

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 December 2001

## **Sri Lankan factory workers locked-out**

Workers at the Korean-owned Pungkook Colombo in Ratmalana, an industrial area south of Colombo, have been locked out following a strike and picket on December 21 against the layoff of 58 colleagues.

The management called the police, who ordered the employees to leave immediately or face prosecution. When the workers obeyed, the management closed the plant and suspended another 33 people. The company has also refused to pay the December salaries.

Workers believe the lockout is part of management plans to shift the entire operation to Vietnam, where labour costs are lower. The Sri Lankan factory imports semi-finished items from Vietnam to produce travel bags for export to Britain and the US. During the past six months the company has cut the 700-strong workforce by almost half and closed down another of its plants in western Sri Lanka.

Monthly wages at the factory begin at just 2,500 rupees (\$US25). Workers are paid a 400-rupee (\$4) attendance bonus, but this is cut off after one day's absence. Six rupees are deducted for low quality factory-provided lunches. On one occasion, nearly 100 staff were hospitalised due to food poisoning.

Workers are not allowed to leave the factory after completing a day's work unless the management-set production target is met. The plant employs teenagers as young as 15, who are recruited from rural areas. The workforce was banned from joining a trade union, but established a branch of the Technical, Transport and General Union on December 22.

## **Tea factory workers fight job losses**

Some 550 Brook Bond Tea workers at Mabole in Colombo are picketing the plant each evening to demand job security. Management has announced it intends to close the factory due to a lack of foreign orders. The workers believe the company is moving to

subcontract work in order to cut costs. The factory is a subsidiary of the multinational Uni Lever. Uni Lever closed its Walls ice-cream factory in Sri Lanka several months ago at the cost of over 600 jobs.

## **Indonesian Shangri-La hotel employees mark year-long dispute**

Dozens of former employees of the Shangri-La Hotel protested in front of the hotel in Jakarta on December 24, to mark the anniversary of their dispute. Workers struck in December 2000 and occupied the hotel lobby to demand improved pay and conditions. The strike closed down the hotel for three months and was met with brutal police actions against the strikers. Shangri-La reopened using contract labour and more than 400 workers were sacked.

The workers demonstrated behind a banner demanding their reinstatement and the dropping of legal charges against a number of leading union activists.

## **Laid-off Chinese workers protest**

About 100 laid-off textile workers protested this week outside government offices in Hotan in China's far western Xinjiang region. No arrests were made and the workers dispersed without incident at the end of the day.

The workers were from a state-owned spinning mill that has recently sacked over 200 of its 1,300 workforce. The sacked staff feared they would not receive any severance pay. Protests by laid-off workers have become commonplace across China, as thousands of state-owned enterprises are closed down or privatised.

## **Philippines hospital strike wins bonus**

Strike action on December 17 by 400 workers at the Western Visayas Regional Hospital in the Philippines has forced management to pay bonus entitlements owed to nurses and general hospital staff. The bonus is 12

percent of the basic salary. Each employee will receive either 6,500 pesos or 7,500 pesos. Management initially claimed the hospital did not have sufficient funds to pay the entitlements. It has now transferred the money from maintenance and other operating expenses.

### **Australian power union agrees to cut jobs**

The long-running dispute by 65 maintenance workers at Yallourn Energy in Victoria's Latrobe Valley ended on December 25 after union officials agreed to the elimination of over half the jobs.

The workers began a series of rolling stoppages at the beginning of December in opposition to the company's demands for a new agreement permitting forced redundancies and increased use of contract labour. The workers struck when management applied to the Industrial Relations Commission to end the bargaining period, making further strike action illegal.

Under the deal reached with unions, the company will call for voluntary redundancies and refer further job cuts to a review panel headed by former Industrial Relations Commissioner Bob Merriman. An enhanced severance pay package will encourage workers to quit voluntarily. It sanctions the use of contract labour, provided the hiring company reaches an agreement with the relevant union.

Electrical Trades Union state secretary Dean Mighell hailed the agreement, declaring: "The maintenance workers are going out with a fantastic redundancy package because they fought for it." From the beginning, the trade unions have refused to campaign to defend jobs. In September, the unions representing 550 other Yallourn workers agreed to forced redundancies.

### **Bank workers strike over Christmas break**

Bank workers at the ANZ bank's output service base in Victoria walked off the job for 48 hours on December 25. The strike erupted after management compelled workers to work over the Christmas holiday period. The usual practice had been for bank staff to volunteer to work Christmas and Boxing Day.

Workers at ANZ, along with other major banks, are involved in an unresolved month-long dispute for improved wages and conditions. They are also opposing staff shortages. More than 45,000 workers from three of the country's major banks went on strike earlier this month and hundreds staged demonstrations outside shareholder annual general meetings in Melbourne and Sydney.

### **Jupiter Casino workers vote for work agreement**

Some 2,000 workers at Jupiter's Casino, on the Queensland Gold Coast, voted in a secret ballot last weekend to accept an enterprise work agreement after a long-running dispute. Under the agreement, the workers will get a \$54 pay rise spread over two and a half years. Workers took strike action early this year and were locked out twice by management for wearing "We want a wage rise" badges to work.

### **New Zealand radiation therapists plan more strikes**

Ninety hospital radiation therapists in Auckland, Hamilton and Palmerston North voted this week to strike again next month as part of an ongoing pay campaign. The therapists will strike from January 14, the third work stoppage in just over two months. Waikato and Auckland union members voted to strike for five days, while those in Palmerston North will be out for two days.

The therapists are demanding a 25 percent rise to stem the flow of qualified workers to better-paid jobs overseas. Several health boards have agreed to the claim, but will not begin payment for two years.



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