

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 July 2000

Striking South Korean hotel workers attacked by police

Striking workers occupying Seoul's Hotel Lotte were violently removed on Thursday when a force of over 3,000 police stormed the hotel. Thirty-three injured strikers, including 14 women, needed to be taken to hospital for treatment.

Police first entered the hotel's Crystal Ballroom, on the second floor, at 4.20 am, where they clashed with strikers. The workers retreated to the 36th and 37th floors where union leaders had set up a base of operations. Along the way, they erected barricades, shut down elevators and fought with police using crockery and fire extinguishers. In the first phase of the raid, nearly 50 workers were detained.

Nearly three hours after the initial raid, a police special squad was sent in to dismantle the barricades and then fired smoke shells and flashing bombs. Nearly all the strikers were taken into custody. Government prosecutors will now seek warrants for the arrest of the nine strike leaders.

The raid came the day after the country's president and justice minister ordered a crackdown on "illegal activities by interest groups" and a week after both South Korea's main train union organisations agreed to halt rallies in downtown Seoul so as not to embarrass the government during the North/South Korean Summit negotiations.

The 1,100 hotel workers have been in dispute since June 9, timing their strike with the commencement of summit talks. The Hotel Lotte is where most foreign journalists were staying. The dispute arose out of demands for a wage rise, an increase in the retirement age and an upgrade of the status of part-time and casual workers to permanent employees.

Indonesian workers occupy Rio Tinto mine

Over 150 striking workers have been occupying the production facilities at the PT Kaltim Prima Coal mine (KPC) in East Kalimantan since June 15, halting all operations. The strike began on June 14 when workers protested at the main mining area, demanding a 15 percent pay increase and the reintroduction of allowances that had been suspended. The dispute escalated when the Regional Committee for the Settlement of Labor Disputes ruled that the strike was illegal because workers failed to notify the committee of their plans. Police were then called in to remove the workers.

The evicted workers returned in force and took control of the mines' main processing site, its fuel station and headquarters. It is estimated that the strike is costing the company, a subsidiary of Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, \$US350,000 per day. Earlier this year another subsidiary of Rio Tinto, PT Kelian Equatorial Mining, was forced to halt production when locals blocked access to the mine over a land dispute. The gold mining company ceased operations on April 18 and is currently in negotiations with residents. It has reported a potential loss of over 700 kilograms of gold.

Fearful that another strike could discourage foreign investors, the Ministry of Mines and Energy has called on protesters and KPC to reach a speedy settlement. The Director General of Mining, Surna Tjahja Djadjadiningrat, claimed that KPC's buyers are already running out of stock and may seek compensation if their supply is not restored. He also indicated that the company is considering withdrawing from the operation altogether if the strike action continues.

Ten Indian miners killed in cave-in

The side wall of an open cut mine owned by Western Coal Fields (WCL) collapsed last Saturday in the Majr area of the Chandrapur district, killing 10 miners and hospitalising five others. Rescue efforts were hampered by torrential rain. Over 3,000 angry workers and their relatives gathered outside the mine site once the news of the collapse became public.

WCL is a subsidiary of Coal India Ltd and has been in financial trouble due to its unproductive operations and competition from cheap coal imports. The wall collapse took place while WCL officials were meeting at a nearby hotel, distributing figures that boasted about the company's safety record. The cause of the cave-in is yet to be established.

Indian telephone workers strike

A one-day strike by Indian Telecom workers took place on Wednesday against the government's proposed corporatisation of the Department of Telecom Services and issues relating to the status of employees and their conditions of work. An official from the Telecom Employees Union said workers were concerned that the government was planning to eventually privatise the telecommunications carrier.

Six of the 10 unions covering telecommunications workers participated in the strike. The other four unions withdrew after reaching an agreement with the government last Sunday. The government had offered those unions a role in a new corporatised department and the establishment of a committee of ministers to examine the issue of wages and pensions.

Indian child workers demonstrate against domestic labour

About 250 rescued child workers demonstrated in the Indian capital New Delhi on June 16 to demand tough action against the exploitation of children. Gathering at the mausoleum of Gandhi, the protesters passed around petitions and called on the Indian President K.R. Narayanan to impose a ban on using children as domestic servants.

Although child labour is illegal in India, the laws are not enforced. There are many sweatshops throughout the country that use child labour in carpet making, the manufacture of sporting goods and numerous other trades including domestic labour. Official government estimates put the number of child labourers at about 17 million. A recent survey by the International Labor Organisation estimates that out of 250 million child labourers in the world at least 60 million are

in India.

Poverty is the main reason for child labour. Children are often forced to work from a young age to earn a livelihood for themselves and their families.

Sri Lankan press workers protest against restructuring

Around 2,000 employees of the Associated Newspapers of Ceylon Ltd. (ANCL), the government-owned newspaper company, staged a demonstration in front of the company premises in Colombo on June 27 and 28 against plans for restructuring the company. They also demanded a salary increase and a resumption of publication of three newspapers that have been temporarily closed down.

The ANCL, which is known as “Lake House”, publishes dozens of newspapers daily and weekly in Sinhala, Tamil and the English languages. The Peoples Alliance government plans to restructure the ANCL, paving the way for the eventual privatisation of the company and retrenchment of staff.

ANCL management has delayed signing a collective agreement, which includes salary increases and other benefits for the employees, for over six months. Union leaders have said that the firm's new management, which was appointed three months ago, has not granted a 28 percent salary increase agreed to by its predecessors.

Australian nurses and hospital workers strike

Widespread strikes over wages and conditions are taking place in hospitals throughout Queensland, following a strike by 500 workers from the Princess Alexandra Hospital on June 19. The strike involved ancillary workers from the hospital's laundry, catering and gardening areas. Workers said they were frustrated by the increased use of casual and contract labour as well as under-staffing, high workloads and low pay.

Many casuals already work a 38-hour week with no prospect of a permanent full-time position. The strike was also in protest against the slow pace of negotiations for a new enterprise agreement, which have dragged on for over eight months. Ancillary staff at Clermont, Dysart, Moranbah, Prosperine and Sarina hospitals, have now voted to strike over the issue. Mackay Base Hospital staff has returned to work after a 24-hour strike.

Nurses refused to perform any of ancillary staff duties during the strike and nurses throughout the state already have 400 of their own work bans in place over working conditions. Nurses held meetings during the week and voted to escalate the bans, which target hospital management systems.

Staff at the Bundaberg Hospital are due to hold a stopwork meeting on Monday, Brisbane's QE-2 Hospital on Tuesday, the Gold Coast on Wednesday and Logan next Thursday. Meetings have also been scheduled for the hospitals in Toowoomba and Warwick. Royal Brisbane, Royal Women's and Brisbane's Mater hospitals have also voted to support the nurses' bans and to join a day of action next Thursday.

Nestlé workers in rural Australia to lose jobs

As many as 122 workers at Nestlé's plant in Warrnambool, Victoria face the sack when the company moves its coffee processing plant in November. The workers, who were shocked by the announcement, were told of the company's plans at a brief meeting after which workers were sent home and the factory closed for the day.

These jobs represent 38 percent of the workforce at the Nestlé factory, which also has a milk processing section. Nestlé said that global economic pressures have forced them to shut the plant. One worker said: “About two months ago we heard some rumours about the factory closing. Since then we were just trying to keep it open. We

have been breaking records in filling Nescafe (coffee) jars, today was just shocking, we knew it was coming but we did not expect it”.

Representatives from the National Union of Workers have already stated that there will be no struggle to defend jobs. Frank Noon, union shop steward at Nestle said: “No matter what we do we are not going to reverse the decision”.

Mental health care workers seek improved pay and conditions

Mental health care nurses throughout Victoria have put the state government on notice that they intend to take industrial action. The nurses, members of the Health and Community Services Union (HCSU), are angry at the pace of negotiations over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The HCSU is seeking an 8 percent wage increase for psychiatric nurses, more funding for training and in-service professional development. They are also demanding an industry-wide code of practice to deal with the growing number of assaults on mental health practitioners.

HCSU state secretary Lloyd Williams said “the government needs to put resources back into mental health”. But under the previous state Liberal government, the HCSU and other health care unions ensured an “orderly” closure of dozens of country and metropolitan hospitals.

New Zealand waterside workers strike over pay and conditions

Waterside workers at the Ports of Auckland voted to strike last week in a long-running industrial dispute over pay and working conditions, including the use of casual labour. Under current laws, the union is obliged to give 14 days' notice of the proposed strike, as the wharves are designated an “essential industry”—a provision which will remain intact when the Labour-Alliance Government passes its new industrial legislation later this year.

Productivity gains over the recent period, enforced by the union, have seen the Ports of Auckland reap increasing profits. Last year, however, the Ports of Auckland lost 10 percent of its container volumes to its main competitor, Port of Tauranga, sending its share price down by 20 percent. The decline in container volume was mainly due to the loss of a contract for the shipping line ANZDL. This follows the opening up of a South Auckland port by Port of Tauranga that also included a joint venture with Tranz Rail.

A spokeswoman for the port employer claimed that last week's stopwork meeting was illegal and that some shipping companies were preparing to take legal action to recover the costs of having their ships idle. If that happened, the port company would sue the union to recover its costs. Union officials said they “fully expected” to be sued but were confident the meeting was legal. The union is yet to announce the timing and extent of any strike action.



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