

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 July 2003

## Indonesian aircraft workers continue protests

Workers who were stood down by state-owned aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PT DI) are continuing to protest outside the company's plant in Bandung, Indonesia. The plant was closed on July 11 and the entire 9,670-strong workforce was ordered home. Special Air Force (Paskhas) personnel have been deployed to guard the plant during the lockout.

Despite promises by the company to allow around 3,000 workers to return to work in stages starting on July 21, so far only 150 employees, mostly managers and supervisors, have been allowed back into the plant. A company spokesman said the 3,000 employees would be reassigned to assemble CN-235 passenger planes and to produce spare parts for Airbus A-380 aircraft ordered by British Aerospace. He said the company had yet to decide what to do about the remaining employees.

The PT DI Workers Union (FKK) Arif Minardi, which covers workers at the plant, announced this week that it will sue company president director, Edwin Soedarmo. The union claims his "unilateral decision" to stand down the workers is illegal as it was made without consulting other members of the board of directors.

## Thai guest workers fight for wages compensation

A long-running court battle between a knitting factory in Mae Sot district, Tak, Thailand and 33 Burmese workers will continue next month. The workers are suing Nut Knitting Partnership as part of a campaign for 4.6 million baht (\$US110,000) in compensation for unpaid wages. They have also filed a complaint with provincial labour protection officials saying that they were paid less than half of the legal minimal wage for extended periods of their employment. The workers were laid off earlier this year after management closed the factory temporarily. The firm has refused to pay the outstanding wages even though workers agreed to accept only 70 percent.

Last week, the Mae Sot Labour Court announced that it would hear witnesses in the case from August 25 to 26. The Federation of Thai Industries has now proposed employers charge guest workers for housing, food, water, and electricity.

## Sri Lankan rubber workers begin hunger strike

Four rubber factory workers began a hunger strike on July 18 demanding the re-opening of a former state-owned factory and reinstatement of 143 employees. Other workers are protesting outside the plant. The factory is situated in a rural rubber growing area in Waulagala, Horana, about 40 kilometres from Colombo.

The plant was originally owned by the Sri Lanka Rubber Manufacturing and Exporting Corporation, but was sold to Suyamas Vestal International in February under the government's privatisation program. Under the sale agreement, workers were to receive the same working conditions and salaries. On July 11, however, the factory was closed and the employees locked out. The new owners want to hire contract workers on reduced salaries.

## Sri Lankan volunteer teachers on fasting protest

About 100 volunteer teachers in Kurunegala district, 90 kilometres from

Colombo, began a fasting protest on July 17 in front of North Western Chief Ministry. They are demanding that their positions be made permanent. Both Sinhala and Tamil teachers are participating in the action. A spokesman for the ministry told the press that it had no power to recruit volunteer teachers even though there are 800 vacancies. He declared that the problems of volunteer teachers had to be "solved by the central government".

## Non-academic staff strike for pay increase across Sri Lanka

Non-academic staff at universities throughout Sri Lanka launched a token strike on July 17 demanding a 2,000-rupee (\$US20) salary increase. Other demands include resolving salary anomalies, the provision of funds for "distress loans" and an end to plans to privatise universities. The workers began a picketing campaign outside the University Grants Commission in central Colombo on the same day. They have threatened to organise more extensive industrial action if their demands are not met.

## Indian teachers' association threaten industrial action

The State High School Master's Association has warned it will begin statewide industrial action from August 15 to pressure the Karnataka state government to make the fee structure for professional courses affordable for poor and middle class students.

The association's general secretary K.C. Puttasiddachetty said that under present circumstances the opportunity for a professional education is "a mirage for poor students". Even if they get a merit seat in private medical or engineering colleges, the fees are prohibitive. Even students from upper-middle class families find it hard to afford the 160,000-rupee annual fees for courses such as medical degrees.

## Indian workers on hunger strike against lockout

Locked-out workers at the Garden Reach factory of Hindustan Lever in West Bengal decided this week to continue the hunger strike they began on July 19. The workers were locked out on March 22 after they refused to agree to a reduction of the workforce.

A union spokesman said the management had shown no sign of making an agreement with the workers and the West Bengal government has not responded to requests that it intervene and use existing laws to prohibit lockouts.

## Australian teachers walk out amid pay dispute

Teachers at Strathfield South High School in Sydney, New South Wales, stopped work for one hour on July 22 to protest advice by the Department of Education to the principal that teachers should be prohibited from using school computers to send emails to members of parliament. Teachers sent the emails as part of a campaign for a new work agreement.

More than 50,000 public school teachers across NSW are demanding a 20 percent pay increase, plus a further 5 percent catch-up. The NSW State Labor government is offering just 3 percent.

NSW teachers will stop work for two hours next week to vote on a proposed strike on September 17 to coincide with stoppages by their colleagues in Western Australia, Victoria and Queensland. Labor governments in all three states are offering teachers pay increases ranging between just 2.65 percent and 3.5 percent.

### **Train workers continue industrial campaign**

Forty workers from train manufacturer EDI's operations in Newcastle and Bathurst staged a rally on July 22 outside the company's Sydney headquarters.

Employees at both sites have been involved in industrial action for a number of weeks in support of new workplace agreements that include protection of entitlements, job security and improved long-service leave. The 90 workers at EDI Rail factory in Bathurst are defying a NSW Industrial Relations Commission order to return to work following a compulsory conference for July 21. They have been on strike since July 11. The plant manufactures train undercarriages.

The 30 workers employed at the EDI Rail plant on Kooragang Island in Newcastle are maintaining a 24-hour picket after walking off the job on July 14. They are demanding a 6 percent pay increase but the company has offered only 4 percent.

### **Locked-out wool workers protest**

On July 18, 115 locked-out workers from the Geelong Wool Combing factory protested outside the company's plant at Corio. They have been locked out for 11 weeks for refusing to accept cuts in their penalty rates that would reduce their average weekly earnings by 25 percent.

Australian Council of Trade Unions President Sharan Burrows, who addressed the rally, said the workers are already paid below the award rate. She did not, however, offer any concrete support or propose a way forward.

### **Glass workers strike to support locked-out colleagues**

More than 300 workers employed by glass manufacturer ACI walked off the job for 24 hours in support of employees at the company's Box Hill plant in Victoria who have been locked out for more than eight weeks. The stoppage involved workers from plants in Brisbane, Sydney, Adelaide and Perth.

The Box Hill workers were locked out in the course of a dispute over working conditions. Management offered to lift the lockout if employees accept a proposal allowing the company to cut jobs and working conditions. The proposal was rejected at a mass meeting last week. Workers voted to demand the management accept a return to work under previously existing conditions or face further company-wide industrial action. The Box Hill factory makes wine and juice bottles and jars.

### **Adelaide bus drivers to strike**

Bus drivers in Adelaide, South Australia, voted this week to strike on July 25 and July 28 after a further meeting in the Federal Industrial Relations Commission (FIRC) failed to resolve issues in an ongoing dispute. Private bus operators Southlink and Serco, which cover southern routes in South Australia's capital city, claimed they could not afford to meet the drivers' demands for improved pay and working conditions.

The FIRC has instructed Southlink to make a new pay offer to be voted on by its 150 drivers on August 14. The 600 drivers at Serco have already rejected a company offer of 10 percent over three years. A union spokesman said that although the stoppages this weekend would go ahead, there would be no further industrial action until after the August 14 deadline.

### **Council workers walk out for pay increase in Queensland**

Workers at the Livingstone Shire Council in Queensland walked off the job for two hours on July 23 in support of a pay increase. The council has offered a 1.5 to 2 percent increase but workers say it is not enough to keep up with the cost-of-living.

Livingstone council employees are paid 10 percent less than those at the nearby Burnett Shire Council and at least 5 percent less than Rockhampton City Council workers.

### **New Zealand health workers to strike**

Nearly 500 Otago workers in mental health, social work and physiotherapy services plan to strike for four hours on July 30 in support of a pay increase. The workers are from 18 occupational groups including

occupational therapists, technicians, public health nurses and engineers. Employed at Dunedin and Wakari hospitals and elsewhere in rural Otago and Southland, they have been working to rule and refusing limited duties since July 10.

A Public Service Association organiser said the workers had decided to strike as it was the only avenue left. Management has not shown any interest when asked to help lobby the government for more health funding that would enable the payment of fairer salaries. The management has also cancelled leave for study, training and conferences.

### **Union officials arrested at New Zealand port picket**

Industrial action at Bluff's South Port continued this week after three union officials were arrested during a 48-hour strike. Rail and Maritime Transport Union organiser Paul Corliss and two other union officials were arrested at a picket on July 18 and charged with disorderly behavior. Protesting waterside workers regrouped outside Environment Southland offices in Invercargill. The regional council owns 70 percent of the port.

The dispute is over working conditions and a claim for a 2.75 percent wage increase for five permanent and 14 casual workers who currently earn just \$9.92 per hour. Some casuals have worked for the port for between 10 and 15 years and have not had a pay rise in over a decade. The company also wants to remove permanent workers' right to be paid, even if shifts are cancelled.

### **Privy Council denies suit by injured New Zealand Telecom workers**

A case by New Zealand Telecom workers suing for \$22 million after being incapacitated by occupational overuse injuries has been rejected by the British Privy Council. A panel of three law lords in London rejected a petition lodged by a worker representing 83 telephone exchange and directory staff that were forced to retire on medical grounds or were made redundant in the late 1990s.

The petition to the Privy Council was in challenge to a New Zealand Court of Appeal decision that barred them from using an exception in previous legislation to gain damages from Telecom on top of accident compensation. The workers claimed Telecom breached the terms of their collective employment contracts that guaranteed protection from workplace hazards and compliance with a code of practice for computers. Even though the Labour Department acknowledged in 1998 that occupational overuse syndrome had been a problem in Telecom, it chose not to prosecute the company.

The workers will decide whether to seek a settlement with Telecom or return to the Employment Court with claims that the company dealt with them unfairly and dismissed some wrongfully on disability grounds. A Telecom spokesman said the company owed the workers no obligations in view of the court decision. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union subsidised workers' costs as far as the Court of Appeal, but turned down a request to help them finance the case before the Privy Council.

### **Vanuatu medical staff threaten walkout over pay**

Technical staff at Vanuatu's Port Vila Hospital are demanding the government pay them \$US640,000 in outstanding on-call allowances before they agree to perform full duties. Doctors are also seeking payment of \$US300,000 in outstanding fees.

The 21 technicians and doctors stopped doing on-call duties five months ago over the non-payment of the allowances and fees. The doctors returned to full duties after being advised by the Ministry of Health that they will be paid. However, the government has paid only what is owing for this year and not the amount from 1999 to the end of 2002.

### **Guam airport to begin layoffs**

Dozens of employees at Guam International Airport are expected to receive layoff notices as the airport attempts to cut its payroll by one third. The airport currently employs 235 workers and plans to cut \$US3.5 million in personnel costs out of its \$US30 million operating budget.

Forty-six employees have already been terminated, including unclassified, temporary and part-time workers and full-time consultants.

Fire fighters and emergency rescue employees will keep their jobs but will be moved to eight-hour shifts instead of the current 24-hour shifts. The move eliminates the need to pay night work penalty rates and cuts overtime.



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