

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

12 June 1999

South Korean workers protest against state provocation

An estimated 20,000 members of the Korean Metal Workers Federation (KMWF) carried out a series of walkouts on Thursday over claims that a senior prosecutor had attempted to incite a strike last year as a pretext for launching a widespread crackdown on striking workers. The metalworkers also held lunchtime rallies and a march in the South Korean capital of Seoul.

Newspaper reports allege that Chin Hyung Gu told reporters that he tried to stage a walk-out at the Korea Minting and Security Printing Corp and crush it, as a warning to other public companies considering strikes. The KMWF leadership is calling on the Kim Dae Jung government to investigate the allegations.

Chin, who was head of the public security department of the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, denied the claims, insisting that he had been drunk and his words misinterpreted. "I have never intended to say it that way. It must be while I was recalling a series of events during my term as the head of the public security department that words were wrongly delivered," he said.

The conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FTKU) is planning an extensive strike on June 16 against job losses and restructuring. Prime Minister Kim Jong Pil has ordered a probe into the allegations against Chin, but warned that tough action would be taken against so-called illegal strikes.

Indian milk vendors on strike

Thousands of milk vendors in Kanpur and Dehat in northern India are on strike to protest attempts by the local police to force them to pay bribes.

The vendors are regularly stopped by police officers, claiming to be searching for milk substitutes being passed off as a genuine product. The vendors are only allowed to continue with their milk run if they hand over money.

This week a crowd of 50,000 vendors and their families rallied in Chaudhery to be addressed by union leaders. The meeting called on the government to control the police and concentrate its investigation into milk substitutes on the large milk producing companies.

Health scare for glass bangle workers

A study carried by the Department of Epidemiology at the Industrial Toxicology Research Center has found that up to 70 percent of workers in the glass bangle industry in India suffer from varying forms of dehydration that causes impairment to their mental and physical capabilities.

Almost 20 percent of the workers studied became seriously dehydrated when carrying out their duties. Those most affected were firemen who work around the main furnaces and are exposed to temperatures of up to 1,400 degrees Celsius, causing a 3 percent bodily fluid loss.

Thai unions agree to wage cuts

Unions attending a joint union-management seminar in Bangkok this week signaled that they are prepared to join employers in a bid to cut wages and working conditions in Thailand.

Leading employers' representative Suchai Wattanareunakul told the meeting that "efficiency and productivity should be considered first when setting a minimum wage for the workforce".

Wattanareunakul was supported by leading union official Danai Jirareudee who said he believed this method "would be fair to workers". He also agreed that private firms should be freed from minimum wage restrictions and allowed to "determine their own pay structures and the level of pay rises".

Jobs and conditions slashed at PAL

Philippines Airlines (PAL) this week announced plans to sack 3,000 workers as part of a restructuring plan to secure new financial backing. The investors agreed to the loan after the remaining workers signed a 10-year no-strike agreement. In exchange for accepting the deal the company will give each employee 60,000 shares (worth \$1,600) which are redeemable only on retirement. The airline slashed its workforce from 15,000 to 8,000 last year.

A section of PAL workers who opposed the deal and the job losses sat outside the Security and Exchange Commission in Manila this week. The Commission had given PAL the order earlier this year to seek a new infusion of funds or face liquidation. The SEC has set up a permanent receiver to supervise the deal.

Biscuit workers fight laid-offs

Around 1,500 workers sacked from a biscuit factory in Indonesia staged a sit-down demonstration outside the Ministry of Manpower this week.

The plant's entire workforce was dismissed after negotiations over a pay increase broke down. Management offered one-month severance pay but the workers are demanding reinstatement or a higher pay-out.

Sri Lankan hospital workers continue struggle

Auxiliary staff workers at major hospitals in Sri Lanka are continuing with their picketing campaign and lunchtime demonstrations, despite threats from health authorities and the state.

Two union leaders attached to the General Hospital in Kandy were arrested by the police at their homes in middle of the night. Auxiliary staff of Kandy hospital and Peradeniya teaching hospital, a major hospital on the outskirts of Kandy, launched a strike the next day with the support of other health workers in the hospitals to protest the police arrests. The arrested leaders were later released.

The police Central Intelligence Department questioned the

demonstrators at Badulla hospital, 230 kilometres from Colombo. Auxiliary staff of the base hospital in Polonnaruwa, 216 km from Colombo, had to face threats by the Provincial Director of Health Services. A Member of Parliament threatened to transfer employees of another base hospital situated in the south eastern coastal belt, Hambantota.

The workers' demands include proper overtime payments, security for casual workers, improved working conditions and proper uniforms. Workers are pressing the union leadership to organise a strike to win their demands but leaders are pulling back. The Health Workers' Action Committee and the United Health Workers Union, both led by the Socialist Equality Party, have been actively participating in the picketing campaigns at the Colombo National hospital. Convenor of the action committee and the secretary of the union, Ajitha Gunaratne, an SEP member, is a frequent speaker during the lunch hour demonstrations in Colombo.

Anglo-Asian to close three factories

The Anglo-Asian Group of companies is preparing to close three of its light engineering factories—Permarite which produces ball-point pens, Elite which produces razor blades, and Asian Plastics—situated in Ratmalana, an industrial area on the outskirts of Colombo. Even though the machines have been stopped for six months, 150 workers of these factories have been regularly attending to their work places.

Now the management has proposed that workers stay at home and accept half salary, but there is no indication or guarantee that the factories will re-open. Workers feel this is a trap to close the factories without compensation.

A branch of Inter Company Workers Union is contributing to the confusion created by the management by advancing no proposals as to what workers should do. Socialist Equality Party members are proposing that the workers organise a struggle to protect their jobs by forming an action committee with the support of the workers, youths and other oppressed social layers of the area.

Victorian nurses lift bans

Nurses at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in Victoria have lifted the work bans they imposed last week after management agreed to their demand that a person with nursing experience should be appointed to the newly created position of operations director, or senior nurse.

The weeklong industrial action led to bed closures and bans on elective surgery. A spokesperson for the Australian Nurses Federation said nurses feared that the appointment of a non-nursing person to the position would compromise the delivery of health care.

Tasmanian miners fight pay cuts

Eight workers at the Rosebery mine in western Tasmania have been locked out after they refused to accept a new workplace agreement that would mean a massive cut in wages. The workers, employed by drilling contractors Pontil, were told they must accept a cut in their hourly rate from \$19.50 to \$12.50.

Pontil is utilising new industrial relations laws introduced by the federal government that allow companies to undermine working conditions and establish individual work contracts.

Pontil has stated that the lockout will continue while a new work

agreement is being ratified in the Industrial Relations Commission. The eight workers were employed to replace 17 others sacked by the company only two months ago. The union is mounting a legal challenge against the lockout.

8,000 at Victorian Trades Hall rally

About 8,000 workers turned out for a rally in Melbourne last week organised by Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) to protest the continuing statewide destruction of manufacturing jobs.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union divisional secretary Craig Johnston attacked the state Liberal government for "creating an economy that does not provide job security and growth". However, neither he, nor any other union official, advanced a perspective to defend jobs.

Over the past 13 years the manufacturing unions have overseen the destruction of more than 34,000 manufacturing jobs in Victoria.

The small size of the rally was an expression of the hostility felt by large sections of workers towards the union leadership. In the early 1990s, VTHC rallies would attract between 30,000 to 50,000 workers.

Perth bus drivers continue strike

Bus drivers in Perth, Western Australia are continuing to strike for increased wages, safer working conditions and an end to eight-hour shifts that are spread over a 14-hour period.

The strike, launched last week, has brought almost half the city's bus fleet to a standstill. The drivers are demanding a common award to cover workers at the three private bus companies, Perth Bus, Southern Coastal and Path Transit. Drivers are also angry about the run-down condition of the bus fleets.

Transperth, the government department that once operated the public bus service in Perth, maintained a policy of upgrading buses after 12 years service. The bus drivers claim that some of the private operators have kept buses on the road for well over 20 years, despite reports of faulty brakes, gearbox problems, worn steering boxes and rust.

Four-day strike over safety

Over 400 building workers employed at the Westfield Carousel extension, one of Perth's largest construction sites, went on strike last week when a worker received an electric shock. Five other workers have suffered electric shocks on the site in the past three weeks.

Unions claim that the company is compromising safety by rushing to complete the extensions in time for the

Christmas shopping period. Workers voted to strike for four days and have demanded that power supplies be switched off when work resumes.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact