

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 July 1999

South Korean subway workers threaten strike

Workers from Seoul Metropolitan Subway Corp and Korea Minting and Security Printing (KMSP) threatened to strike over the weekend if workers sacked for participating in strike action in April were not reinstated.

The unions have called for a parliamentary investigation into management strike-ballot rigging at KMSP and the dropping of employer claims for damages against the unions.

Broadcasting workers strike

Union members employed at South Korea's major broadcasting networks went on an indefinite strike earlier this week in opposition to the "lack of broadcasting independence in the government's proposed integrated broadcasting law". The government is pushing for legislation that the unions fear will bolster state control over broadcasting stations.

After launching their strike, workers from the Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) and Munhwa Broadcasting Corp (MBC) held separate meetings at their respective stations before attending a joint rally in the square in front of KBS headquarters.

A union spokesman said that of the 2,500 unionists at KBS in Seoul, some 1,000 are estimated to have joined the strike and most of the workforce at MBC was participating.

The strikers called on the government and the ruling party to guarantee the independence of the planned integrated broadcasting committee and to introduce a hearing system to appoint presidents and executives of public broadcasting firms.

Shemburg workers picket plant

More than 50 workers from the Shemburg Company at Cebu City, in the Philippines, are picketing the company's seaweed treatment plant in a bid to force management to reinstate 15 of their colleagues sacked for being involved in an earlier dispute.

The workers are also protesting the discharging of untreated water from the plant into drainage systems. Earlier this year Shemburg workers occupied a company water pumping station, demanding improved working conditions.

Port workers win pay rise

Port workers at Chittagong Port in Bangladesh have forced the port authority to increase their wages by up to 25 percent. A port official said the authority hoped that the increase would "curb the frequent wild-cat strikes that have crippled the port in recent months".

The State Minister for Shipping Mofazzal Hossain Chowdhury approved the wage hike last Saturday after reaching an agreement with port labour unions.

The workers have been on strike for a total of 10 days over the past three months, disrupting transport, suspending the delivery of goods and the handling of cargo at jetties

Agricultural workers set to strike

Indian agricultural workers have threatened to strike in support of demands for regular work, the implementation of the Minimum Wages Act, a pay increase and a review of government legislation covering

conditions in their industry.

All India Agricultural Workers Union secretary Hannon Molla said a strike would be called for the end of July involving agricultural workers from all over India if the government failed to meet workers' demands.

Indian college teachers strike

University and college teachers in Eastern India staged a day-long strike this week in a dispute over pay. The teachers were promised a pay increase over 12 months ago, but are still waiting for their money.

Marches were held across the state, with several of these being violently broken up by the police, resulting in the arrest of teachers and their supporters. Unions have said an indefinite strike will be called for, if the state government does not start paying the teachers the pay increase.

Students protest as Bihar state government axes jobs

The Bihar State Government, in North East India, announced this week that it will slash more than 75,000 state government jobs, on top of another 200,000 positions that have not been filled.

The All India Students Association called the move an "anti-people measure which should be condemned by one and all". A statewide protest is being organized by students, youth and the unemployed to demand the government reverse its decision. State employee unions said they would support the student protest.

Indian tea workers on strike

Tea production at 270 plantations in the East Indian State of West Bengal came to a halt this week as 350,000 workers went on an indefinite strike over working conditions and manning levels. A meeting at the weekend between trade unions, tea plantation owners and state government officials failed to reach any agreement to the dispute.

An Indian Tea Association official said the workers' claim for increased manning levels was not justified, saying there had been no increase in production. This is in direct contradiction to figures recently released which showed a record crop yield last year of over 870 million kilograms.

Sri Lankan medical students picket to demand jobs

Medical students from all universities in Sri Lanka—except University of Jaffna—picketed in front of Health Ministry in Colombo on July 16 protesting the discontinuation of the government's practice of recruiting medical interns as preliminary grade medical officers, just after their internship. The picket demanded that the government recruit all medical graduates to the state hospitals after their internship.

The Health Ministry has sent a letter to hospitals saying that, "interns can continue to work in same stations". Their working hours are specified as 8 am to 12 noon and 2 pm to 4 pm, whereas preliminary medical officers are supposed to work, on a call basis, around the clock. Generally, preliminary medical officers are appointed just after their internship and are sent to the relevant stations. The present directive does not even indicate in what capacity interns are now supposed to work.

According to Government Medical Officers Association press release dated July 14, the government was planning to terminate the services of 600 medical interns with immediate effect. The press release said the government was putting pressure on these doctors to go into private

practice. This is designed to redirect patients from outdoor patients departments (OPD) of government hospitals to private clinics.

Even at present, hundreds of patients are queuing in OPDs for treatment, waiting hours and hours to see a doctor. Waiting lists for minor operations are months long. In the public sector, the doctor to patient ratio in Sri Lanka is 1:5,500—far worse than the average of 1:300 in developed countries. Even in India it is 1:2,500. The GMOA estimates that 10,000 doctors need to be recruited in next 15 years to achieve a ratio of 1:1,500. However, the GMOA has entered into an agreement with the government to form a committee to consider the students' demands.

The Peoples Alliance Government is implementing a World Bank/IMF-directed privatization program in order to cut welfare and reduce the budget deficit. Doctors were recently in struggle against the abolition of the central structure of health administration.

Teachers on hunger strike

Schoolteachers from 93 schools have been on a hunger strike in front of the education office in Ampara, a prominent city in eastern Sri Lanka, since June 16. They are demanding incentive payments and salary arrears. They are planning to organize a strike-unto-death in front of education ministry in Colombo, if their demands are not met by July 14.

Police attack Visy strikers

Striking workers at Visy Industries' Smithfield plant clashed with police on Monday after police attempted to force a busload of scabs through the picket line. The company has also used helicopters to fly in strikebreakers and hired security guards to intimidate the strikers.

The 400 workers at the company's two factories in the western Sydney suburbs of Smithfield and Warwick Farm walked out on strike last week after management sacked two forklift drivers who had refused to pick up stock subject to union black-bans.

The bans were part of a campaign for a 12 percent wage increase. The company had refused to budge on its offer of only 8 percent.

This week Visy gained a Supreme Court injunction against the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, threatening unionists with severe penalties for preventing scabs entering and leaving the factories.

Workers strike against union-owned company

Workers at the Mountain Maid cannery in Batlow, west of Sydney, said that they might call off their nine-day strike and picket line after management said it would guarantee them accumulated entitlements.

The 71 workers went on strike fearing the cannery was about to be closed and that their entitlements, including long service, holiday and redundancy pay worth more than \$1.2 million, were threatened.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union's (CFMEU) superannuation fund owns 50 percent of Mountain Maid cannery. Former Australian Council of Trade Unions assistant secretary Gary Weaven is a director on its holding company, Staged Developments Australia.

Weaven, Mountain Maid's managing director David Marriner, a Victorian businessman and developer, and the chief executive officer of Staged Developments, Warren Atlas, are negotiating to buy Mountain Maid.

The Mountain Maid plant, which employs half of Batlow's workforce, was bought by C+bus, the CFMEU's superfund, and Staged Developments, after its previous owner, the Leeton-based Letona Company, went broke in the early 1990s.

Call-centre workers threaten strike

Victorian telephone call-centre operators employed by Data Connection threatened to go on strike this week. The workers, who are employed to answer inquiries concerning the e-tag accounts of commuters using Melbourne's new City Link freeway, are angry that the company failed to pay them back-pay owing since September 1998.

About 60 operators are employed by Data on day shift and about 40 more work at night. A spokesman for the operators said that at least half were expected to walk out if the issue was not resolved.

A strike by Data Connection employees would mean a second call-centre, run by United Customer Management Solutions, would bear the burden of all calls. The operators are all casual employees and are not represented by a union.

Victorian health workers step-up bans

Services at 23 public hospitals across Victoria were disrupted this week after health workers imposed a series of work bans over a pay claim.

The industrial action includes radiographers, occupational therapists and physiotherapists and hospital ancillary workers. The workers are seeking a 5 percent pay rise over 15 months in line with a pay rise recently granted to nurses.

The Royal Melbourne Hospital had to cancel a quarter of its elective surgery. Linen and rubbish collection was affected at other hospitals in the North-Western Health Care Network.

Rehabilitation services were also seriously reduced as physiotherapists and occupational therapists withdrew their services at sites such as the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Centre.

The Victorian Health Services Union had tried to restrict the bans to only eight hospitals but workers at 16 others joined the action after hearing that the state government had failed to respond to the pay demands.

Union branch secretary Pauline Fegan said: "When members found out, they became enraged and the bans went into 16 additional hospitals overnight. By the end of the week bans will be imposed by our 12,000 members in all public hospitals in the state."

Hospital managers have applied to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to block the bans on safety grounds but a union spokesperson said the action would continue no matter what the commission ordered.

Perth hospital staff walk out

Hospital orderlies, cleaners and catering staff at Royal Perth Hospital in Western Australia, walked off the job on Thursday demanding a "fair pay increase". The workers said the walkout was the first in a campaign of rolling stoppages across the state.

The State government has offered hospital staff a 7 percent pay increase but demanded substantial changes to work conditions in return.

Seven-day strike at Armaguard

Security guards employed by Armaguard in Brisbane, Queensland, voted this week to strike for seven days in support of demands for a 10 percent pay rise and guarantees that crew numbers will not be reduced.

The 170 guards are responsible for delivering the supply of cash to and from banks, ATMs and other businesses.

Rail unions abandon jobs strike

Public transport unions have called off all industrial action against plans by the New South Wales State Rail Authority (SRA) to axe 540 station workers jobs. The unions backed off following an order by the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to enter negotiations over job cuts.

Acting on behalf of the state Labor Party government, the SRA announced in August that 340 workers would face retrenchment and 200 would be transferred to the revenue protection section.

Earlier this month the Public Transport Union and the Australian Services Union called off a planned 24-hour strike allowing the SRA to shift the dispute into the IRC.

The Authority is also planning to outsource railway maintenance work, worth approximately \$535 million a year, to private companies.

PNG Elcom workers to strike

The Elcom National Staff Association in Papua New Guinea has warned that it will call a nationwide strike beginning August 2 in pursuit of a 30 percent wage increase.

At a lunch-hour union membership meeting in Port Moresby last week the workers voted unanimously to go on strike. Union president Albert Evald said the decision was "the result of the commission's failure to address the wage claim and a breach of the retrenchment agreement".

Evald said the strike would shut down power supply to all major centres, including Rouna, Ramu and Warangoi Hydro systems, but pledged that power supply to hospitals would not be affected.



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