

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 May 1999

Thai airline workers oppose privatisation

Further opposition emerged this week to the Thai government's plans to privatise the country's public sector industries. Nearly 300 airline mechanics and engineers threatened to strike if Thai Airways International does not drop its move to sell 49 percent of its Operations Department. The airline workers claim that privatisation will lead to serious maintenance and safety problems.

Their union accused the airline's management of "rail-roading" them into signing an agreement on privatisation earlier this year. A union spokesman complained that the management had promised the union a say in the plans to sell-off the department.

The workers voted to join power workers in a demonstration being organised by the State Enterprise Relations Confederation against the privatisation of the power generating industry. The power workers are demanding a public referendum.

Hong Kong's public housing workers to strike

More than 2,000 Hong Kong Housing Department workers this week endorsed a proposal to strike for 24 hours to demand the government abandon its plan to privatise the department's estate management services and destroy 9,000 jobs.

Alliance of Housing Department Staff Union convenor Lam Man-cheuk said the strike recommendation came after Housing Authority chairwoman Rosanna Wong Yick-ming "failed to offer the union any concession on the plan".

The strike is supported by the biggest civil servant trade union, the Hong Kong Chinese Civil Servants Association. A spokesperson, Cecilia So Chui-kuen, said the association had called on the Housing Authority to back away from its privatisation proposal and had urged its 20,000 members to join the strike.

Even so, the Housing Department has announced it will go ahead with the formation of a taskforce to negotiate compensation with the 9,000 affected employees and to work out the "pace of privatisation".

Air freight workers march to company office

Around 30 transport workers at World Transport Holdings (AWT) air freight base in Hong Kong, marched to the company's head office in Sheung Wan to demand that the company pay \$2.8 million in wages and entitlements owed to

them after they were made redundant last week.

The sackings at AWT are part of a series of layoffs at three companies. Hong Kong Citybus said it will shed 84 engineering staff and 11 administrative workers. A company spokesman said Citybus aimed to "cut costs and increase work efficiency".

Leung Fu-wah, vice-chairman of the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions, condemned the company's decision saying that it was "unreasonable for it to axe workers as Citybus was still making a profit".

Hong Kong Telecom also stated its intention to slash 300 jobs from its 4,000-strong workforce through "voluntary redundancies". Many of the workers who have applied to take the package are in their mid-30s.

A union spokesman said the workers had opted out because they had "simply lost faith with the company and are not optimistic about their future". The union has not planned any action to oppose the downsizing.

Striking workers cut company's water supply

Workers employed by the Shemburg Marketing Corporation, in Cebu City, Philippines, are on strike in opposition to the company's treatment of its employees and its "violation of labor laws".

The strikers have set up a picket at a water pump that supplies water to a number of the company's plants. The strikers say the picket is effective and the plants are being starved of water. Last Saturday the city's mayor, Thadeo Ouano, visited the picket line to attempt to persuade the workers to end their action and take their case to the National Conciliation and Mediation Board.

The workers rejected Ouano's proposal, saying they are prepared to continue their action until Shemberg's managing director returns from Argentina later this month to conduct direct negotiations.

Death toll rises in China's mines

The number of workers killed and injured in China's mines continues to rise rapidly despite claims by the central government in Beijing earlier this year that it would close down dangerous mining operations.

Last week another 19 mineworkers perished and seven others were badly injured in an explosion at the Yaojie state-owned coal mine in Gansu province in northwest China. The workers were caught in the blast because they were not warned by the

mine's management that gas was present in the mine.

In a statement released earlier this year the Chinese authorities admitted that more than 7,423 workers had been killed in the country's mines in 1998.

Sri Lankan bankworkers continue struggle

Private and state sector bankworkers are continuing industrial action in support of wage demands and improvement in working conditions. Private sector bankworkers are seeking a 35 percent salary increase, down from their original demand for a 50 percent increase, while state sector bankworkers are demanding an end to special favors and promotions given by management to political supporters of the Peoples Alliance government.

State sector bankworkers, who have maintained a work-to-rule for several weeks, stepped up their action on May 3 with combined lunch-breaks forcing the banks to close between 12.30pm and 1.30pm. They are also refusing to work overtime. Private bankworkers are also boycotting all overtime work. If the demands were not met by May 7 the bankworkers planned to begin picketing bank headquarters.

Bank employers and the PA government have launched a propaganda campaign claiming that the workers' demands are unrealistic and that their present salaries are well in excess of those paid to other trades.

Commercial Bank, one of the private banks, has recalled Ceylon Bank Employees' Union secretary, M.R. Sha and forced him to resume normal duties as a bank employee. The bank had previously released him to engage in fulltime union work. Hatton National Bank, another very profitable private bank, has issued a circular to security staff directing them to stop any union activist entering the bank after 3pm (i.e. after banking hours).

Bank employers are also trying to cripple union activities by banning union meetings and blocking union access to communication facilities. Banks are also trying to recruit casual staff in order to counteract major strike action.

Garment workers strike

Eight hundred and fifty garment workers employed by International Dresses launched an indefinite strike on April 27 to demand the reinstatement of 14 workers who were active in forming a trade union at the factory. Management interdicted these workers in mid-April without offering any explanation.

Management deliberately provoked Shelton Senaratne, leader of the newly-formed union, when he was attempted to collect his salary advance. On the basis of bogus charges made by the management Senaratne was taken into police custody and detained for two hours. The next day, Senaratna and another 13 workers were prevented from entering the factory.

International Dresses is situated in Ratmalana, an industrial area on the outskirts of Colombo. The company exports to the US, Canada and Germany. The union was recently formed to fight the harsh working conditions at the factory. Ninety percent of the factory's employees are female.

Before the interdiction of the 14 workers the union had planned to strike for an 8-hour shift, regular payment of overtime, the establishment of leave entitlements, and the provision of drinking water for workers and other basic conditions.

Owners of the factory have used hooligans to physically attack the union activists and threaten them with death in an attempt to intimidate the rest of the workforce.

Railway staff strike over safety

Rail station staff, together with signalmen and train controllers, at Moss Vale, near Sydney, went on strike last Tuesday night causing the cancellation of freight and passenger services to Canberra and Goulburn.

The workers said they were concerned about passenger safety because staff cuts meant many stations were left unmanned. The dispute arose when the management refused to abide by a decision to allow Moss Vale to service the unmanned stations in the immediate area.

A spokesman for the Moss Vale workers said management now insisted that the unmanned stations be managed from the nearest section office, in Liverpool--over 100 km away.

"We are concerned about passenger safety," he said. "Passengers expect stations to be safe. The response time from Liverpool is poor. How is it possible to respond to problems such as vandalism and violence?"

Nurses reject new wages deal

Nurses employed in Western Australia's southwest country health care system overwhelmingly rejected a new pay package offer this week. Nurses at Vasse-Leeuwin, Busselton, Augusta, Margaret River and Bunbury voted 94-1 against the deal that would have eliminated accrued days off.

Australian Nurses Federation state secretary Mark Olsen said: "This is not an issue of higher pay, this is a rejection of a proposal based on what nurses perceive as an attempt to erode their working conditions and reduce nursing hours in country hospitals."

Strike at PNG gold mine

Australian workers employed by mining sub-contractor Theiss Roche at the Lihir Mining Company's gold mine on the Papua New Guinea island of New Ireland went on strike last Monday against the company's attempts to cut working conditions and change work practices.

Lihir management admitted that the strike was affecting ore production but claimed that the company's stockpiles can keep the ore refining plant operating for at least 10 more days. Native workers employed by Lihir are not involved in the stoppage.



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