

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

24 July 1999

Indian rail workers strike

A snap strike by railway workers in the southern Indian city of Bangalore this week brought the rail network to a standstill. The stoppage was called by gangmen and pointmen in protest against the Rail Protection Force (RPF), which workers accused of imprisoning and torturing one of their colleagues. The workers, members of the Southern Railway Mazdoor Union and Southern Railway Employees Union, blocked tracks and refused to allow trains to enter or leave the city's main station.

The RPF arrested the worker in connection with a theft and detained him at its headquarters where he was badly beaten by security officers. The workers claim that another pointman is still missing after being questioned by the RPF. The strikers demanded the suspension of the RPF's chief inspector and action against the constables involved.

The strikers returned to work after rail management announced it would conduct an inquiry into the incidents and bring down findings by next week.

Malaysian workers continue picket

About 300 members of the Malaysian Electrical Industry Workers Union are continuing their month-long picket action at the Sanyo Electric plant in Penang. The workers are protesting against a new work system introduced by management last month requiring that they stand continuously for almost nine hours a day.

A union spokesman said the management had brought in the new system to increase productivity. "Management does not consider health and safety an important issue and has adamantly refused to alter the system. We are extremely worried about long-term health effects," he said. Over 80 percent of the workers are women.

Korean cooperative workers strike

Thousands of workers employed by South Korea's National Livestock Cooperatives Federation (NLCF)

launched a two-day strike last week in protest against a government restructuring plan that could result in a massive loss of jobs.

The government is planning to integrate the three major cooperatives, the National Agricultural Cooperatives Federation (NACF), the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperatives (NFFC) and the NLCF.

Some 2,000 NLCF strikers rallied at the Myongdong Cathedral in downtown Seoul and endorsed a resolution threatening an indefinite strike later this month if the National Assembly approves the revision bill on cooperatives.

Hyundai workers defend rights

Workers at the South Korean Hyundai Precision and Industry's Ulsan factory in Kyongsang-Namdo went on an indefinite strike at the end of last week when the company sacked a union president and 16 union members.

The company accused the unionists of instigating "illegal" strikes in June when workers at the plant went out for 17 days in opposition to a plan to merge with Hyundai Motor and downsize the workforce.

Hyundai Precision, a transportation equipment manufacturer, also took disciplinary action against 25 workers for their involvement in the strike.

Subway union cancels strike

The Seoul subway union canceled a strike due to begin last weekend after holding talks with management. The 9,700-strong union, which covers four of the city's eight subway systems, had threatened to strike over the sacking of 86 union members who played leading roles in strike action in April.

The union's secretary general Na Sang Pil said that the strike action had been called off when the management had agreed that "no more union members would be sacked" and that charges filed with the prosecutors office against 191 union activists would be dropped.

W.A. power workers walk out

Over 150 power workers at Western Power in Western Australia, walked off the job last Friday at four Perth depots when they heard that a colleague had been docked pay for abiding by a union overtime ban.

The overtime ban had been placed as part of a campaign for a 16.5 percent pay rise. Management told the union that its offer of a 12 percent increase was final. Depots at Forresfield, Fremantle, Balcatta and Kewdale were effected by the stoppage.

Workers complain that they have not had an increase in pay in two years while senior management has received substantial salary hikes. The number of managers receiving over \$100,000 a year increased from 3 to 49 after the state-owned utility was corporatised in 1993.

In a separate dispute, 30 maintenance workers employed at the Muja power station, south of Perth, stopped work for two hours last Friday in protest at the lack of job security. The workers went on strike after Western Power withdrew guarantees last week that no jobs would be lost when the company's maintenance contracts were privatised later this year.

Perth hospital workers escalate action

Over 100 hospital auxiliary workers, including orderlies, cleaners, catering and supply staff, at the Royal Perth Hospital voted at a stopwork meeting last Friday to escalate industrial action for a pay increase and improved working conditions. The workers are demanding a 20 percent pay rise over three years, job security and a general award agreement to cover workers at all West Australian public hospitals.

The meeting rejected a Metropolitan Health Services pay offer of 7 percent over 2 years that is conditional on trading off conditions. Workers claim that the concessions would effectively reduce the 7 percent increase to around a 3.5 percent.

The trade-offs include ending penalty rates paid to workers on sick leave; the removal of allowances, such as infectious handling allowances; the end of Sunday penalty rates; and a reduction of tea breaks from 15 to 10 minutes. The management is also demanding the right to transfer workers from one metropolitan hospital to another.

Low-paid hospitals workers have not had a pay rise for more than two years and some part-time workers are living below the poverty line. Most full-time

auxiliary staff are paid barely \$30,000 a year, including penalty rates and allowances.

NSW power unions call off strike

Power unions covering workers at the New South Wales state-owned Eraring power station called off impending strike action after a dispute over downsizing was put in the hands of the Industrial Relations Commission.

The workers voted to strike at a membership meeting on Tuesday to oppose the attempt by Pacific Power to axe 150 permanent jobs through “voluntary redundancy” packages.

When only 50 workers accepted the company's offer, the management announced that those refusing the package would be declared “surplus to requirements” after 12 months and placed on a lower rate of pay. The state Labor government is attempting to distance itself from the sackings by laying blame on the company's management.

Nurses demand pay rise

Delegates at the NSW Nurses Association's annual conference voted this week to begin a campaign to force the state Labor government to pay a 15 percent pay increase. The meeting also voted against giving any trade-offs or productivity increases in exchange.

The resolution was passed overwhelmingly despite a claim by the union's general secretary Sandra Moat that the pay demand was “unrealistic”. Moat told the delegates that at recent meeting with Treasurer Michael Egan and Premier Bob Carr, “both indicated the Budget was tight and there was only room for a small pay increase”.



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