

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 June 2004

## Indonesian plywood workers strike over unpaid wages

A two-week-old strike by up to 3,000 workers from Kalimantan Plywood Industry and Santi Mumi Plywood in Samarinda city on the island of Borneo, is continuing. The strikers are demanding the payment of salaries owed to them over the past two months.

Nine of the workers began a hunger strike on June 23 and are camped outside the main gate of the East Kalimantan provincial governor's office. On June 22, strikers kidnapped two company executives, who are being held hostage in a company office. A spokesman for the workers said the two executives would not be released until their demands were met.

The Hong Kong-based Shine Hill Limited owns the companies. At a meeting with the strikers, company spokesman Wahyudi Manaf claimed that the salaries had not been paid because the companies had failed to achieve sales targets. He promised to pay each employee \$US58, just half of what they are entitled to, by the end of the week.

## Indonesian hotel workers demand reinstatement

Dozens of employees of the Nikko Hotel in central Jakarta and members of the Federation of Independent Workers Union took to the streets on June 15 to demand reinstatement of 237 employees in line with a recent direction by the Jakarta Manpower and Transmigration Agency. The workers demonstrated at the Hotel Indonesia traffic circle, bringing midday traffic to a standstill.

The workers were sacked after the government sold its shares in the hotel, formerly known as the President Hotel, to PT Guthrie Logistic Private Ltd. The new management claimed the sackings were necessary because the hotel was suffering financial losses. The workers' union has disputed the claim, pointing out that the hotel's occupancy rate was over 70 percent, the highest in Jakarta, and profits last year amounted to more than 1.4 billion rupiah (\$US149,636).

## Workers march against unfair dismissals

Some 1,000 PT Kyung Dong Indonesia (KDI) workers marched to the East Java legislative council on June 17 to protest the company's closure due to financial difficulties. The South Korean company ceased operations and laid-off 3,000 workers in February despite a manpower ministry order that it delay the closure.

"KDI has treated us arbitrarily. We will fight it to the last drop of blood," one demonstrator told the rally outside the council building. Protest leader Sugeng Prayitno said the massive layoff was unacceptable because the company had not been declared bankrupt.

## Teachers in eastern Indonesia continue strike over assault

A mass strike by teachers in the Mula region of South East Sulawesi entered its eleventh day on June 18 with little resolution in sight. The strike is affecting all levels of education, from elementary to senior high schools.

The strike is in protest against the beating of junior high school principal La Ode Tiala on June 4 by a high-ranking police officer Chief Brigadier Alim Salman. Salman carried out the assault because teachers had disciplined his son who was a student at the school. He also threatened further violence against teachers and said he would throw grenades at the

school buildings.

The teachers have vowed to continue the strike until the authorities charge Salman and punish him in accordance with the law.

## Abused Filipino workers flee Middle East

The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has ordered the repatriation of at least 492 overseas Filipino workers (OFWs), mostly domestic helpers who left their employers in five Middle East countries because of mistreatment.

Acting Labor Secretary Manuel Imson issued the repatriation order amid protests by OFW relatives claiming the government is ignoring the plight of abused Filipino workers around the world. Many workers have died while trying to escape from violent employers.

Of the 492 OFWs to be repatriated, the Philippines Labor Office in Kuwait is sheltering 327, 83 are in Saudi Arabia, 22 in Lebanon, 48 in the United Arab Emirates and 12 in Bahrain.

More than 7.4 million OFWs are employed throughout the world, about 9 percent of the Philippines' workforce. This year, remittances from OFWs to the Philippines are expected to total \$US7.6 billion. In the first three months of this year, OFW numbers were up 18.9 percent, increasing remittances by 4.3 percent. The government is anxious that if it is not seen as responding to reports of maltreatment then potential applicants for the program will be scared off, reducing remittances and adding to the already high level of unemployment, which stands at 20 percent.

## Philippines government orders strikers back to work

Striking day and swing shift workers at a Taiwanese electronics exporter in Subic Bay industrial estate were last week given 14 hours by the Philippines Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to return to work. DOLE claimed that the strike, which began on June 16, threatened the economic interests of the country.

The small company, Taian (Subic) Electronic Inc. (TSEI), employs just 144 workers. Acting Labor Secretary Manuel Imson claimed "a prolonged stoppage of the [TSEI] operation will deprive the [Philippines] economy of very much needed foreign revenues" and "may act as a deterrent to investors to invest in our economic zone".

Union spokesman Jimmy Mamolo said the union had been surprised when at 9 p.m., on June 16, while at the picket line, he was served with a DOLE order to vacate the area or face dispersal by Subic Bay Metropolitan Authority (SBMA) law enforcement officers.

The strike is over unfair labour practices, especially harassment, illegal transfer of machines, union busting and illegal suspension of employees. The union is also demanding that perjury cases against two union officials be dropped. DOLE has asked the National Labor Relations Commission to resolve the dispute within 30 days.

## South Korean hospital union calls off strike

Striking hospital workers in South Korea returned to work on June 21 after the union reached an agreement with management in all-night negotiations. The 15,000 nurses and hospital administrative workers from over 100 hospitals across the country had been on strike since June 10. The union rushed to sign off on the agreement after management walked

out of the negotiations, declaring the talks had “broken down”.

The strike was part of a campaign by the Korean Confederation Trade Unions (KCTU) for a five-day workweek, the abolition of discrimination against part-time and day laborers, and pay increases for workers in affiliated unions.

While management in some hospitals agreed to the five-day workweek, they will introduce alternating shifts that will see 50 percent of staff working each Saturday. Workers in hospitals that implement the shorter working week this year will get only a 2 percent pay increase while those in hospitals on the old system will receive 5 percent. The agreement abolishes paid monthly menstruation leave for female workers, replacing it with a “health allowance” equivalent to a 30th of their salaries.

The union did not press for settlement on its demand that all temporary workers get permanent posts after management representatives promised to “make efforts to effect a gradual transfer”. The minimum wage for casuals is 40 percent of that of regular workers.

#### **Sri Lankan health workers oppose pay cut**

About 80,000 health workers across Sri Lanka began a “sick note” campaign on June 23 to protest the secretaries of provincial councils holding back payment of amended salaries scales. According to a health workers spokesman, the decision affects 49 categories of provincial health workers.

After workers reported in sick, services in the country’s 569 hospitals and 269 administrative establishments were crippled. On the same day, health workers demonstrated outside the Health Ministry in central Colombo.

The workers have threatened to repeat the sick-note campaign on June 29 and 30, and to launch an indefinite strike from July 5 if the issue of pay remains unresolved. Health workers of all categories, except medical officers, were involved in the industrial action, called by the Health Services Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA).

#### **Telecom engineers fight victimisation**

On June 22, 300 Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) telecommunication engineers began an indefinite strike, demanding the reinstatement of four leaders of the Sri Lanka Telecom Engineers Union (SLTEU). They set up a picket at the entrance of the company’s offices the next day.

The state-owned telecommunications provider sent the four union leaders, Tilak De Silva (President), Lionel Imbulana (Vice President), N.G. Senanayake (Secretary), and G.D. Senanayake (Treasurer), on compulsory leave after accusing them of holding a press conference without prior written permission from company’s CEO.

The union leaders pointed out that they had held many media conferences in the past, and it had never been a problem. At this media conference they accused management of making a wrong decision when buying an expensive software package for telecom billing.

The Joint Front of Telecom workers, comprising of almost all grades of telecom workers, expressed its support for the engineers and threatened action if their demands were not met.

#### **Doctors strike over working condition and pay arrears**

Medical officers in the Anuradhapura district, in Sri Lanka’s North Central province, held a token strike on June 19 over several demands, including the immediate payment of salary arrears, outstanding overtime payments for doctors in provisional hospitals and the introduction of a proper procedure for recruiting medical officers.

Other demands include the appointment of specialist doctors to the technical evaluation committee commissioned to purchase medical equipment and an inquiry into the activities of the District Health Service Director.

The strike affected health services across the entire district. The medical officers threatened go out indefinitely if their demands were not met.

#### **Indian transport workers oppose privatisation and wage freeze**

Transport workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu protested

outside the State Transport Corporation’s rural depot in the city of Tiruchi on June 19.

The protestors were opposing privatisation of the corporation and demanding that management negotiate a new wage agreement to replace the old one that expired two and half years ago. Other demands included the end of the ban on paying pensions and the withdrawal of punitive actions against workers who had earlier gone on strike demanding the restoration of bonuses and other benefits.

#### **Milk workers strike for pay and conditions**

Workers from National Foods, a milk-processing plant in Western Australia’s capital Perth went on strike this week demanding an increase in pay, improved redundancy packages and restrictions on the use of contract labour.

They want seeking a 6 percent annual increase over two years. The company has offered only 3.23 percent a year and refuses to negotiate any further. National Foods processes almost half the state’s milk supply.

#### **Mental health nurses act over safety**

Nurses walked off the job this week at Fremantle Hospital’s secure mental health ward over inadequate staff numbers. Staff at the West Australian hospital had been expected to care for 12 patients instead of the maximum number of 10 in the ward. Five patients were considered very ill and potentially aggressive.

Other hospital staff were assigned to look after patients as striking nurses attempted to meet with the administration to express their concerns. Hospital management conceded that it was not possible to provide adequate care to the patients or staff safety if the ward was understaffed.

Nurses pointed to recent assaults of a nurse and doctor by mental patients at the Swan District Hospital mental health ward in Perth’s outer suburbs, saying they would no longer accept similar unsafe conditions at the Fremantle facility.

#### **Tram drivers defy union to oppose attack on working conditions**

More than 200 tram drivers employed by Yarra Trams at the company’s Malvern depot in Melbourne went on strike for four hours on June 24 to oppose changes to their rosters that will result in workloads of more than 40 hours a week. The strike took place in defiance of the Rail Tram and Bus Union which has supported the management’s plans.

Workers insist that the roster changes contravene long-established award conditions won more than 20 years ago. A union official attempted to prevent the strike by telling tram drivers that their actions were “extreme” and they could face possible legal action.

At a stop-work meeting called independently of the union, striking workers passed a resolution demanding that the company withdraw the new rosters and warned that any attempt to force drivers to work more than 40 hours would be met with further industrial action.

#### **Sydney taxi drivers strike**

About 300 Sydney taxi drivers went on strike on June 21 to oppose the recently introduced “no destination” rule brought by the New South Wales Transport Minister Michael Costa. The rule will prohibit taxis services giving cab drivers the destination of a client when they ring in.

While Costa claims the legislation seeks to stop cabdrivers accepting only the more lucrative or convenient fares, the move came amid a deepening crisis for the government over collapsing services in the public transport system. Cab drivers claim Costa conjured up the “no destination” issue as a diversion.

The strikers are members of the Transport Workers Union. The NSW Taxi Council did not support the striking cabbies. The drivers voted on a series of resolutions for further action and are launching a public petition to demand the abolition of the “no destination” rule.

#### **New Zealand university staff to renew strikes**

Non-academic staff at the Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) have voted for a campaign of industrial action that will shut down the university’s administration for the first week of the second teaching

trimester, beginning on July 12. Last week the workers, who are seeking a 4 percent pay increase, rejected an offer of a 2.5 percent with an additional \$350 one-off payment.

The total shutdown will be preceded by a communications blackout, with the withholding of exam grades and a ban on processing enrolments. Rolling and lightning strikes are planned with more sustained stoppages and in selected key areas. Academic staff are promising financial and practical support for the action.

General staff at all other universities have been offered a salary increase of at least 3 percent. A spokesman for the Association of University Staff said the staff at VUW would not accept lower salary increases than those in other parts of the sector. The union, however, is continuing “informal discussions” with the university in the hope of reaching some kind of agreement before the July disruption.

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

Mental health workers in Tauranga in the central North Island are planning to strike for six days after talks this week between the Public Service Association (PSA) and Pacific Health failed to resolve a pay dispute. The union made the announcement after a 10-hour mediation session on June 21 ended in stalemate on Monday. The chief executive leading the negotiations for the health boards had declared that workers’ representatives needed “a good dose of reality”.

An official strike notice has been handed to the management of the Tauranga Hospital and if further mediation attempts fail, the strike will go ahead on July 2. The strike will involve 100 psychiatric nurses and psychiatric assistants and about 10 staff at Whakatane Hospital. A further 40 staff in Rotorua and another 200 in Hamilton may join the action and this would leave a large part of the central North Island without mental health care services.

Psychiatric nurses in the region have rejected a management offer of a 1.5 percent pay rise over two years and are demanding the same as their Waikato counterparts, who are seeking a 3.4 per cent pay rise, backdated to March last year.

The PSA has been negotiating on pay and conditions with the Bay of Plenty Health Board, Lakeland Health in Rotorua and the Waikato District Health Board for just over a year. Nurses also contend that the prevailing working conditions and staff levels in mental institutions are unsafe for both nurses and patients.



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