

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 June 1999

Indonesian police arrest 500 workers

Jakarta city police detained more than 500 workers and supporters during a protest on Wednesday against their sacking by PT Mayora Indah, a candy and biscuit producer. Police seized the protesters outside the Capital Supervisory Agency (Bapepam) office in Central Jakarta and forced them into police trucks. Most were released in the evening but face charges of disturbing public order.

The rally was the latest in a series of protests that began in April. The company has failed to carry out a Minister of Manpower order to reemploy the 1,367 sacked workers by June 15 and pay them full salary backdated to the beginning of May.

Four activists from the Urban Poor Consortium, including its coordinator Wardah Hafidz, were also arrested on Wednesday. Wardah, who was not released until 1 am, has been accused of acting as an agitator—a charge that carries a maximum sentence of six years jail. City police chief Major General Noegroho Djajoesman told the media that Wardah had told the workers not to move when the police ordered them to disperse. This, he said, was “already a form of provoking people”.

Thai watch workers strike

Thousands of workers at the ATA (Thailand) factory in the Bang Sao Thong district of Bangkok staged a demonstration this week to fight the company's proposed wage cuts and lay offs.

Union rep Preecha Khiewkaew warned of an all-out strike if management tried to introduce a 50 percent pay cut and went ahead with plans to sack 700 workers out of 2,600.

ATA makes watches under license for Rolex, Rado and Swatch.

Indian garbage collectors continue strike

Garbage collectors in the north-eastern Indian city of Rajkot are refusing to call off their three-day strike over a pay dispute.

Workers have not been paid for eight months and unions are demanding that this money be paid and some kind of wage regulation introduced. They are also demanding other improved conditions, including new brooms, soap, uniforms, PVC boots and bicycles.

Council leaders have agreed to some of the demands but workers said their struggle would continue until all their demands were met.

Primary teachers threaten strike over pay

Primary school teachers in the central Indian state of Deccan have threatened to strike if their pay rates are not increased. Union leaders said teachers are 15-20 percent below their colleagues in other states. Promotions are also harder to obtain than in high school education.

A union leader, Mahalingaiah Hiremath, said that if pay rises promised in March and April of this year were not honoured, a strike would be inevitable.

Indian farmers in violent protest

There was a violent demonstration in the central Indian city of Ahmedabad this week, when 3,000 farmers marched in protest against plans by the Ahmedabad Urban Development Authority to acquire 50 percent of their farming land.

Eleven farmers were arrested in clashes against police, who fired tear

gas to try to break up the rally. Traffic in the city ground to a halt during the running battles between farmers and police.

Transport workers demonstrate against conditions

State transport workers in Bangalore held a demonstration this week in opposition to the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation's "anti labour policies". Workers and unions are angry that management has not regulated the pay of contract and daily workers; these workers are also being forced to work unpaid overtime.

Unions say the corporation is heading towards privatising the industry. If workers' problems were not resolved, union convenor H.S. Manjunath said workers would be called on to step up their industrial action.

Cathay pilots call off protest

After a two-week “sick-in” protest, pilots at Cathay Pacific last week voted to accept a \$1.4 billion pay cut over the next 10 years. Senior pilot's individual pay will be cut by 7 to 22 percent, and pilots will receive stock options. Some 45 pilots have taken redundancies rather than work under the new agreement.

Flights continue to be delayed because of the 45 redundancies and because some pilots are still on sick leave.

At the same time, the Government Flying Service announced plans to phase out helicopter pilots by 2003.

Sri Lankan banks vow to break union

After a year-long “work-to-rule” struggle by Sri Lankan private bank workers for salary increases, Hatton National Bank general manager Riency Wijetilleke has issued a new threat. “Even by closing the bank for five days and employing new workers, we'll break the union,” he said.

Amid escalating repression, three Commercial Bank workers and two from Hatton National Bank have been disciplined. All five are Central Committee members of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union.

Other measures against bank workers include demanding written explanations from union activists on their involvement in union activities, stopping union dues deductions from salaries, banning union meetings within bank premises and telephone conversations among union members, forcing workers to sign a letter accepting bank terms, and delaying the confirmation of probation workers. New workers have been forced to work in closed rooms. The general secretary of the union and the president of the Hatton National Bank union branch have been recalled from their full-time union work. The banks have formed two scab unions.

Union leaders called a token strike against these measures on June 3 but called it off after the labour tribunal said it would inquire into the salary issue on June 8. Now this inquiry is dragging on.

Earlier, state bank workers took action to support their private bank colleagues. But the union leadership halted the struggle after threats from President Kumaratunga. This betrayal has paved the way for the banks to divide the struggle and step up their intimidation.

Even though the union called off the work-to-rule campaign, the People's Bank disciplined six union activists. Seven State Bank workers were transferred on punishment.

Workers protest against Paddy Marketing Board closure

Paddy Marketing Board (PMB) employees picketed in front of the Ministry of Agriculture and Land on June 16, to protest against the PMB's closure. On the same day, another picketing campaign was held in front of the PMB's regional office in Pollonnaruwa, 200 miles away from Colombo. All PMB trade unions participated.

Government is planning to reduce the 500-strong staff of PMB to 80. Workers have received a letter from the management terminating their services with immediate effect, and offering only three months' salary as compensation.

The PMB is a government agency, buying paddy from rural peasants. To a certain extent it protects the peasants from the market manipulations of private dealers.

Sri Lankan government doctors on strike

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) launched a series of strikes from June 12 to protest against the appointments of Provincial Health Administrators. These appointments should be made according to cabinet-approved national policy, but instead are being made by provincial councils, GMOA president Dr. Ananda Samarasekara told a press conference.

About 5,000 doctors have stayed away from work for several days and threaten to strike until their demands are met. The government-owned media have launched a vicious campaign against the striking doctors. As a crackdown measure, President Kumaratunga declared the health service to be an essential service on the evening of June 17.

PNG health workers threaten industrial action

Health workers in Papua New Guinea last Friday threatened to close all health institutions nationwide in two weeks unless the PNG Government addressed serious problems within the health sector.

The workers are members of the Health Workers Federation, made up of the National Doctors Association, PNG Nurses Association, community health workers and medical laboratory personnel. They say that the passage of the 1999 National Budget had caused difficulties in providing medical and nursing care.

Their concerns were outlined in a letter to the PNG Secretary of Health, Dr. Puka Temu, last month. "As health workers who are responsible for implementing these policies, we find ourselves in situations where we are struggling to meet the minimum standards of expected patient care and are forced to divert from the normal ethical practices," the letter stated.

Port Moresby General Hospital was singled out but the letter said similar problems existed in other centres. Some of the grievances were:

- * Shortages of manpower—nurses and doctors are overworked, resulting in physical and mental exhaustion
- * Shortages of drugs and supplies—forcing doctors to use second best alternatives
- * Inadequate equipment and facilities—hospitals and aid posts are using out-dated equipment.

Toyota workers walk off in Melbourne

Three hundred maintenance workers at Toyota's Altona factory in Melbourne walked off the job last Wednesday when management threatened legal action against any worker who attended a union rally in the city centre. Toyota sought an injunction from the Victorian Supreme Court to have the stopwork declared illegal.

In response to the company's threats, members of the Manufacturing Workers Union (MWU) voted at a mass meeting to take strike action. A spokesperson said the union was willing to negotiate with the company only if it withdrew warnings against workers.

No union stoppage of the entire factory was called, so production was kept running at normal levels. Toyota management said: "As long as no machinery breaks down, then the maintenance workers are not needed. If something does break down then we will be forced to bring in contractors."

University of Sydney staff hold half-day strike

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Sydney University held a half day strike last Thursday as part of a national campaign for a 19 percent wage increase. The strike is the second in the current round of negotiations over an Enterprise Bargaining agreement.

Union members have placed bans on first-semester results and have threatened to delay implementation of management's information systems.

So far the university has offered a pay increase of 1.3 percent. NTEU industrial officer Chris Holley said the university had not made a new offer since the last one was rejected six months ago.

WA power workers impose bans

Workers employed at Western Power—Western Australia's corporatised power utility—have imposed overtime bans over the past week and may take strike action. They are demanding a 16.5 percent pay rise over three years and reject management's action in standing down workers without pay after the imposition of the bans.

Members of the Australian Services Union, they have been denied a pay rise since September 1996 whilst senior management have awarded themselves generous increases. According to union sources, Western Power's profits have increased 60 percent from \$86.2 million to \$141.6 million since September 1996.

New Zealand pilots strike

Pilots employed by Air New Zealand went on strike on Monday following a breakdown in their employment contract negotiations. The strike involved hundreds of members of the Airline Pilots Association. International and domestic flights scheduled between 5am and 1 pm were cancelled or delayed, including 10 flights between New Zealand and Australia.

The company employs a total of 650 pilots. They have rejected a company plan to raise their workrate and remove a range of existing benefits in return for a 10 percent pay rise. The pilots say the company is seeking to impose a 25 percent productivity increase, and argue that the proposed cuts threaten aircrew safety.

The company and the union have not yet agreed on 12 key issues. Airline Pilots Association advocate Adam Nicholson rejected company and press accusations that "overpaid" pilots are trying to defend "gilt-edged" benefits such as first-class international travel. Nicholson said the dispute is "not about money". He pointed out that Air New Zealand is "recognised as being the most efficient operator in the Pacific Basin. It gets more work out of its pilots than any of its competitors, but it pays less than any of its competitors".

The top salaries, about \$NZ150,000 a year for pilots flying Boeing 747s, only come after 20 years in the industry. There are huge costs in getting into professional flying. Most pilots start out in an aero club on \$17,000 before joining Air New Zealand on about \$36,000.

Some of the claims sought by the company include reducing pilots' transport allowances, altering promotion procedures to avoid spending extra on training for new generation aircraft, cuts to retirement allowances, trialling an increase in flying hours for international pilots and the introduction of short-term employment contracts.



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