

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 April 2000

Indonesian workers jailed for supporting strike

Two workers, members of the SBSI union in Lomenik, Indonesia, were sentenced to six months jail on March 27 for supporting strike action at the Gajah Tunggal Company. The firm, which employs 8,000 automotive workers and 4,000 chemical workers, manufactures tyres and other automotive components for export to Germany. The two workers, Hadis Julianto, 25, and Budiono, 31, were charged with “inciting criminal action”.

The dispute first arose in January 1999 when union members held a meeting to prepare for negotiations with the company over working conditions. In February, workers who attended the meeting were individually questioned by management and 20 union members, including plant level union organisers, were sacked.

On March 4 the workers held a demonstration outside the plant to demand that management cease dismissals, reinstate the sacked workers and begin negotiations for a wage increase, improved bonuses and a social insurance scheme. More than 400 police and military personnel arrived to break up the demonstration and 17 workers were arrested. Five of the workers were held in detention and charged. Only Hadis Julianto and Budiono have received jail terms.

South Korean auto workers oppose Daewoo sell-off

More than 10,000 workers at the Daewoo Motor Company in South Korea went on strike on March 31 in opposition to the projected sale of the South Korean carmaker to an overseas company. The workers, who fear that any sale will lead to further restructuring and layoffs, are demanding that the government nationalise the company.

The Daewoo Motor union stated that it will continue the strike until April 12 and the Korean Metal Workers Federation has warned that 62,000 workers at Hyundai, Kia, and Ssangyong Motor will join the strike if the government does not abandon the sale.

The sale of Daewoo Motor follows the collapse of the Daewoo Group last year, with debts of some \$70 billion. General Motors and Ford in the United States, Italy's Fiat and the German-U.S. firm Daimler/Chrysler are all potential buyers for what was the country's second largest carmaker. The government has ruled out the takeover of Daewoo by rival Hyundai, saying that it would hand Hyundai a monopoly over the domestic car industry.

Indian power workers to strike

Over 100,000 employees of the Maharashtra State Electricity Board (MSEB) have threatened to go on a three-day strike from April 25, to protest against the state government's plans to split-up and privatise the industry.

The workers are also demanding that the MSEB negotiate a pay rise, increased pensions and fill all vacant job positions. The unions have accused the state government and the MSEB of using “delaying tactics” to avoid discussion on their demands.

Indian radio technicians plan action

Workers employed by the All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan have endorsed a campaign of industrial action, beginning with a 24-hour strike on April 20, in opposition to restructuring and job losses. Unions are demanding the company end layoffs, halt staff redeployments, consul employees about further changes and fill all vacant job positions. The April 20 stoppage will be followed by a further 72-hour strike if management do not agree to negotiate on the demands.

The decision to launch the campaign was taken at a recently held joint national convention of the National Federation of Akashvani and Doordarshan Employees (NFADE) and the Association of Radio and Television Engineering Employees (ARTEE).

Workers are also concerned that a new feasibility study of AIR, commissioned by the government, will be used to carry through further job cuts.

Mine workers protest closure in southern India

Bharat, a town in southern India, came to a halt on March 31 when mine workers protested against the government's decision to close down a 100 year-old gold mining complex close to the town. The government claims that the state-owned Bharat Gold Mines Limited is no longer a viable operation and that it has made losses of more than \$US95 million over a 15 year period.

Workers employed in the town's banks, hotels, government offices, cinemas and transport system all stopped work and joined the miners' demonstration, which went ahead despite the deployment of a large number of police.

The 4,000 mine workers are demanding the mines remain open or that the government compensates them 800,000 rupees each for the loss of their livelihood.

Mining unions have filed a petition in the Karnataka High Court questioning the legality of the government's closure decision in the absence of any “safety net” and severance pay arrangements. Since the mining complex began operations it has yielded over 800 tons of gold.

Protest against child labour in Delhi

Nearly 1,000 children staged a march in Delhi, India, this week to demand that the government provide them with free education and end child labour. The demonstration included many children who had only just been released from bonded labour and others who work as rag pickers, in railway and bus stations or as domestic help.

One speaker at the demonstration said: “It is criminal and shameful that in the 21st century children are not being given their right to go to school. We cannot allow it to continue.” Nearly 32 million children in India are denied a school education. These are mainly concentrated in the states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh.

Pakistan textile mill to close

Pakistan's Privatisation Commission and the Ministry of Industries and Production have ordered the closure of a government-owned textile mill in Shahdadt Kot by April 10, destroying over 800 jobs. Workers from the plant staged a demonstration this week against the closure and over 50 were arrested and charged by city authorities.

The government has been running down operations at the mill for years. Established in 1980, the plant's weaving and pressing departments were closed down a year later. There were further department closures in 1988 and again in 1994.

Sri Lanka Telecom workers picket over bonuses

Some 3,000 workers at Sri Lanka Telecom set up pickets in front of the corporation's head office in Colombo for four days from March 29. The workers are demanding a common holiday bonus for all telecom workers.

At present, workers are paid an amount equal to one and a half months salary, in two equal parts, as a "festival bonus" for the Sinhala/Hindu New Year in April and the Christmas break in December. The workers are demanding a payment of 10,000 rupees (\$US142) for the New Year and 20,000 rupees for Christmas.

Sri Lankan estate workers strike over physical attack

About 800 Tamil workers at three rubber plantations—Midlands Rubber Malai, Bumberakele and Kawarachedn Raththota—located in the central province of Sri Lanka have been on strike since Monday demanding legal action be taken over an attack on four estate workers. On April 1, a leader of the estate union committee and three other workers were attacked by a gang who followed the bus they were traveling in. Three were hospitalised.

Teachers wage "sick note" campaign in Sri Lanka

Tamil teachers in the northern Vavuniya and eastern Trincomalee districts of Sri Lanka conducted a two-day "sick note" campaign on April 5, reporting in sick and not attending work. The teachers have a number of demands, including the issuing of new Tamil language text books, the issuing of school books on time, correct salary scales for recently appointed teachers and the immediate granting of promotions that are due.

Almost all the schools in the two districts were closed down. The teachers say they will continue their campaign until the educational authorities respond for their demands.

Australian university staff to strike

Up to 2,000 academic and technical staff at Deakin University's six campuses in Victoria are planning to take industrial action in support of pay increases, ranging from 12 to 15 percent. Earlier this week the staff rejected an offer from the university administration to increase salaries by 8 percent.

Staff at Victoria's Monash University are expected to join the campaign and are considering a "work to rule," including taking full break times and refusing to do unpaid overtime.

In a separate dispute, staff at La Trobe University's Shepparton campus in country Victoria have placed bans on teaching a political sociology class after a casual lecturer was taken off the subject when she asked to be permanently employed.

Firefighters walk off job in New South Wales

NSW firefighters imposed administrative work bans on April 1 at fire stations in Sydney, Newcastle and Wollongong, after negotiations with the Fire Department and the NSW Labor government for a new work agreement broke down. The firefighters had previously walked off the job for two hours on March 30, leaving stations in some areas completely unmanned.

Negotiations on the new agreement were supposed to be completed by February 24 this year but the deadline was extended by another month when negotiations stalled. Another issue that remains unresolved is a discrepancy in accident insurance and pensions to about 1,500 workers hired after 1986. Firefighters took industrial action last year to insist on full entitlements for all.

Plantation workers end strike in New Britain

The Amalgamated General Workers Union (AGWU) has called off industrial action by 3,000 workers at the New Britain Palm Oil Ltd (NBPOL) in Papua New Guinea's West New Britain province, after the company placed the dispute before the Labour Court.

The workers had been carrying out rolling strikes over eight days in support of a 150 percent wage increase, improved safety conditions and better housing.

This is the second time the AGWU has ended strike action at the plantation without the pay issue being resolved. A strike last year was suspended by the AGWU after the employers' federation intervened and agreed to conduct negotiations with the union on behalf of the company. The strike had been endorsed by 99 percent of the union's membership.

Strike closes radio station in Papua New Guinea

The National Broadcasting Commission's Radio Nek Bilong Tarangau station in Papua New Guinea's Western Highlands was closed down this week after staff walked out on an indefinite strike demanding increased security.

The strikers have petitioned the provincial government to replace a worker's vehicle stolen from the car park and have demanded 24-hour security at the station. The workers fear for their safety after a series of break-ins at the station and three other vehicle thefts in which employees have been held up at gunpoint. A spokesman for the workers said that the radio station would be off the air until the two demands in the petition are met.

Cereal workers' strike ends in New Zealand

Workers at the Hubbard Foods breakfast cereal factory voted this week to accept a company offer well short of their original demands. The workers went on strike last week for one day and picketed the factory in support of their claim for a \$NZ7 meal allowance and an extra week of annual leave. The company agreed to pay the meal allowance but ruled out increased holidays.



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