

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 July 2000

Amico workers in Sri Lanka face repression after strike ends

Workers at the Amico factory in Ratmalana, a southern suburb of Colombo, have been subjected to a series of provocations by management since their union leadership called off their three-month strike.

The company is a producer of metal packaging material and was closed on March 3 by management in retaliation for the strike. The initial dispute emerged over workers' demands for union recognition, higher wages and better working conditions. So draconian were the conditions that workers were forced to mark a card whenever they used the toilet and lacked basic facilities such as drinking water.

The strike had continued despite the imposition of emergency laws by the Peoples Alliance (PA) government in early May banning all strikes and industrial action.

The Inter-Company Workers Union sent its members back to work on May 30, on management's terms, which included the sacking of 25 workers. According to the return-to-work agreement, compensation for the sacked workers will not be paid until August. The Labour Minister and Labour Commissioner insisted union leaders sign the agreement, threatening to begin arresting workers under the emergency regulations if the strike continued.

Workers now face an increased workload since Amico refuses to replace those it has sacked. The firms' production manager has also assembled a group of thugs inside the factory to intimidate workers. Two workers have already been sacked for bringing a cellular phone into the plant; another has been sacked for refusing to work overtime. Quality controllers have been demoted to the rank of machine operators and one of them was sacked because of an error he made on a dye machine.

Miners' strike in Indonesia continues

Kalitim Prima Coal (KPC) has issued a public statement declaring that it is unable to fulfil its contractual obligations due to the ongoing dispute at its mine in East Kalimantan on the island of Borneo. On June 15, workers took over the company's main production facilities, demanding a 15 percent pay increase and the reintroduction of suspended allowances. The striking workers have since been joined by their families and have blockaded several roads leading into the mine.

KPC, which is a subsidiary of the Australian mining giant Rio Tinto, supplies coal to power plants, steel mills and industries locally and worldwide. It currently employs 2,600 workers. Since the strike began the company's stockpiles have been depleted and there are vessels waiting in the harbour for shipments. This year's exports were expected to reach 15.5 million tons of coal, up from 14 million tons last year. It is estimated that the company is losing \$1.4 million per day as a result of the strike. The strike is also costing the government up to US\$337,000 per day in royalties and tax revenue.

Campaign by South Korean bank workers

More than 90 percent of bank workers from the Korea Financial Industrial Union (KFIU) have voted for a campaign against the government's financial restructuring plans. Workers fear it will lead to major job losses. The KFIU is an umbrella organisation covering 24 bank

unions with a membership of over 65,000 workers.

For the first time, the government will allow financial holding companies to control two or more banks, setting the scene for bank mergers. As industrial laws ban any strike by bank workers, the union has called on its members to take holidays over the same period—from July 11 to 14.

Government prosecutors have already indicated that they will consider the holiday campaign a form of strike action and will prosecute the union leaders. South Korean banks have stated they will use non-union contract workers and managers to act as bank tellers if the action goes ahead.

A survey last week showed that the number of labour disputes in South Korea has increased to 146 compared to 108 for the same period last year. Lotte Hotel workers have refused to return to work despite the use of 3,000 police to violently break up their occupation of the hotel. Hotel workers from the Swiss Grand and Hilton Hotels are also on strike. Insurance workers have been on strike since June 20.

Thirty-six killed in Chinese fireworks factory explosion

A massive explosion on June 30 at the Tuchu Premium Fireworks Factory at Jiangmen in China's Guangdong province killed 36 workers, injured 170 and reduced the plant to rubble. Inter-Oriental Fireworks owned the factory. In April management ignored an order to improve its fire-fighting and alarm systems.

An investigation has begun into the explosion and seven factory managers have already been arrested. The company's Hong Kong-based owner has refused to go to the mainland for interrogation. Last Saturday the provincial government suspended production in all fireworks factories in Guangdong until safety inspections are conducted.

Following the explosion, the Chinese President and Premier called for the enforcement of safety regulations. But within days further fatalities underscored the indifference of authorities towards safety. On Sunday, a petrochemical factory in Shandong exploded, killing 10 people. On the same day, 12 miners at the Tianba Coal Mine in Yunnan's Qujing City were killed in a gas explosion. On Monday a blast rocked a plastic packaging factory in Dafeng, Sichuan province, killing at least one worker.

Cathay Pacific pilots in Hong Kong hold work-to-rule protest

Cathay Pacific pilots held a stop-work meeting last week and voted on a work-to-rule protest for next Tuesday. Over 1,100 of the 1,300 company's pilots will refuse to answer their phones or be called in to work on their rostered days off.

A year ago pilots were involved in a dispute with Cathay Pacific over pay and conditions. One senior pilot said: "We're sick and tired of bailing them out. This is what happens when you annoy and overwork your aircrew. If the travelling public is inconvenienced, we're sorry, but this is a combination of arrogance, greed and stupidity on the part of this company and it did not have to happen."

A roster system, which was to be set up for pilots after last year's dispute, has not been established. The Aircrew Officers Association general secretary, John Findlay, said after the vote. "Here we are more

than one year later. The talks have not concluded, the trial has not started, the members' personal lives are being disrupted because they're constantly being asked to work changes to their rosters, and they're saying it's time all this stopped."

Nepali jute mill workers clash with police

Hundreds of striking jute mill workers in the south-eastern town of Biratnagar in Nepal clashed last Saturday with police attempting to remove barricades at a border crossing with India. The strikers had blocked the road at Jogbani since June 27.

Police used firearms, tear gas, grenades and batons during the confrontation. More than 50 workers were injured and six were hospitalised with severe injuries. Police arrested eight workers and demolished several workers' homes.

The workers have been on strike since May for 19 demands including the restoration of facilities and the immediate reopening of the mill, closed by management in retaliation for the strike. Workers took to streets and blocked the road after management failed to honour an earlier agreement to reopen the mill on May 28. They returned to work following after management conceded 10 of the 19 demands during talks on July 4.

Indian miners strike over sackings

Around 100 miners from Bellary in Bangalore have been on strike over the last month against the sacking of 30 workers by their employer, Bellary Iron Ore Private Limited (BIOP). The company claims that the loss of an iron ore contract and increased mechanisation forced them to carry out the retrenchments.

The workers have established a picket line at the mine site and prevented vehicles entering and leaving. They are stopping private trucks that the company has tried to use to bypass the pickets and continue transporting ore from its mine.

Australian hospital workers strike

An estimated 50,000 staff from Queensland public hospitals, including doctors, nurses, clerical and ancillary workers, held a 24-hour strike on Thursday over wages and conditions. Stopwork meetings and rolling strikes involving 12 unions are taking place in up to 50 hospital facilities throughout the state. Nurses have now been enforcing work bans for several months. Queensland Health Minister, Wendy Edmond, claimed the government could not afford to meet all of the striker's demands during the enterprise bargaining process.

Catholic teachers demand equal pay

The Victorian Independent Education Union, on behalf of Catholic teachers, has submitted a draft log of claims to the Victorian Catholic Schools Association. The claims are aimed at securing working conditions that match those of their public school counterparts.

The teachers are demanding that class sizes be cut from 35 to 29 students and practical classes be reduced to 16 students; a 3 percent pay rise per year in line with the increase offered by the state government to public school teachers; and a clause for further increases to offset the higher living costs due to the newly introduced Goods and Services Tax.

Fabric mill to close leaving 77 unemployed

Seventy-seven workers at a wool mill in the Victorian country town of Warrnambool will lose their jobs by September this year when the mill owner, charity group The Smith Family, closes it down.

Twenty-seven workers were sacked immediately last Wednesday after being told of the closure at a lunchtime meeting. The remaining 50 workers will continue until mid-September. The factory, which produces blankets, recently lost a contract with the Linda Company for the supply of material.

The job losses are part of a growing trend in the state's southwest. Fletcher Jones, another fabric mill in Warrnambool, announced last May that 15 jobs are to go. In the nearby town of Camperdown, 35 workers recently lost their jobs when the Bonlac dairy factory closed.

New Zealand health workers picket rest home

Health workers in the South Island city of Invercargill picketed the Peacehaven rest home for the aged this week, in support of a wage claim lodged with the Presbyterian Support Services (PSS). Nurses and support workers are seeking a 2.5 percent wage increase, an extra \$7 Saturday allowance and improved redundancy compensation. PSS, just one of many church affiliated organisations running rest homes and health care centres around the country, has refused any pay increases or changes to workers' conditions.

Union spokeswoman Carolyn Payne-Harker said nursing pay rates in the age-care sector were about 15 percent behind other nursing sectors. "It's time to speak up in this industry. There are shocking conditions." A \$7 allowance is paid by PSS for work on Sundays, but not for Saturdays. In addition, staff numbers had been halved in the past 10 years while patient numbers had stayed the same or, in many cases, increased.

PSS communications manager Chris Nichol said a "neutral" pay settlement remained on offer. PSS was at the "top end" of rest home pay rates and needed to remain "competitive" in the fast growing age-care "market", he claimed.

New Zealand doctors threaten strike

Strikes by junior (first or second-year) doctors are likely at hospitals throughout the country this year, with the doctors preparing to fight for a 20 percent pay claim. Resident Doctors Association general secretary Deborah Sidebotham, said a nation-wide strike was likely because the Labour-Alliance Government refused to "take an interest in junior doctors' pay claims".

In fact, the government is taking an intense interest in containing costs in the health sector and suppressing pay rises among doctors and nurses. Earlier this year, Health Minister Annette King and Finance Minister Michael Cullen jointly wrote to hospital administrators instructing them to limit pay rises and make all staff work harder. Their letter demanded that "increases in pay should be offset with productivity improvements" so that all settlements would be "cost neutral".

The government's recent budget was severely criticised by health professionals. Medical Association chairwoman Pippa MacKay complained that it provided nothing to help medical students facing massive fees and debts and no measures to end the shortage of junior doctors in hospitals or to stop the exodus overseas of locally trained doctors.

Last year, about 350 junior doctors moved overseas, many to Australia, where, according to the union, doctors earn up to 50 percent more for fewer hours worked than their counterparts in New Zealand.



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