

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 June 1999

Indonesian police attack Surabaya protest

Indonesian police attacked demonstrators in the East Javan city of Surabaya on Wednesday with rattan sticks, injuring several people. Two protesters are in a critical condition with serious head wounds and about six others have more minor injuries. Police punched a reporter in the mouth although she had repeatedly shown them an identity card.

The protest outside the Surabaya police headquarters involved about 500 students. They demanded the release of friends who had been detained on the previous day. On Tuesday, students joined thousands of cigarette factory workers protesting as part of industrial action for higher wages. Six people were detained and only released after the Wednesday protest.

Korean unrest continues

Industrial unrest continues in South Korea, highlighted by a strike involving some 25,000 workers, mainly affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). Companies affected by the stoppage included Daewoo and Hyundai.

This latest unrest has been bought about by allegations that government prosecutors orchestrated a strike at the Korean Minting and Security Printing Corporation last year to show the Korean government's will to smash illegal strikes.

The KCTU and the more conservative Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) could jointly call for a general strike on June 26. They are demanding the release of all union leaders arrested for illegal strike action, a shorter working week and a halt to the restructuring of major corporations.

The FKTU has threatened to withdraw its support for the administration of President Kim Dae Jung, because of mass layoffs and the government's austerity measures, ordered by the IMF.

Figures released by the National Statistical Office show that the number of full-time workers has fallen from seven million to six million in two years, while the number of temporary workers employed on a daily basis has risen 46.2 percent to 2.5 million. Another survey by the Bank of Korea showed that wages fell more than 3 percent this year, the first drop since 1975.

Indian teachers threaten more protests

Primary school teachers in the Indian state of Karnataka have threatened to escalate their protests if the government continues to ignore their pleas for a pay increase. This week saw demonstrations across the region, primarily in the cities of Gulbarga, Bidar, Chikmagalur and Mangalore.

Union leaders representing the teachers warned of an all-out stoppage on June 28 if their demands are not met.

However their colleagues in the high school teachers union, the State High School Teachers Committee, have refused to support the dispute, with their president, Dummanna Gowda, declaring the strike call selfish.

Sri Lankan government doctors continue strike

Doctors attached to all state hospitals—Central and Provincial—continue their strike against the decentralization of the health service, defying an order issued by the Colombo District court on June 22.

Colombo District Judge A.W.A. Salam issued an injunction restraining

the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) which was leading the doctors' strike, from continuing any trade union action. Earlier on June 17, President Chandrika Kumaratunga had declared the health service to be an essential service, a clear preparation to break the strike.

GMOA officials met on June 23 and decided to continue the strike, by dissolving the union and forming an action committee in order to avoid legal sanctions. The government and its media have intensified their campaign against the striking doctors. The GMOA president and secretary have been questioned by the Crime Investigative Department (CID).

Ancillary staff and nurses attached to government health service engaged in lunch-hour picketing campaigns supporting the doctors' strike in front of Colombo National Hospital on June 22 and 23. The Health Workers Action Committee, led by the Sri Lankan Socialist Equality Party prominently participated in the pickets.

Striking doctors, interviewed by World Socialist Web Site correspondents, explained said the health service had deteriorated after decentralization from the Central government to Provincial Councils. They pointed out that a recent World Health Organization study revealed that the decentralization of health services has had disastrous consequences in some other 30 countries.

They described how thugs had been organized to intimidate them. The car owned by Dr. D.A.D. Jayawardena, a consultant pediatrician attached to the Lady Ridgeway Hospital—the major children's hospital in the country—was set on fire by thugs at his residence at Nawala, just outside the Colombo City limits, in the night of June 23. In Hambantota, a southern coastal town, a group of thugs broke the windscreen of a car belonging to a doctor attached to Hambantota hospital. The residences of two doctors were attacked by thugs in North Western Province, in Kurunegala—the provincial capital—and at Gokerella. Two residences were stoned by thugs at Avissawella, including that of the District Medical Officer.

Steel factory workers fight harsh conditions

Workers at Melbourne Metal Industries of Sri Lanka have been on strike since June 4 to demand reinstatement of victimized workers. Their other demands include: the removal of wage anomalies, an end to racial discrimination, improved health and other amenities, working hours in line with labor laws, equal opportunities for over time, and regular Employee Provident Fund payments.

Melbourne Metal Industries, owned by an Australian company, is a sweatshop situated in Ja-ela, on the outskirts of Colombo. Its 200 workers produce twisted steel, mainly for the construction industry. Almost all the workers are not permanent and are employed by seven subcontractors. These subcontractors are pocketing the major share of the wages. As a result, the average monthly wage is much less than the factory payment—Rs.5,000 (\$70).

Workers have no fixed working hours or lunch and tea breaks. Instead, they have to work until their workload is finished. Some times they have to go up to 24 hours at a stretch. Even though they are grappling with high temperature steel bars, there are no protective measures such as thick

uniforms, boots, eye protectors and earplugs. There are frequent accidents but no first aid facilities. Bare electric wires are scattered inside the factory. There is noise and dust everywhere. Even the drinking water is contaminated with iron dust, drawing complaints from local residents. There is a "hostel" for the workers, which is a virtual prison camp, with workers hardly allowed to go out. Food is rationed and not sufficient.

Factory management uses racial differences to divide workers, who include Sinhala-speakers, Tamils and Indians. Workers formed a branch of Industrial and General Workers Union last February to fight for their basic rights. The management has taken repressive measures to break the union. The branch organizer and a committee member of the union were victimized on May 14, followed by the branch chairman on May 15 and another four activists on May 21. A protest strike was launched on June 3 and another eight were sacked when they returned to the factory next day. Workers immediately launched the present strike.

Management has used armed police to intimidate the workers and to extract letters from workers to the effect that they have quit the union.

Ceylon Bank Employees Union betrays private bank workers

The Ceylon Bank Employees Union has betrayed the struggle of private bank workers by suspending all actions, subject to a Labor Tribunal decision on wages, due in August.

The private bank workers were fighting for more than a year for a 30 percent pay rise. Three weeks prior to the union's sellout, the same union leadership aborted the struggle of state bank workers against political interference and for a salary increase, by agreeing to the same form of tribunal decision following threats by President Kumaratunga.

Unions urge Hong Kong Telecom workers to accept pay freeze

Cable & Wireless HKT workers have been told by their unions to accept a wage freeze for a year. The 13,000 staff had been campaigning for a 5 to 6 percent pay increase, even though the company made a profit of \$1.15 billion last year.

In imposing the pay freeze, management cited a 32 profit drop and said most other companies were cutting or freezing workers' pay. In April used voluntary redundancies to remove 403 of the 4,000 staff.

Other Hong Kong companies have taken similar action. The 4,200 workers at the Kowloon Canton Railway Corporation have had their wages frozen, and the Crocodile garment company has axed annual bonuses.

Food poisoning in Shenzhen factory canteen

More than 100 workers of a Japanese-owned electronic plant in Shenzhen Special Economic Zone in southern China suffered food poisoning after the dinner in the factory canteen on June 19. Many workers complained of feeling dizzy, and had abdominal pains and vomiting soon after the meal. They were sent to the local People's Hospital for treatment. The following morning 16 workers were still in hospital, and others continued to have side effects.

The factory, which employed nearly 400 migrant workers and mainly produced camera and computer components, has been idle. The canteen was opened on April 7, but workers have complained that the food is terrible. Workers have repeatedly demanded that the factory management improve the quality of food, but nothing has been done. They are angry that they are now required to pay any medical expenses themselves.

PNG health workers halt services

Unions covering government hospitals and aid posts in Papua New Guinea called a stoppage for Friday in a bid to pressure the government to rectify serious shortages of staff, medicines, equipment and facilities.

The chairman of the Medical Board of PNG and president of the Health Workers Federation Dr Bob Danaya announced the action last Monday. He said a skeleton staff would look after in-patients and emergency cases only. Danaya blamed the government for the declining level of health services, saying the situation worsened with the 1999 Budget. Hospital staff were working at conditions "dangerously" below the code of ethics

set by the medical board.

The federation is urging the Government to review the 1999 Budget and give the (health) department its total budget. "We have been lenient and so far they have told us lies all along," Danaya said. ">From the medical point of view it is no longer ethical to practice medicine in this country." The federation has a membership of 13,000 and represents six unions covering doctors, nurses, community health workers, health extension officers, medical laboratory personnel and health workers.

Security guards strike over wage claim

Two hundred drivers from the security company Armaguard took strike action last week in the state of Queensland seeking a 10 percent wage increase. The workers, members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), stopped work after negotiations with the company broke down. A spokesperson for the TWU said that between 90 and 95 percent of cash shipments in south-east Queensland have been disrupted.

Garbage collectors impose work bans

One thousand contract garbage collectors from around Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong have begun imposing work bans on the collection of garbage at local council buildings, libraries and swimming pools in an attempt to gain a 10 percent wage increase.

The garbage collectors, members of the Transport Workers Union, are pushing ahead with the wage claim after it was rejected by the Local Government Association.

Police attack striking workers at electrical transformer factory

Police violently attacked a strike by 120 workers at the ATCO Transformers factory in the Melbourne suburb of Tullamarine last week after striking workers tried to prevent trucks and people from moving inside the plant.

Members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) have been on strike since June 16 for a wage increase, English lessons and better redundancy provisions. AWU spokesman Bill Shorten said the workers were demanding English classes because for many of the workers, ATCO was their first job after immigrating.



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