

Workers Struggles: Asia and the Pacific

5 June 1999

Korean union calls stoppages

The Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) South Korea's biggest union peak body, announced this week that it will call two national 24-hour work stoppages on June 16 and June 26.

The strikes are to protest the slow progress in negotiations with many employers for new collective bargaining agreements and pay increases. As of mid-May only 290 FKTU affiliates out of 3,470 have managed to reach a settlement.

Bangalore workers demand decent jobs

Hundreds of part-time and contract workers in Bangalore, India, employed in the private and public sector, held a protest march this week to demand that the state government abolish contract work and provide full-time jobs.

Workers from Wheels and Axle Plant, Bharath Heavy Electrical, Karnataka Soaps and Detergents, Mico, and Escorts and Goetze, took part.

The government has ignored a Supreme Court order issued earlier this year forbidding the recruitment of contract labour to replace permanent positions. A delegation of workers handed a petition to the state governor calling for all contract employees to be given full-time status.

Indian cleaning workers oppose privatisation

Cleaning workers employed by the Chitradurga City Municipal Council in Deccan, India, staged a noisy demonstration outside the council chambers this week.

A council meeting was in process discussing the privatisation of the city's garbage disposal and cleaning services.

The meeting fell into disarray when 18 of the 31 councilors staged a walk-out in protest against the privatisation move. The remaining 13 voted to approve the proposal.

Automotive company cuts jobs

Automotive parts producer Escorts Mahle announced this week that it would cut the 4,300-strong workforce at its New Delhi operations by 25 percent. More than 1,000 workers will be asked to take voluntary redundancy over the next five years.

A company spokesman said the automation of the company's automotive division had made it possible to shed the jobs. The company, a joint venture between Escorts Limited and Mahle of Germany, registered profit losses for the second consecutive year.

2,000 demonstrate against Sri Lankan school closure

Iranawila, a fishing area 50 miles north of Colombo, well known due to the construction of an American military

communications and propaganda facility, the Voice of America, was taken up with intense agitation on June 2 as authorities tried to close the two uppermost grades (10 & 11) of the Iranawila Central School.

At least 2,000 people demonstrated on the street blocking the coastal. Battalions of police arrived armed with hand weapons and tear gas, terrorising the demonstrators. Later the Catholic priest of the area intervened to divert the demonstrators into discussions at the Education Department.

The Central School is attended by 800-900 students of fishing families. There are only 13 teachers. According to demonstrating parents, school is short of at least 11 teachers. If the two grades are closed, eligible students may have to attend to Mahawewa Central School, which is miles away, and public transport is hopeless. Most of the average students will have to stop the education from 9th grade, without sitting the ordinary level National Examination.

Hospital employees protest in Colombo

More than 1,000 minor employees of public hospitals picketed in front of the National hospital of Colombo and demonstrated in the streets on June 1. Minor employees of the Lady Ridgeway hospital, De Soysa maternity hospital and Eye hospital joined the demonstration.

The demonstration was staged after a lunchtime picketing campaign, called by 11 unions. According to the demonstrators, token strikes and discussion with the Minister had proven useless. They are threatening an all-out strike, supported by other health workers.

Their demands include proper overtime payments, security for casual workers, improved working conditions and decent uniforms.

The Health Workers Action Committee and the United Health Workers Union, which are affiliated to the Socialist Equality Party of Sri Lanka, participated in the demonstration with their banners and slogans. The convenor of the action committee and secretary of the union, Ajitha Gunaratne, an SEP member, addressed the gathering. Even though trade union leaders objected to SEP banners, workers insisted that banners remain. The day before the demonstration, the action committee organised a meeting in Colombo to discuss "how to organise the struggle of minor employees".

Garment workers strike to press for union recognition

About 1,200 workers of three garment factories—Aca, Deepa, and Sampath—are on strike to demand recognition of their

newly-formed union. The factories, owned by the same group, are situated in the outskirts of Colombo. Management called police into the factory from May 18, sacked 6 workers and transferred 30 who were supposedly active in the formation of the union. Workers stopped overtime work as a protest and the unions complained to the labour commissioner in Colombo. Management boycotted the meeting called by the labour commissioner on May 24.

On May 25, workers went on strike at noon but congregated near the gate. Management was getting ready to send two container loads to the port and they wanted to prevent it. Trucks of police arrived and severely assaulted the workers, predominantly female. Twenty-four female workers and two male workers were hospitalised. One male worker, Sunil Shantha, is in a critical condition. Handbags of the female workers were scattered and reportedly thrown onto a fire by the police.

Workers of the three garment factories responded on May 26 with a picketing campaign in front of the Labour Secretariat of Narahenpita, in Colombo, and vowed to continue the strike until the union was recognised.

University staff back at work

With the Sri Lankan University Grants Commission entering into an agreement with University Executive Officers Association to resolve present grievances, university executives decided to go back to work, ending a one-week-old strike. However, according to Association officials, "if the association is of the opinion that a genuine effort is not being made by the authorities on their grievances, the UEOA reserves the right to involve its members in trade union action once again, including strike action." Their main demands include lifting salary anomalies, regularising promotions, establishing a university administrative service and duty-free vehicles.

Jobs threatened in Thai privatisation

Telephone Organization of Thailand [TOT], the country's largest domestic telecommunications carrier, this week outlined its plan to privatise the company.

Company Vice President Olarn Pientham indicated that by 2001 TOT hopes to have merged with a major Western or Asian telecommunications provider.

Even though TOT pledged that it would not lay off any workers in the first three years the move will provide the conditions for a huge downsizing of the company 25,000 employees. Hundreds of jobs have already been shed over the past year through an "early retirement" scheme.

A company spokesman told TOT employees that they would be expected to "contribute to society and provide an appropriate return to share holders".

Shemburg strike continues

Workers occupying a strategic water pump at the Shemburg Company in Cebu City in the Philippines have continued to defy an order by the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) to vacate the plant.

This week the NLRC ordered its sheriffs to coordinate with the local police to forcibly remove the protesting workers. The workers are occupying the plant to demand the reinstatement of 15 union officials who were sacked in May.

The pump, which supplies water to some of the company's factories, has been occupied for three weeks, disrupting production and causing losses of P500,000 (\$13,500) a week.

This week Shemburg management offered to pay compensation to the sacked workers but in a series of installments over time. A leading union official said the union would only accept "all workers reinstated or nothing" but added that it would consider termination payments if they were lump-sum payments.

PNG unions threaten national stoppage

The Papua New Guinea Trade Union Congress is threatening nationwide stopwork action if the government fails to act on a list of demands presented by the union this week.

The TUC is demanding changes to the government's planned Value Added Tax and a reduction in other taxes, including the superannuation and concessional taxes. The union is also calling for an end to the drive by the government to privatise statutory bodies.

A TUC spokesman criticised the "lack of provisions for compensation to wage earners to absorb price increases in goods and services caused by the introduction of VAT".

He said the union was concerned that the government has unilateral powers to increase VAT charges anytime in the future.

Fijian workers protest work conditions

Woman workers employed at the Pacific Fishing Company in Fiji have registered complaints with the PAFCO Employees Union about the shocking conditions they are forced to work in.

The union's secretary Tomasi Tokalauvere said he had been told that young women had suffered miscarriages due to the bad working environment. Others had told him that since working at the plant they were finding it hard to conceive.

"A substantial number of women labourers are suffering from varicose veins, a sickness apparently ascribed to standing in wet and squalid conditions for lengthy periods while at work. This predicament is complicated when women are not permitted to visit the toilet or take a breather to assist blood circulation during working hours."



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