

DANDENONG SOUTH

Protest continues at Aspen

Geordie Cowan

WORKERS WON'T ACCEPT 'OUTRAGEOUS' CONTRACT CHANGES

STRIKING workers at Aspen Pharmaceuticals are at loggerheads with management over pay and conditions.

As *Leader* went to press, workers had clocked up three days on the picket line in front of its Dandenong South facility.

The stop work was originally slated for 24 hours

from 11pm Tuesday, but the company locked the gates behind the picket line on Wednesday and both parties are now at a stalemate.

"Management is digging their heels in. It's whoever buckles first," Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union organiser Toby Paterson said.

The dispute over changed conditions has been going for up to 18 months as more than half of the facility's 340 staff fight the changes. Sixteen fitters and 160 production line workers are directly affected.

Mr Paterson said Aspen was threatening workers with sending jobs to South

Africa if they did not agree to the changes. Fitters were being asked to accept the removal of half their rostered days off or a below-inflation wage rise of 3 per cent over three years.

"It's absolutely outrageous," he said.

Production and machine operator Chetan Rama-

krishna said workers were fighting for a good cause.

"It is not only for us, but also for the future," he said.

An Aspen spokesman, who would not be named, said the company had offered production line workers more pay at a higher hourly rate in exchange for half its RDOs and said

employees would be paid 3 per cent a year over the next three years.

The spokesman said the company had to "increase production efficiency" or its Australian operations "may not be sustainable".

Aspen claimed the picket line was "an unlawful blockade" which stopped workers not covered by the enterprise agreement attending work.

SOUTH-EAST

set to go to Africa



Aspen staff strike to try to save their jobs over fears their work may be sent to South Africa. 141502

Picture: GARY SISSONS

"We're prepared to sit until the company's attitude changes."

The plant produces chemicals for the pharmaceutical industry, including methadone.

"The company said to me this morning that they had enough products to last several months," Mr Pater-

son said. "Whether that's true or not, I don't know."

National Union of Workers (NUW) is also involved in negotiations, which have included proposing banking the RDO days to improve flexibility, adding them to annual leave time, or allowing workers to accrue the RDOs

through working overtime. NUW organiser Andy Riley said: "The company just wants to force longer working hours on them and they see it as a way of gaining more efficiency."

Bernie Lacey has worked for Aspen for 15 years and said the RDO change would cost workers time with

their families. He said many had young children and used the time to pick them up from school.

"I spend the time with my mum," he said.

"It was the reason I started working here. It was less money but better conditions."