

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 August 2001

## **Chinese workers block road over unpaid wages**

Hundreds of workers from a state-run copper company blocked the main road in Taiyuan, Shanxi province, for two days last week in protest over unpaid salaries. The workers also occupied central Taiyuan for 11 hours on August 1, and again on August 2.

Workers told a meeting called by the city's vice-mayor to end the protest, that Taiyuan Copper Company had not paid them for months. They also accused management of swindling public funds and victimising workers who had complained. A Taiyuan government spokesman confirmed that the workers had not been paid for three to four months, even though the company was not making substantial losses.

## **Bangladeshi workers crushed to death**

Twenty-three workers, 14 of them women, were crushed to death on August 8 when they attempted to escape from an eight-story factory building in Dhaka after a fire alarm falsely sounded. The death toll could climb higher with than 100 workers were injured in the accident.

Although the building houses four factories—Mico Sweater LTD, Europe Garment, Ajax Sweater and Four Wings Garments—its main northern and southern exits were locked. The southern gate was not opened until 15 minutes after the alarm.

Bangladesh factory owners regularly lock emergency exits claiming it is necessary to stop theft. The tragedy follows the Chowdhury Knitwear fire of November 25, 2000, when 51 workers, including child labourers as young as 10, were burnt to death.

## **Sri Lankan ice cream workers fight for jobs**

Sixty Walls ice cream factory workers picketed the labour department in Colombo on August 7, in protest over the closure of the company's Badhuragoda plant. Walls, a subsidiary of food transnational Unilever, suspended the president and secretary of a newly formed union at the plant on June 12, 10 days after workers imposed an overtime ban to demand a wage rise. On July 31, management closed the plant and locked out the 100-strong work force. Workers are demanding the plant be reopened and suspended union officials be reinstated.

## **Postmasters in Sri Lanka on work-to-rule campaign**

Sri Lankan postmasters launched an indefinite work-to-rule campaign from midnight, August 5, to demand that all charges

laid against postal workers following a 53-day strike in 1998 be dropped. The postmasters are also demanding the government fill all vacant positions, as it promised to do in August last year, maintain a monthly phone subsidy at its current rate and reopen the closed Colombo general post office.

## **Pakistan airline workers protest over safety**

Pilots and flight engineers at Pakistan International Airlines (PIA)—Pakistan's national carrier—initiated a protest campaign on August 2 against the extension of flight duty time. Prevented from taking industrial action by the country's military regime, the workers are wearing black armbands to indicate to passengers that air safety is being compromised by increased fatigue. PIA is on the verge of bankruptcy and the government has ordered management to resolve the financial crisis.

## **Australian construction workers strike over workplace deaths**

The death of two men on building sites in just four days has triggered strike action by over 50,000 Victorian construction workers. On August 2, a 45-year-old man fell to his death after a scissor lift he was operating toppled over. Workers across the state struck the following day, demanding full safety inspections of all such equipment. They struck again on August 6, after a 53-year-old worker was crushed when a 20 tonne crane counterweight fell into an external hoist, causing it to crash to the ground from the tenth floor of a Southbank building site in Melbourne.

The two deaths brought the total number of fatal industrial accidents in Victoria to four in seven days. The other workplace fatalities were a maintenance worker, crushed by a furnace door at West Footscray, and a man who was hit by a tree being felled at a farm on the Murray River.

## **Bank workers in Victoria take industrial action**

Bank employees in eastern Victoria walked off the job this week in protest over declining work conditions. Staff from the National Australia Bank, Westpac and ANZ attended stop-work meetings, forcing branches to suspend services or operate with a skeleton staff. Over 10 branches were affected by the industrial action.

Finance Sector Union spokeswoman, Cath Noyce said: "The conditions under which our people work are now intolerable—and the banks still want to squeeze their workforce further." Bank workers are demanding a 7.5 percent pay rise,

“achievable workloads” and other measures to improve customer service standards.

### **Garbage workers strike to defend conditions**

Garbage collection workers in Brisbane struck on August 7 to oppose tendering conditions for a new waste management contract that threatens jobs and pay rates. The Brisbane City Council has refused to stipulate that companies tendering for the contract agree to pay the workforce at the current rate of pay, rather than the minimum award rate. If the award rate were applied garbage collectors would lose up to \$230 per week.

The Transport Workers Union is also demanding guarantees that the workers, who are currently employed by Cleanaway and Pacific Waste Management, retain their jobs if other companies win the contract.

A union spokesman said: “The garbos are not asking for a pay rise but are simply asking that their current rates of pay are maintained.” The union has previously collaborated with management to boost productivity in exchange for limited pay increases. Productivity has been increased by up to 400 percent over the last few years with garbage collectors forced to work longer hours and on public holidays.

### **Nurses take strike action**

Nurses at the Royal North Shore Hospital and Manly Hospital took strike action on August 2 to demand higher wages and the employment of more staff. Manly Hospital has at least 40 nursing positions vacant, forcing the hospital to close 18 beds. Royal North Shore Hospital has 80 positions vacant, resulting in the closure of five cardiology beds and eight neurosurgical beds.

Nurses are also demanding a review of their wages. Despite going through comparable degrees of training, nurses are paid \$70 to \$100 less per week than other professionals such as speech therapists and social workers. The NSW Government health minister Craig Knowles has opposed any wage increase, claiming nurses are locked into an enterprise agreement. The NSW Nurses Association endorsed further industrial action on August 7.

### **Radio New Zealand staff strike over pay**

More than 120 Radio New Zealand (RNZ) staff walked off the job on August 8 over deadlocked pay negotiations. The strike was called after RNZ management issued suspension notices to union members when wage contract talks broke down earlier this week. Negotiations have been going on for six months.

Radio staff want a minimum 3 percent wage increase but the state-owned broadcasting company has only offered 1 percent. Workers also claim that RNZ is seeking to claw back conditions and wants to exclude some staff from collective coverage.

The strike affected some of the country’s most popular radio shows, including the flagship news and current affairs program *Morning Report*. Workers are threatening more strikes and protests if their demands are not met.

### **New Zealand casino workers stage protests**

Sky City Casino workers in Auckland picketed the casino’s main entrance on August 4, to demand wage rises and in protest over management attempts to induce staff onto individual work contracts. This is the first time since Sky City opened five years ago that staff have been involved in a pay dispute. The company has only offered a 2.5 percent wage increase. A spokesperson for the workers described the company’s offer as “tight-fisted”. Sky City, which also owns a major casino in Adelaide, South Australia, is expected to announce a record profit later this month.

### **New Zealand fibreboard workers picket for pay rise**

Management officials at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) pine panel mill near Rangiora had to scale a fence to get to work on August 6, after workers set up a picket to protest the breakdown in contract negotiations. Workers walked off the job at 7am and picketed the plant for 24 hours. Trucks carrying chip and logs to the plant were forced to turn away, some dumping their loads in order to get on with other work.

Rangiora workers are demanding a 4 percent pay increase, in line with a recent rise won by CHH workers in Nelson. The company has only offered 2.5 percent. This is the first time in 16 years that any industrial action has been taken at the plant.

### **Papua New Guinea bank workers end three week strike**

Striking employees at soon-to-be-privatised Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation (PNGBC) were directed to end strike action on August 2 by the country’s Arbitration Tribunal. The hearing was hurriedly convened after the bank failed to get a National Court ruling that would end the three-week dispute.

The workers’ union, the National Staff Association, agreed to order its members back to work after the tribunal ruled that the strikers should not be penalised by the bank. The union has also agreed to allow the bank to dock the workers’ pay for the period of the strike and for the tribunal to take action against employees accused by management of misconduct.

The workers struck on July 16 in support of a log of claims aimed at protecting their interests when the bank is sold. The demands included a government guarantee on all employee entitlements, a 7 percent wage rise backdated to January 1, a 25 percent staff shareholding in the privatised PNGBC and an improved retrenchment package with entitlements taxed at only 2.5 percent. They also demanded the bank write-off all housing loans owed by union members. None of these demands have been met.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**