

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Labor Premier moves to break strike

Queensland state Labor premier Peter Beattie announced this week that he will ask former prime minister Bob Hawke to intervene to force an end to the month-long strike by more than 1,000 construction workers at the Sun Metals Zinc Refinery south of Townsville in north Queensland.

Hawke, who was president of the Australian Council of Trade Unions before becoming prime minister in 1983, is known for brokering an end to disputes on terms favourable to the employers.

Beattie is pressing the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Builders Labourers Federation to end the strike after threats by Sun Metals this week to suspend the refinery project indefinitely.

Last week Beattie joined with the Townsville Chamber of Commerce (TCC) to denounce the strikers, accusing them of "intimidation and bad behaviour" toward management staff crossing the picket line. A TCC spokesman said the unions covering the workers were "not welcome in the town".

The strikers are demanding that pay rates be increased in line with other major sites, the payment of the standard \$288 per week living away from home allowance and an improvement in safety conditions.

This week the unions took the dispute back into the Queensland Industrial Relations Court despite workers having earlier rejected a return to work order by the court.

Gordonstone remains isolated

Workers are maintaining an around-the-clock picket outside the Gordonstone mine near Emerald, in central Queensland despite the arrest of more than 230 workers.

Supreme Court Justice Martin Moynihan last Tuesday granted interim injunctions against seven Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union officials, ordering them not to "hinder access to the mine site" or "stand in a line at the exit gate" and to "refrain from verbal abuse or organizing such activity".

The bitter dispute erupted 17 months ago when the mine's

former owner, ARCO, sacked its entire 300-strong workforce and attempted to reopen the mine with non-union labour under reduced working conditions. Picketing was stepped up early in February when the mine's new owner, Rio Tinto, attempted restart operations using non-union workers.

The union has refused to escalate the dispute to mines in the area or nationally fearing that this would cut across a number of deals being made with mine owners in other states.

In New South Wales the union has just concluded an agreement that allows Gympie Gold, the new owners of the closed Ellalong mine near Cessnock in the Hunter Valley, to ignore seniority and reopen using labour of their choosing. The deal allows a substantial reduction in wage levels.

At the same time the union has agreed to a cut in working conditions, including ending demarcation, when York Mining reopens the Gretley colliery, near Newcastle, in NSW. The mine, once owned by Oakbridge, was the site of a mining disaster in November 1996 that claimed the lives of four miners.

Victorian meat workers locked out

Management at the G&K O'Conner meat processing plant in Pakenham, Victoria locked out 350 workers this week in an attempt to force them to accept wage cuts of up to 17.5 percent.

The company claims that labour costs have increased the cost of processing each carcass by \$30. A company spokesman said the new work agreements negotiated by the meat workers union in other states, parring back pay and working conditions, had given its interstate rivals a competitive edge.

The union has applied to Federal Court to declare the lockout illegal and order reinstatement. G&K O'Conner is Victoria's second largest beef processor and the biggest supplier of premium chilled beef to Japan.

Medical scientists protest privatisation

Eighty medical scientists from the Royal Childrens Hospital (RCH) and Royal Womens Hospital in Melbourne held a public demonstration last Tuesday in opposition to the

Victorian Liberal government's decision to privatise pathology services. The scientists gathered in front of the RCH and waved placards saying, "contracting out destroys jobs and services" and "I'm out over contracting out".

A planned 24-hour strike was called off at the last moment after the Medical Scientists Association accepted a verbal assurance from management that privatisation would not proceed while negotiations were in process.

An Association spokesman said scientists were taking the "unprecedented action" to protect their jobs and the long-term interests of patients after six months of negotiations had failed to produce an acceptable result.

He pointed out that privatisation would mean that complex pathology tests would be considered uneconomic and would inevitably be phased out.

Winery strike ends

Workers at Southcorp's Seppeltfield and Nuriootpa wineries in South Australia voted this week to end their two-week strike and accept a new work agreement that includes an 11.3 percent pay increase spread over two years.

The strike involving 350 workers erupted after negotiations between the company and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union broke down.

The settlement includes an undertaking by the company that it will drop threats of legal action against union officials and 14 job delegates. Southcorp is Australia's largest wine producer.

Unions accept more layoffs in PNG

Air Niugini announced last week that it will eliminate 96 positions in the first phase of a major restructuring of its Port Moresby operations and its head office at Jackson airport.

Only last year the Papua New Guinea airline sacked 67 long-term workers and announced ongoing retrenchments via the company's retirement policy.

The airline unions have done nothing to oppose the sackings. Announcing the latest sackings Air Niugini managing director Andrew Ogil commended the airline unions "which have cooperated fully with management throughout the course of restructuring".

Fiji power workers oppose restructure

Workers employed by the Fiji Electrical Authority (FEA) last week staged a rally in Churchill Park in Lautoka and endorsed a campaign of industrial action to oppose a restructuring plan that will destroy jobs. The workers first learnt of the authority's plans from an article in the local media.

Despite the rally's decision, the Fiji Electrical Authority Staff Association general secretary Daniel Urai told the media this week that "industrial action would be the last resort". Following negotiations with FEA management, Urai admitted that the talks had "not been fruitful".

Korean threat to halt strikes

South Korea's Justice Minister Park Sang-cheon this week ordered the Supreme Prosecutors Office to crack down on illegal strikes. The order follows threats by the Korean Confederation of Trade Union to organise national stoppages to oppose threatened layoffs and restructuring in the country's major conglomerates.

Park said the government was concerned that illegal strikes "could be followed by others at worksites across the country".

Earlier this month the prosecutors office issued warrants for the arrest of a dozen or more Kia Motors union officials who had been involved in strikes and work stoppages over pay claims.

Police attack shoe workers

Up to 50 workers who were picketing the Lotus Footwear factory in the Bataan Economic Zone (BEZ) in the Philippines were attacked by a group of armed police and BEZ security guards last Saturday.

About 75 workers attempted to stop the attackers from dismantling picket structures but were no match for the thugs, who were armed with knives, axes, batons and a shotgun. One woman worker was seized around the throat when she demanded that a BEZ official stop taking photographs of the picket.

Another 100 workers from surrounding factories attempted to give assistance but were kept at bay by 12 armed security guards who cocked their rifles and pointed them at the workers. The Lotus workers have been picketing the plant since last November after management laid off 700 workers and forced 400 others to take unpaid leave. Those who were sacked have not yet received the separation pay owing to them.

The Korean-owned company began layoffs after a drop in orders for the production of Nike and Reebok shoes. Workers at the nearby Prince Footwear are also picketing their factory against sackings.



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