government immediately withdraw its restructuring plans for the public entity. The first phase of the plan will be implemented by September and will result in the closure of hundreds of branches and the destruction of about 7,500 jobs.

The bank workers decided at well-attended meetings to stage an indefinite strike from next week if management does not agree to their demands.

## Hope fading for 46 Chinese miners

Government officials say there is little hope that 46 miners still trapped underground in a privately-owned coal mine in eastern Jiangsu province are still alive. A massive explosion tore through the mine near Gangzi village on July 22. By July 25 rescuers had recovered 46 bodies. Another 13 workers, including three female miners, were brought out alive within

the first hours.

Zhuang Jincai, the mine's owner, has been arrested and other managers have been detained. The mine was closed down earlier this year because of safety standards but Zhuang illegally re-opened it on July 15.

#### **Western Australian health workers walk out**

Health workers from the St John of God's Murdoch and Subiaco Hospitals in Western Australia walked out on July 25 and demonstrated outside both hospitals to coincide with Caregivers Week celebrations. The workers, including caregivers, enrolled nurses, orderlies, catering, cleaning and laundry workers and ground staff, are demanding an 8 percent pay increase over two years, as part of a new enterprise agreement. The workers have not had a pay rise since they were granted a \$10 a week increase a year ago.

A supporter attending the rally outside the Murdoch hospital has registered a complaint with the police after being struck by the car of hospital CEO Glynn Palmer. According to witnesses, a group of about 40 people were standing on or near a traffic island in the access road leading to the hospital at about 6 am when Palmer drove through the protesters. Several people had to leap out of the way to avoid being run over.

#### **Airport security guards call snap strike**

About 50 security guards employed by Group Four Security called a snap strike at Melbourne Airport's Ansett terminal on July 25, after the company withdrew a pay offer. The walkout follows industrial action last month. The guards are demanding an 18 percent pay increase over three years as part of a new enterprise agreement.

While Group Four had initially agreed to negotiate changes with the union last month, the management later insisted that the guards continue to work under the old contract, effectively denying them a pay increase.

Chubb security guards at the airport's Qantas terminal have also taken industrial action over a wage demand. The dispute will go before the Industrial Relations Commission this week.

#### **Postal worker rally against casualisation**

More than 1,000 postal workers demonstrated outside Australia Post's Sydney headquarters to protest against the destruction of full-time permanent jobs and the ongoing casualisation of the workforce.

According to Australia Post's annual report, the company now employs 6,349 permanent part-time workers, up from 5,238 in 1998. The number of full-time workers fell from 29,322 in 1998 to 26,140 in 2000.

While management claims that many workers prefer to work as casuals, a union spokesman said: "Australia Post wants to casualise their workforce so they can avoid paying workers their full entitlements, such as appropriate holiday, sick leave and superannuation benefits. While this flexibility may suit some people, the average worker wants to feel secure in their job."

Part-time postal worker David Messent who attended the rally said: "I have been permanent part-time for two years. I would like to be made full-time but this has not occurred. When full-time posties retire management tend to casualise the jobs, split them into two part-time positions or use outside labour companies to fill in. I have two school-aged children to support and would like greater job security."

#### **Goninan Maintrain workers on strike over entitlements**

Two hundred workers at Goninan Maintrain in Sydney are continuing a strike they began on July 16, after management refused to agree to a new enterprise agreement. Last week the workers staged a rally outside the company head office at North Sydney. Maintrain was set up in 1994 after the State government closed the Electric Car Maintenance Workshop at Chullora, at the cost of over 1,000 jobs, and contracted the work to Goninan.

#### **PNG bank union ends strike**

The National Staff Association (NSA) in Papua New Guinea ended a strike this week by workers at the PNG Banking Corporation (PNGBC), without settling any of the matters in the dispute. The union said it agreed

to the return to work "to allow management to respond to their log of claims" after discussions between PNGBC lawyers and the NSA's legal counsel.

The bank workers went on strike demanding a 14 percent cost-of-living pay adjustment, retrenchment pay, and the payment of outstanding superannuation contributions. They have also demanded assurances from management on job security if the government privatises the bank.

The management has only offered a 7 percent cost-of-living adjustment. Controversy still surrounds the payment of superannuation contributions, with the bank claiming that all PNGBC employee contributions were up to date with the Finance Pacific superfund. However, the union says that employer contributions were not made to Finance Pacific, but were handed to the Department of Treasury and Finance. The union is claiming that the government is therefore responsible for making the payment.

#### **New Zealand cleaners picket university over job cuts**

Sixty-two cleaners picketed the University of Auckland on July 25 over the axing of 30 cleaning jobs. Many of those facing the sack are Pacific Island and Maori women who have worked at the University for over 10 years.

The University subcontracts the cleaning to QSE, one of biggest contract cleaning companies in New Zealand. The QSE tender to clean the University was one of the cheapest, but after securing the contract it claimed there were too many staff and could not afford to pay them all. The cleaners have placed work bans and begun a go-slow.

The University has refused to take any responsibility for the cleaners and QSE is refusing to reverse its position on redundancies. Students and staff at the university, who are backing the cleaner's protests, say it is impossible to maintain acceptable hygiene standards with only half of the cleaning staff.

#### **New Zealand fish processors' dispute continues**

A six-month long contract dispute between fish processing company Sanford South and process workers at its Bluff and Timaru plants continued last week, after both sides rejected settlement proposals. More than 100 workers at the two sites remain locked out after taking strike action more than five weeks ago.

During the past two weeks, hundreds of supporters have demonstrated in the South Island towns in support of the workers. Fish processing workers at the Sanford Bluff plant are among the lowest paid in the industry, earning \$9.40 per hour.

A 10-hour negotiating session between the company and the Service and Food Workers Union last week ended with no agreement. Sanford rejected a union proposal over pay rates, the term of the work agreement and demands for a multi-site contract.

Union members overwhelmingly rejected the company's counter-offer, including separate contracts for the two sites and 7 percent pay rise over 20 months, at a union meeting on July 20. Sanford management has persuaded the Department of Work and Income that the workers have not been locked out and their emergency benefits have been discontinued.

#### **New Zealand Bluebird Foods workers return to work**

The 300 striking workers at Bluebirds Foods returned to work on July 20, after voting to accept a contract settlement recommended by the Service and Food Workers Union. Bluebirds' workers in Auckland, Christchurch and Timaru had been on strike for more than a week over contract and pay issues, stopping production at all three factories.

The settlement included a 4.25 percent wage increase in the first year, 3.6 percent in the second year and improvements in some working conditions.



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