

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Thai golf caddies attack union officials

Golf caddies, retrenched from the closed State Railway of Thailand's (SRT) golf course, attacked and beat up two officials from the Railway Employees Association (REA) last week.

The caddies were furious that the association had urged the SRT not to reinstate 14 railway staff who were sacked for supporting a blockade of train tracks staged by the retrenched golf course workers.

About 50 caddies had gathered in front of the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration building after learning that REA president Somsak Kosaisuk and five other association officials were meeting there.

Informed that the caddies were outside the building, the officials left by a side door and attempted to escape in taxicabs. Caddies stopped the cab carrying Somsak and his assistant, dragged the two men out, and beat them with sticks and shoes.

After registering a complaint with the police, Somsak made a public statement saying he had opposed the reinstatement of the 14 railway workers because "the blockading of the railway tracks was a serious mistake and they deserved to be sacked".

The caddies have just ended a five-month occupation of the golf course in protest against the SRT's decision to sell it to the city administration, and to back their demand for reinstatement.

The city authorities had promised they would pay the 50 retrenched workers 40,000 baht each but now claim that they are unable to raise the 17 million baht needed.

Indian transport workers strike

More than 35,000 transport workers in Kashmir launched an indefinite strike last week against new tax proposals announced in the state budget that will increase the price of basic commodities and raise token tax, passenger tax and other fees relating to transport.

The strike, involving the drivers of trucks, buses, mini buses, auto-rickshaws and oil tankers, has brought road transport to a standstill. The strikers have also withdrawn all services to the army.

A spokesman for the All J&K Transporters Joint Action Committee said the strike had been called because appeals to the government had "proven to be futile". "We will continue our action until all tax rises are withdrawn," he said.

The government has attempted to operate limited transport services in the city of Jammu and placed police and security guards at intersections throughout the city. However mini-buses loaded with strikers are touring the suburbs to ensure the strike is 100 percent. Thousands of government and private sector workers, unable to get transport, are staying away from their workplaces.

Hotel workers strike in Cambodia

Staff at the Le Royal Hotel in Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh went on strike last week for three days to force the management to reach an agreement over unpaid bonuses. The management had promised payments of at least \$20 a month if the hotel showed a profit.

Around 60 strikers, including housekeepers, waitresses, front office staff and security guards, demonstrated outside the hotel and burnt tyres in protest. Room service waiter Meas Villa said: "We will not stop burning tyres until we reach a settlement. Workers are paid as low as \$50 a month, while the hotel's most expensive suit costs \$2,000 a night."

The workers called off the dispute when the management offered to pay the bonuses. A management spokesman said the staff could receive an extra \$10 a month and a one-off incentive payment of around \$120 but insisted that no figure had been agreed to. Singapore's DBS Land Ltd owns the Le Royal, one of the country's most expensive hotels.

Sri Lankan bank union leader summoned to court

M.R. Sha, general secretary of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union, was charged with insulting the court by organising a strike of workers in the private banks, picketing, and defying a district court injunction. Four thousand private bank workers, along with 20,000 state bank workers, went on half-day strike March 25 in defiance of the court order issued in response to a petition filed by the bank employers.

Sha was summoned to court on April 5 on charges of contempt of court. When he did not appear, the court issued an open warrant for him. He appeared in court with his lawyer that same day afternoon. The judge has given him until April 19 to lodge his answers, and released him on Rs.50,000 bail.

In the meantime, state bank workers are continuing with their work-to-rule campaign and private bank workers are wearing casual dress during working hours as a protest.

Sri Lankan hospital staff workers announce token strike

Having received no response from the government and Health Ministry authorities on their demands--despite an island-wide day of action on March 26--minor hospital staff workers of the United Front of Health Services announced they will launch a token strike on April 23.

Workers' demands include a wage increase, hostel and uniform facilities, a proper promotional scheme, and prompt overtime payments according to the actual number of hours worked. Meanwhile the secretary of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) announced that they have cancelled their scheduled strike action on April 23, as a committee appointed by Parliament has accepted their demands. A spokesman for the GMOA told to the WSWs that most of their demands were agreed to by the parliamentary committee, one outstanding demand had been referred

to the cabinet and they were waiting for the cabinet decision before deciding on any further action.

This is clearly a move on the part of the GMOA to isolate the struggle of the hospital workers.

Korean union body renews strike threat

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, one of South Korea's peak union bodies, warned this week that it would call a nationwide strike of state government employees on April 19 if the government did not stop corporate restructuring and mass layoffs.

A KCTU spokesman said that its members employed in state corporations had pledged to strike for two days on April 19-20 and to stage national rallies together with unemployed workers until the end of the month.

Following further mass actions are planned for May Day. The KCTU said it would call a general strike of its entire half million membership on May 15 if the government did not comply with its demands.

President Kim Dae-Jung this week urged major conglomerates to press ahead with restructuring, cut their debts and reduce the number of subsidiaries they own, moves that will see thousands more workers retrenched. "There is no gain without pain in the cruel world of business," Kim said.

Mine blast in China

Nine coal miners were killed last week in an underground explosion that ripped through the Minxing coal mine near Lengshuijiang, in Hunan province.

The blast was caused by an electrical malfunction that ignited methane gas as the miners were engaged on excavation work. Since March this year another 14 Chinese miners have lost their lives and 47 are missing, presumed killed, in three separate disasters--two explosions and a flood.

Multinational lays off workers

Uniden Philippines, a Japanese subsidiary, will close its plant in Taguig near Manila, at the end of the month, leaving 2,800 workers jobless. The company claimed the closure was due to plunging sales and rising costs, which had made the plant uncompetitive.

Uniden will transfer 80 percent of its equipment to its affiliate, Uniden Philippines Laguna, which employs 3,000 workers producing cordless phones. The remaining equipment will be shipped to the company's plant in China.

A company spokesman said there was no room for any of the sacked workers at its Laguna operations, which are presently operating at half capacity

Union officials held protracted meetings with Trade Secretary Jose T Pardo, pleading for the government to intervene and persuade the Japanese subsidiary to continue operations. The company has refused to change its decision.

Uniden joins a growing list of multinationals, such as Johnson & Johnson, Colgate Palmolive and Philips, that have decided to relocate their manufacturing operations to other low-wage countries.

Solomons police cancel rally for sacked workers

The Police Commissioner cancelled a rally called by the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) in Honiara at the beginning of this month. The rally was to be staged in support of 412 workers sacked in September 1997 by Earthmovers (Solomon) Limited. The police decision is part of a campaign of intimidation by the company and the authorities against the workers who were dismissed after they took legal strike action in support of a new work agreement.

Earthmovers has defied a ruling by the country's Trades Disputes Panel in March 1998 that the workers be reinstated and the company enter negotiations with the union on a 10 percent wage increase.

The High Court later upheld the Panel ruling. It found the sackings to be illegal and ordered that the workers be reinstated by September 1998. The company ignored the Court's decision and launched its own legal action against the union, claiming damages for the strike. Despite Earthmovers having flouted the law, the government has refused to take any action against the company. A SINUW spokesman said Earthmovers was a rich multinational using its power to tie up the case in the legal system, "to avoid reinstating the workers and to ultimately destroy the union". The workers have appealed for letters condemning the sackings and the police ban to be sent to the Office of the Prime Minister, Fax: (677) 26088. Messages of support can be sent to SINUW, Fax: (677) 23110.

Australian meat workers remain locked out

G&K O'Conner is continuing to lock out 300 workers at its meat processing in Pakenham, Victoria. The lockout began more than three weeks ago when the workers refused to accept a 26-point workplace agreement that included wage cuts of up to 10 percent for all workers and 17.5 percent for slicers. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) says workers will be up to \$200 per week worse off.

The union has not taken any industrial action to oppose the lockout. It has not organised support among other meat workers or even mounted a picket at the plant. Instead union officials advised workers to rely on an appeal to the Federal Court to declare the lockout illegal and order reinstatement on the grounds that the company failed to consult the union and give adequate warning of the lockout. The presiding judge rejected the union's case last month. A further application by the union to the Federal Court has been postponed until May. Meanwhile the workers remain locked out without pay. The AMIEU has advised the workers to apply for unemployment benefits. Rail deaths inquiry due to begin

A coronial inquiry is due to begin this month into the deaths of two rail workers eight months ago at Sandy Hollow in the Upper Hunter Valley. The men, employed to remove debris from the tacks, were killed outright when a coal train struck their four-wheel drive vehicle. A third worker jumped to safety. The deaths brought the number of state rail workers killed in the last six months to four. Workers say there have been many near misses as well.

Budget cuts and downsizing has cut manning on maintenance crews, undermining safety. Some crews work without a flagman or fail to place detonators on the line to warn of oncoming trains.



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