

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 May 2000

Sri Lankan metal factory to sack 120 workers

Having shut down workers' pickets using Sri Lanka's new emergency regulations, management at the Amico metal packaging factory is now moving to prevent 120 workers resuming work. Labor Minister W.D.J. Seneviratne has stepped into the dispute to attempt to get Amico to reduce the number of victimised workers to 25 and to hold "a disciplinary inquiry" rather than sacking the workers outright.

Amico shut the factory almost three months ago in response to a strike over union recognition, improved pay and working conditions. None of the plant's 450 workers have been paid since the factory was closed. After the government introduced emergency powers on May 3 banning all industrial action, Amico secured a court order allowing it to remove finished goods from the factory and banning protests near the plant. Six workers were taken into custody as the police enforced the court order and although they were released later that day, two remain on bail.

Strike by Indian ordinance workers

Ordinance workers from Suriyur in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on strike early this week to protest against the non-payment of wages and the victimisation of striking workers and unions officials. The Ordinance Factory Board had agreed to pay employees wages for piece-rate production for overtime worked to produce extra munitions during the Kargil conflict last year. Management at Suriyur have refused to pay the overtime wages. Union leaders have threatened to extend the industrial action to other ordinance plants if their demands are not met.

Police mobilised against Indian hospital workers

Indian authorities deployed a large contingent of police at the Patna Medical Hospital College last Sunday to intimidate striking hospital workers who were protesting over corruption in the administration. The workers had closed most of the hospital's wards following the arrest of two strike leaders three days earlier. Nurses at the hospital were also considering joining the strike.

Sony threatens to relocate Indonesian factory

Electronics producer Sony is threatening to shut down its factory in Indonesia and relocate to Malaysia because of a prolonged sit-in by staff. Striking workers have been occupying the plant's export area for nearly a month and Sony estimates that the occupation has cost it over \$200 million.

The Indonesia Business Council has said that at least 20 foreign manufacturing companies are considering shifting their operations because of disruptions caused by workers' demonstrations. Electronics workers in Malaysia are not permitted to form a trade

union.

Hotel strike in Indonesia

About 200 workers from the five-star Imperial Century Hotel in Lippo held a strike on Monday, May 22 demanding full health insurance for their family members, a salary increase and additional allowances. The protesters also called for the dismissal of two top managers because of their treatment of staff. The strike ended when workers, hotel management and a representative from the All-Indonesian Workers Union (FSPSI) negotiated a settlement.

Strike over construction worker's death

Building workers throughout the Australian state of Victoria went on a 24-hour strike on Monday, angered at the recent death of a construction worker on a Melbourne work site. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) is calling on the government to hire 40 additional workplace safety inspectors.

The strike, involving between 35,000 and 40,000 workers from 1,000 work sites, took place after Wade Pollock, aged 41, died last weekend when a piece of his clothing was caught in a crane box. He was lifted to the 12th floor by the crane before falling for about 18 meters. He died an hour later in hospital.

CFMEU state secretary Martin Kingham has called on the Labor Party government to spend more on safety in the building industry, but at the same time the union has been involved in negotiating agreements with major construction companies that compromise safety standards.

The union recently signed a deal with Grollo Construction to allow for the speedup of production schedules and to end the current practice of halting construction during inclement weather. The agreement, which has become the benchmark for other construction firms, also commits the union to "avoid" situations that give rise to strikes and stoppages.

Queensland teachers strike over pay and hours

Schoolteachers in the Australian state of Queensland are continuing a campaign for increased wages and improved conditions. Last week teachers in 1,300 schools refused to see students during their lunch breaks and banned carrying out playground supervision. Teachers at Sarina State High went on a 24-hour strike on Tuesday and a statewide stopwork meeting is planned for June 6 followed by a 24-hour stoppage on June 14.

Queensland's 30,000 teachers are demanding pay rises of 8 percent and lower class sizes. Teachers want to limit class sizes to 20 students for Years 1 to 3 and Years 11 to 12 and to 25 students

for other years. They also want be lower limits for composite classes and those with students having special needs or behavioural problems.

Other claims include contact time of 18 hours a week (a two-hour cut), paid helpers for playground supervision during lunch and two weeks holiday at Easter. Teachers are also demanding support staff for school computer networks at present maintained by teachers in their spare time.

Toyota stands down 2,500 workers

Toyota stood down 2,500 workers at its Altona and Port Melbourne plants for 24 hours on Tuesday because of an industrial dispute at one of its parts suppliers. Workers at the nearby Socobell component factory in Spotswood went on strike and set up a picket line after negotiations over a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) broke down. Socobell management made an unsuccessful bid in the federal court to have the picket line declared illegal.

The dispute arose when Socobell, a maker of internal plastic parts and trimmings for Toyota and Holden, bypassed the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and began negotiations on a new EBA with a rival union. The AMWU claimed they had won coverage of the company's production workers. The demarcation dispute involving 55 workers was ended when the company and the union signed a 12-month EBA.

Joy Mining dispute widens

Over 200 workers, union officials and Labor Party members of parliament occupied part of a plant in Unanderra for an hour last week to prevent work being carried out for Joy Mining. The company, which maintains and services underground mining equipment, locked out its 70-strong workforce three months ago after wage negotiations broke down. To circumvent a round-the-clock picket at its Moss Vale plant, Joy Mining has attempted to continue its operations at other factories, the latest being at the Klondu Engineering plant in Unanderra.

The company obtained a second lockout order this week against its workers at the Moss Vale plant after the unions lodged an application May 24 in the Federal Court to have the first lockout declared illegal. The company has sought access to the union's memos and mobile phone records claiming it was illegally encouraging people to join the pickets and thus impeding the company's operations.

Train electricians threaten rail shutdown

Electrical workers employed by Cityrail in Sydney have threatened to shut down the city's train system because of a breakdown in negotiations over a pay increase and a new job classification structure as part of an enterprise bargaining agreement.

The 32 electricians, members of the Australian Services Union, voted to strike if their pay increase of 16 percent over two years was not passed on to all electrical workers. The State Rail Authority has offered the wage deal if workers accept a new "broad banding" job classification structure.

However five of the electricians involved would miss out on an 8 percent pay rise in the second year because they would be excluded from the new job classifications. A Cityrail spokesperson admitted the electrical workers could shut down the whole train

system if running repairs to the electrical system are not made as problems occur.

Construction workers picket

Some 80 construction workers stopped work on Monday, May 22 at the Armadale Hospital site in Western Australia and set up a 24-hour picket line after police were called to stop their union organisers of the CMFEU from entering the site and speaking to their members. Workers had been protesting at the lack of proper site allowances, canteen facilities and basic amenities.

Australian technical teachers strike

TAFE teachers at the Newcastle campus of the Hunter Institute of TAFE walked off the job on Wednesday against government cuts to funding. The cuts have led to job losses and a reduction in classes for the engineering and trade areas. The funding cuts are part of the ongoing destruction of TAFE teachers' jobs in all areas including Newcastle.

Papua New Guinea union calls off teachers strike

On Monday, May 22 teachers in the PNG Western Highlands Province boycotted classes and several hundred protested in front of the provincial government headquarters to demand a 200 percent pay increase and the release of the second quarter school subsidies. They are also demanding that the Teaching Services Commission (TSC) act on the promotion of teachers and that it also provide school materials.

Teachers union leader Andrew Mangi sent teachers back to work on Tuesday after Provincial Education Adviser Malcolm Culligan assured the boycotting teachers that he would present their grievances to the TSC in the capital Port Moresby this week.

Teachers strikes are threatened in other areas of the country. About 1,000 teachers met in the West New Britain Province earlier this month to demand a 100 percent pay rise and increases in allowances. They threatened to resign at the end of the second school term if their demands were not met.

Teachers in the Morobe Province have publicly supported their colleagues in the New Guinea Islands (NGI) region and threatened to disrupt exams for grades 6, 10 and 12 if the NGI demands are not met. Teachers in the Mamose region are also demanding a 100 percent pay increase. The last pay increase for teachers was 3.3 percent in 1994.

New Caledonian workers march against police harassment

Around 2,000 workers held a protest march in Noumea, the capital of New Caledonia, on Tuesday. The march was organised against police harassment of pickets involved in a dispute at the Pacific Island's only cement works. A few days earlier a police car had rammed a carload of striking workers at a Noumea intersection. The police had claimed the collision was accidental, but the workers said it was a deliberate act and part of a continuing campaign by police against them.



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