

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 June 2003

## Indian tanker drivers launch indefinite strike

Indian tanker drivers and cleaners launched an indefinite strike from June 2. The workers, who are employed to transport LPG gas from oil refineries, want a pay increase and bonus, introduction of a provident fund, gratuity, better leave provisions and improved compensation for accident or death while on duty.

The strike has stopped the movement of LPG from major oil companies in Mangalore, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. The police have attacked striking workers a number of times. They arrested about 50 workers on June 2 and the next day arrested 12 more.

## Brick workers in Pakistan demand approved pay rate

Brick kiln workers in Gujrat, in Pakistan's northeastern Punjab province, demonstrated on May 30 to demand that the government direct kiln owners pay a recommended salary increase. Owners pay only 70 to 85 rupees (\$US1.40 to \$1.70) for 1,000 raw bricks, compared with a state-recommended rate of 184 rupees per 1,000.

Those employees who have refused to work for the lower rate allege they have been subjected to harassment and intimidation. Even though the repression has been reported to the Labour Department, no action has been taken against any employers. Workers have accused Labour Department officials of colluding with the kiln owners to cover up work violations for several years.

## Pakistani sugar mill workers demand union rights

Workers from the Army Welfare Sugar Mills in Badin, Sindh province, marched through the town on May 27 to demand management lift an order that they disband their union. The workers carried banners and placards accusing the mill of anti-labour policies.

The acting general manager, retired Colonel Zahirullah Khan, issued the order on May 19, after he received a letter from the Army Welfare Trust Director of Farms demanding the union be abolished. The union was established at the mill when it began operations in 1983.

Khan warned union officials that if they did not comply with the directive to stop activity and close the union office, he would do it by force. He directed all mill managers to have no relations with the union or communicate with its officials. Workers have been staging daily protest meetings at the factory gate since the disband order was issued.

## Sacked Pakistani gas workers demand reinstatement

Sacked Sui Southern Gas workers demonstrated outside the Hyderabad Press Club on June 2 to demand reinstatement. Workers' action committee leaders claim that the company has

refused to act on a Pakistani Supreme Court directive ordering reinstatement of the 1,390 workers.

The action committee warned that if Sui Southern Gas did not comply with the order within seven days it would mount a sit-in protest in front of the company headquarters in Karachi.

## Sri Lankan port workers oppose transfers

Port workers at Bandaranaike Bridge in Colombo harbour staged a protest on May 26 against a management decision to transfer a number of their colleagues to other locations. The employees refused to carry out their work duties but remained on the job. The Port Authority eventually ordered them to leave the harbour.

## Philippine casino workers sue for entitlements

Over 40 employees sacked by Waterfront Cebu City Hotel and Casino-Club Restaurant International in the Philippines filed a complaint this week with the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC).

The workers have charged the casino with violating labour laws after it told them not to report for work. The violations include illegal suspension, illegal dismissal and non-payment of salaries. The workers are owed 13 months pay, service incentive and allowances.

Club Waterfront claimed the jobs were axed because of decreased hotel patronage due to the SARS epidemic and that it would try to pay the outstanding entitlements in about a week.

The workers are disputing the casino closure, alleging that it is a ploy to sack some of the long-term employees before the casino section of the business is sold. They claim to have records showing the occupancy and attendance rate is not decreasing. They have asked the NLRC to order reinstatement and payment of "actual, moral and exemplary damages" as well as court costs.

## Journalists' case against police delayed in Indonesia

On June 2, the Central Jakarta District Court postponed for the second time a hearing of a lawsuit filed by the Association of Independent Journalists (AJI). The hearing was delayed because the Jakarta Police chief and the Menteng police sub-precinct chief failed to attend.

The union is taking legal action against several high-ranking police over an incident at *Tempo* magazine's Jakarta offices on March 8. The AJI allege that the police stood by while thugs working for prominent businessman Tommy Winata, an associate of Indonesia's president Megawati Sukarnoputri, attacked *Tempo* offices and assaulted journalists.

The attack came after the magazine published a story claiming Winata stood to benefit from a fire that destroyed around 5,500

kiosks at the Tahah Abangf textile market in Central Jakarta several weeks earlier. According to *Tempo*, Winata submitted a 53 billion rupiah (\$US5.9 million) proposal to the Jakarta city administration to renovate the market three weeks before the fire.

Journalists immediately staged protests after the attack demanding official action against Winata, and calling on the AJI to launch legal proceedings against the police.

#### **Australian brewing company locks out workers**

Carlton & United Brewery (CUB) in Abbotsford, Melbourne locked out more than 300 workers for 24 hours on June 4. The lockout was in retaliation against industrial bans imposed by employees for a 15 percent pay increase over three years. About two months ago workers imposed bans on overtime and training courses and also began leaving the job before the prescribed finishing time.

A CUB spokesman said the company was considering weekly lockouts. It is the first time CUB has locked out its workforce in 20 years.

#### **Car component workers walk off the job**

Workers at the high-tech manufacturer Bosch in Melbourne walked off the job for 24 hours on June 2. The strike is part of a campaign for a 13 percent pay claim and a trust fund scheme to protect entitlements such as long service leave and sick pay. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) is conducting an enterprise-by-enterprise campaign of limited industrial action at 1,100 auto component workplaces in Victoria and NSW.

The union has limited industrial action to prevent any repeat of the auto-part strikes in 2001, which brought production at the major car plants to a virtual standstill. Following these disputes the AMWU entered into an agreement with the car companies pledging that there would be no repeat of the disruption. In return, the car companies promised not to pursue the legal action against the union.

The Bosch walkout came after a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement. A management spokesman said employees were due to vote on an offer on June 11 and that the package would ensure the company remained “competitive in a demanding local and global market”.

#### **Teachers strike over pay**

On June 2, teachers at the Bankstown, Chullora and Nowra Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in New South Wales held a two-hour stop work meeting. They have been campaigning for the last six months for a new work agreement with improved wages and conditions.

The teachers passed a resolution calling on their union, the NSW Teachers Federation, to call statewide industrial action if the state Labor government does not grant a 5 percent salary catch-up, in addition to a 15 percent pay increase over three years. They have demanded the government make provision for the pay increase in the coming June state budget.

#### **Young construction worker dies in fall**

A young construction worker died instantly in Queensland on June 2 when he fell from the roof of a building and crashed to the concrete floor some 30 metres below. Troy Leonard Body, 27, was working on the Townsville Port Authority sugar shed when the accident occurred just after 11.30 a.m.

Workmates gave him CPR but he did not respond. While Leonard had been wearing a safety harness some time before the fall, a senior police officer on the scene said: “We are assuming he was unhooked.” Employees walked off the site immediately after the accident and will meet to decide when to resume work.

Workplace Health and Safety officers have started a mandatory inquiry into the incident. Subcontractor Lollo Constructions employed Leonard as a roofer and plumber. The senior contractor on the job is Walter Constructions Group.

#### **Seafarers quit ship at New Zealand port**

Six Indonesian seafarers flew home last week from the New Zealand port of Nelson, after what they said was “nightmare” employment on a Korean ship. The crew walked off the *Wisteria* when it berthed in Nelson late in May.

Second officer Rasena Sutopo said the men decided to quit the ship because of bad food and frequent water shortages. The men complained of discrimination against the Indonesian, Burmese and Chinese crew. The International Transport Workers Federation negotiated payment of \$33,000 in owed wages. The seafarers were among a crew of 19 on the *Wisteria*, which is owned by Korean firm Hanjoo Shipping.

#### **Fijian timber workers protest bad working conditions**

About 40 workers from Sustainable Forest Industries in Fiji took strike action on June 3 over poor working conditions. The workers do not get annual leave pay or over-time payments and are not provided with essential safety equipment. The company, which processes raw mahogany into finished timber for export, also failed to pay employees’ National Provident Fund (NPF) contributions.

A spokesman for the timber workers said they were “being treated like slaves”. A director of the company, Christopher Donlon, admitted that NPF payments were not up to date but claimed the company was paying wages before meeting other commitments.

#### **Health workers threaten strike over salary arrears**

Honiara City Council health workers in the Solomon Islands have issued the council with a 28-day strike notice. They are demanding the payment of eight salary arrears. Although employed by the city council, their salaries are paid by the national government through the Ministry of Health.

A city council health official that said unless the government acts quickly health services in Honiara would come to a standstill.



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