

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 June 2002

## Over 100 feared killed in major mine blast in China

A total of 111 miners were killed in a gas explosion at a coal mine on June 20 in the northeastern Heilongjiang province. Another four miners are still missing and are feared dead. Eight of the 24 men who were rescued are in a serious condition.

The blast ripped through the Chengzihe Coal Mine at 9:45am while 139 miners were working underground. The mine employs 5,500 workers and produces 1.1 million tonnes of coal annually.

Two other disasters in the same area in April killed 31 miners and injured 43 others. In the most serious of the two, 24 miners died and 39 were injured when a blast collapsed the shaft in which they were working.

China's State Administration of Coalmine Safety claims to have closed thousands of small, illegally operated pits in order to lower the industry's appalling death toll. At least 5,600 miners were killed last year. The closures, however, have mainly been aimed at reducing an oversupply of coal that holds down prices. The latest fatalities, occurring in the country's larger mines, demonstrate that unsafe conditions remain endemic.

## Retrenched oil workers demonstrate in China

More than 1,000 laid-off oil workers reportedly blocked roads leading into China's Shengli oilfields in Shandong province last weekend, demanding higher unemployment payments and more assistance in finding new jobs. Shengli is China's second largest oilfield, after the major Daqing field in Heilongjiang province. Tens of thousands of laid-off workers in Daqing have taken part in large-scale demonstrations since March against oil company attempts to slash compensation and unemployment benefits.

## Indonesian textile workers demand welfare

About 1,500 women workers employed by the garment manufacturer PT Indorama, in Tangerang, camped outside the municipal administration office on June 17 and held a rally there the next day. The women are demanding that the company improve their welfare scheme.

A spokesman for the Tangerang Independent Association of Workers said that the union had repeatedly discussed the demand with company management and reached several agreements, but they were never implemented. The company refused to honour its promises, even after being instructed to do so by the municipal manpower agency. One worker at the rally said: "We have now come to this office because the administration has the power to make the company directors approve our demands."

## Oil workers stage two-day protest in Java

On June 17, about 1,000 temporary workers at the state-run oil

and gas refinery in Balonan, West Java, occupied the facility for two days to demand a 50 percent wage increase. The workers presently earn just 476,000 rupiah (about \$US53) a month. The strikers also marched from the oil refinery site to the regional government building to press their demands.

## Sri Lankan ceramic workers fight to re-open factory

About 1,000 Lanka Ceramic workers have been picketing their plant after it was closed suddenly on June 5. Management imposed the lockout at the former state-owned company after workers took industrial action against the suspension of four union activists.

The locked-out employees, who have begun putting up posters about the closure, also picketed the company's main outlet in Colombo on June 6 and 7. Employees at the company's show rooms and auxiliary plants have supported the locked-out workers by holding two-day pickets outside their own work places.

## Plantation workers block land grab in central Sri Lanka

About 100 workers are occupying the Nuwara Eliya Pedro Plantation in central Sri Lanka in opposition to a June 10 court decision ordering part of the plantation be handed over to a private operator.

The private owner, accompanied by the court registrar and police, attempted to take over the land on June 15 but was blocked by nearly 7,000 workers from other divisions on the plantation who mobilised in support of the occupation.

## Indian tyre workers demand back pay

A total of 5,800 workers at Dunlop tyre factories in Kolkatta and Chennai began a hunger strike on June 20 to force the company to pay unpaid wages. Both factories suspended operations last September, owing workers about eight months wages. Workers are now facing grave economic difficulties and several have committed suicide.

Union sources said management has laid down conditions for resuming operations at the Chennai plant. Under the company plan, a minimum of 500 employees would have to accept compulsory retirement with only meagre compensation. Those remaining would have to agree to a 25 percent pay cut and the abolition of canteen facilities and transportation benefits.

## Thousands of Australian nurses walk off the job

More than 16,000 nurses at 80 public hospitals across Queensland struck for between one and 24 hours on June 20 and voted to close one in every four beds in the state to reduce patient-to-nurse ratios. Nurses from the Royal Brisbane and Princess Alexandra hospitals in Brisbane held rallies outside their workplaces while nurses in Cairns marched through the city's

streets.

The nurses want a six percent pay increase and a two-hour-per-day limit on overtime, as part of a new enterprise work agreement. The pay increase would bring their wages into line with other equivalent health professionals. The Queensland Labor government has rejected nurses' demands claiming that the government does not have the funds.

Inadequate pay and poor working conditions have led to a shortage of nurses, resulting in extra workloads, cuts in services and unlicensed staff being used in place of registered nurses. According to figures from the Queensland Health Department (QHD) public hospital nurse vacancies increased from 500 in 1999 to over 800 in November 2001. Nurses claim that these figures underestimate the situation. The official figure for nurse shortages at the Royal Brisbane Hospital was recorded at only 15, but nurses claim it is 100.

#### **Aged care workers fight for pay increase**

Aged care workers employed at Salvation Army facilities across Australia walked out on June 19 as part of a campaign for a dollar an hour wage increase. A union spokesman said all staff walked out at 11:30am "because the Salvation Army was just not prepared to make a decent pay offer".

The Salvation Army enterprise work agreement covering carers, nursing assistants, cooks, enrolled nurses, laundry and other support staff, expired three months ago. Management has demanded workers accept a new agreement that gives only a seven cents an hour pay rise, reduces annual leave entitlements, abolishes annual leave loadings and lowers penalty rates. According to the union, if the package were imposed some workers would lose up to a dollar an hour.

#### **Airline workers strike for improved severance pay**

Workers at the Qantas-owned regional carrier Southern Australia Airlines went on strike for 24 hours on June 20 demanding improved severance packages for 25 workers due to be retrenched in September. A spokeswoman for the Australian Services Union said Southern's workers were seeking the same redundancy entitlements paid to other Qantas employees.

#### **Union seeks negotiations at Lake Creek Meatworks**

The meat workers' union ended a weeklong strike on June 19 after management at the Lakes Creek Meatworks in Rockhampton bused strikebreakers through pickets outside the plant. A spokesman for Consolidated Meat Group, Lakes Creek plant owner, told the media: "When the union realised we were going to go ahead they spoke to me and said they'd like to hold further discussions with us."

The meat workers have been involved in off-and-on industrial action over the terms of an enterprise work agreement since the plant reopened in April, after being shut down late last year.

#### **New Zealand nurses vote industrial action over pay**

Thousands of Auckland public health nurses and midwives have voted by a 95 percent majority to strike next month over contract negotiations. This week, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) announced the result of a ballot of more than 4,500 members employed by the Auckland region's three district health boards.

The nurses approved a plan of industrial action, starting with a

four-hour strike on July 9, to be followed by a two-week ban on overtime and extra shifts and a two-day walkout on date to be determined. The strikes would close all but emergency services.

The health boards have made a four percent pay offer. Nurses have indicated that while they may accept this increase at intermediate levels, a proposed starting rate of \$31,900 is too low to attract new nurses to reduce heavy workloads. They are also demanding a single collective agreement and any pay increase to be backdated to spring last year when the previous agreement expired.

Three days of mediated talks between the NZNO and the boards began on June 19. However, the Waitemata Health CEO has already declared that any settlement will have to be "within the government's budget".

#### **Teachers' union calls off industrial action**

The New Zealand Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) called off planned industrial action this week. The union's decision followed mass student walkouts last week in support of the teachers' continuing pay dispute with the Labour-Alliance government. A ban on school sports and other extra-curricular activities last week led to thousands of students streaming out of schools, many holding roadside demonstrations to demand that the government meet the teachers' demands.

The union's national president Jen McCutcheon said the PPTA had decided to suspend industrial action to restore some "calm" to schools. At a series of stop work meetings held in centres across New Zealand last week, the 14,000 secondary school teachers rejected by a 74 percent majority a deal struck between the PPTA and the government.

#### **Fiji city council threatens to sack strikers**

Suva City Council (SCC) this week threatened to sack 200 striking council workers. The council also called on the Acting Minister for Labour to commence criminal proceedings against the National Union of Municipal Workers (NUMW) general secretary Pramod Rao.

The strike is in its second week and has gained support from Post and Telecom Employees Association members, who joined the council workers on their picket at the council depot. The workers are ignoring a ministerial order issued on June 13 declaring their strike illegal and ordering them to return to work.

The workers said the strike would continue until the council hands pays overdue bonus entitlements and complies with a Ministry of Labour order to recruit 22 extra workers. The council has employed contract workers to do essential work and claims it can continue to operate for six months. The matter has been referred to the courts for arbitration.



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