

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 April 2000

Indonesian teachers continue strike action

Teachers have been demonstrating across Indonesia over the past three weeks, demanding a 300 percent salary increase and a 500 percent increase in allowances. The protests continued last Saturday when 1,000 teachers from Jambi province in Sumatra staged a rally in front of the provincial legislative building in the capital.

During the protest teachers forced their way into the main plenary hall of the legislative building, where their representatives from the Indonesian Teachers Union (PGRI) and the Forum of Jambi's Teachers (FGKJ), were meeting with local councillors. Speaker of the legislature, Nasrun HR Arbain, promised teachers that he would relay their demands to Jakarta and the local administration.

In addition to the pay increases, teachers are pushing for the removal of the PGRI's provincial head, Yusuf Madjid, whom they say, has failed them. They are also demanding the introduction of government housing credits for teachers.

Demonstrations also took place in Medan, North Sumatra on Tuesday and thousands more teachers in the Banyumas regency in Central Java are threatening strike action on National Education Day, May 2, along with 9,000 of their colleagues in the neighbouring regency of Banjarnegara. According to one teacher some strike action has already begun in Banyumas.

At a cabinet meeting on Wednesday government ministers agreed to raise teacher's functional allowances by 100 percent, an amount well below teachers demands. According to Yahya Muhaimin, Minister of National Education, it was the best the government could do due to this year's financial constraints. The decision contradicts the agreement made on April 17, when the Minister of Education pledged to raise allowances by 300 percent. The Indonesian government has earmarked only 5.8 percent of the state budget for teacher's wages and allowances.

Following the government's announcement of a 100 percent increase in allowances, PGRI secretary-general, Sulamiman SB Ismaya indicated that the union might reconsider its decision to suspend mass action on May 2. Under the government's plan Indonesia's 1.7 million teachers would receive an extra 90,000 rupee (\$US11.25) on top of their basic salary.

Korean workers demand release of officials

Around 1,000 workers from Daewoo Motor in Pupyong, South Korea went on strike on Wednesday and staged a rally

inside the plant demanding the release of jailed union leaders. The stoppage and protest shut down most of the plant's production lines.

The union leaders were seized when 100 riot police stormed the union office in the Pupyong factory at 3.40am on Tuesday. The police arrested Daewoo union president Chu Young-ho and 19 other unionists.

While most of those arrested were released later in the day, Chu and three other officials still remain in detention on charges of obstructing the operations of Daewoo by orchestrating strikes and work stoppages. Daewoo's 10,000-strong workforce has been involved in a series of strikes over the last two months in opposition to the scheduled sale of the company in September. General Motors, Ford, Daimler-Chrysler and Fiat are all presently bidding for Daewoo.

On April 6, 37,000 workers at Hyundai, Kia Motor and Ssangyong Motor joined the Daewoo workers on a week-long strike. Since then, however, there has been no further action called by the unions.

While the unions insist that their concern is that the sale will lead to job losses, the main objection of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Daewoo union is that the company will be sold to a "foreign" firm.

However, whether the company remains in the hands of a Korean conglomerate, or is taken over by an overseas rival, there will be further restructuring and job losses. Over the past three years the unions have worked closely with the local employers to eliminate thousands of jobs and destroy working conditions in a bid to restore the "competitive position" of the Korean automakers.

Cambodian textile workers strike

Nearly 1,000 workers at the Hong Kong-owned Luen Thai Garment factory went on strike on Monday over the sacking of their union shop steward, Eam Youlong. Over 500 marched through the streets of Phnom Penh to parliament to protest against his dismissal on a traffic charge fabricated by the company management and a local police inspector.

The Free Trade Union of Workers said Youlong was first suspended in January, the same week he submitted documents setting up a union in the factory. Workers are also demanding a pay increase from the current \$US36 per month to \$US70.

More mine deaths in China

A methane gas explosion last Saturday at the state-owned Yongai coal mine in China's northern province of Shanxi trapped 44 miners underground—40 were killed, 3 are still missing and one was rescued.

Thousands of workers continue to perish in China's mines every year. In the first three weeks of this year at least 70 miners have been killed while in the first nine months of last year 3,464 miners lost their lives and 2,028 miners were killed in explosions and cave-ins during 1998.

In yet another industrial disaster, 38 workers were killed and 20 others badly injured when a fire tore through a poultry plant in the eastern Chinese province of Shandong last Wednesday.

Sri Lankan plantation workers launch strike

Some 8,500 workers from the Sapugaskanda plantation in the Ratnapura district launched an indefinite strike on April 17 demanding a payment of 3.75 rupees for every kilogram of tea leaves picked, adequate water facilities and changes to Employee Provident Fund payments for workers with Indian passports.

The strike action followed failed discussions between union representatives and the Sapugaskanda Plantation Company management on April 4. The management is now insisting that the workers return to work as a pre-condition for talks. The workers are determined to continue the strike and their colleagues in other plantations owned by the same company have expressed their willingness to join the strike if the management fails to address the demands.

Sri Lankan Air Lines claims damages from union

Sri Lankan Air Lines has filed a petition at the district court in Colombo claiming 110 million rupees from the Independent Workers Union for financial losses resulting from a dispute led by the union last December. If the company succeeds in prosecuting the case, it would set a dangerous precedent for further attacks on democratic rights.

Last December, workers from the airline's catering service and ground staff at Colombo International Airport went on strike and then imposed work-to-rule bans over bonuses. The company reacted by declaring the union action "illegal" and obtained a court injunction preventing the union from continuing its action. The company suspended hundreds of catering employees and disciplinary inquiries are continuing for 49 workers.

Workers say that the company has a plan to pressure all catering workers to take "voluntary retirement" with a meagre amount in compensation. The Sri Lanka Independent Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Sri Lanka Freedom Party, the dominant party in the present Peoples Alliance government, has done nothing to defend the jobs of these workers.

Sri Lankan Air Lines, previously a fully state-owned company known Air Lanka, is now a joint venture between Emirates Air Lines and the Sri Lankan government.

Australian train controllers vote to strike

Sydney train controllers voted unanimously on Wednesday to

go on strike for 24 hours from midnight Sunday over a wage claim and the breakdown in negotiations with State Rail (SR) over a new enterprise work agreement. The negotiations have dragged on for the last 18 months.

The 62 controllers, members of the Rail Tram and Bus Union and the Australian Services Union, monitor rail traffic throughout Sydney and to Canberra, Lithgow and Newcastle. The strike will also affect the operation of interstate trains such as the Indian Pacific.

The controllers are demanding a 12 percent wage increase but SR has refused to budge from its offer of 8 percent and is also seeking productivity trade-offs, including further cuts to manning levels. Last year SR cut controller numbers by four and is now looking to cut another six jobs. The union is also demanding bonuses of \$300 a week for working through the two-week period of the Olympic games in September.

Controllers say they are already having extreme difficulty meeting the increased workloads. One controller said: "They want to cut jobs and we say that staffing levels are not negotiable. There are two guys on tonight who have worked 26 days straight. This is getting ridiculous."

Despite the determination of the controllers, the unions are working to head off the strike and do a deal with SR. Following a three-day hearing in the Industrial Relations Commission this week, the union began last minute talks on Friday with SR aimed at heading off the strike. Australian Service Union assistant secretary George Panigris said on Thursday evening that he believed that "there was some room to move" on the 12 percent wage claim.

Australian academics take action over pay

After a lockout notice from college management, academic staff at the Australian Marine College in Launceston took strike action for 48 hours on Thursday. They are demanding a 4.5 percent wage increase over the next three years. The college has only offered a 3.75 percent increase.

Other higher education institutions have offered salary increases of between 12 and 14 percent as well as commitments to maintain staff levels. The 40 staff members struck for three days last week in a dispute that has been running for over a month.



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