

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 July 2000

Sony to sack striking Indonesian workers

PT Sony Electronics of Indonesia announced on Friday 7 its intention to sack 928 workers who have been involved in a strike since April 26 at the Citibung plant, which produces compact video disc players and television sets.

The workers are protesting over conditions at the plant, saying they are denied basic rights and intimidated by management. They also object to the introduction of a new production line, which requires them to stand whilst working. During the two-month strike, the workers have occupied the plant's export area and squatted in some of its locker rooms, forcing the company to close down 10 of its 12 production lines.

Under the country's labour laws, companies must secure the approval of the Central Committee for Labor Dispute Settlement (P4P) before they can dismiss striking workers. The decision to dismiss the Sony workers was reached in an informal meeting between the company and the committee, without the participation of workers or union representatives. The P4P had previously assured workers that their strike was legal because it had been conducted in accordance with the labour laws.

The P4P also dismissed the workers' objections to the new methods of production, claiming that the "standing operation procedure is a better and healthier work method".

The workers have rejected the committee's decision and accused it of colluding with company management. Union officials have diverted the dispute into parliamentary channels. They went to the House of Representatives (DPR) on Thursday to meet with the Commission VII on population and welfare affairs, asking it to look into the dispute, and sent a letter to Manpower Minister Bomer Pasaribu, asking him to veto the P4P decision.

Gold miners protest against intimidation

Hundreds of Indonesian gold miners working without permits at Pongkor Mountain rallied at the Bogor Council building on Monday to protest against the violence they have suffered at the hands of security officers from mining firm, PT Aneka Tambang. The miners said that they had been beaten and abused, and that the company had used explosives to excavate the mining sites where they had worked over the past month. This has reduced the number of miners in the area from 1,000 to 400.

During the protest miners met with several of Bogor's councillors for administrative and economic affairs and asked the Council to provide them with protection so that they can continue to mine in the area. The councillors agreed to arrange a meeting between the miners and representatives of PT Aneka.

Most of the miners are migrants who come from towns in West Java and other provinces such as Lampung and North Sumatra. They are inexperienced and poorly equipped to dig the deep shafts needed for gold mining. As a result scores of miners have been buried alive over the past few years.

Sri Lanka broadcasting employees demonstrate

Around 600 employees of the government-owned Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation demonstrated during their lunch hour on Friday

July 7 in front of the corporation's office in Colombo. They were protesting against restructuring plans and demanded the removal of a corrupt management. They also called for an end to recruitment based on political favours.

The Peoples Alliance government has set up a commission to restructure the corporation. Under the plan, 620 employees, including engineers, technicians and program producers, have already been forced to leave under a "voluntary retirement scheme".

Unions refuse to defend Veytex jobs

Union leaders have refused to organise any struggle to defend over 700 workers from the Veytex textile factory in Veyangoda, 30km north of Colombo who lost their jobs when the winding section of the factory was closed by management. It has been reported that the company is bankrupt and its closure would mean the elimination of over 3,000 jobs.

When the textile factory closed last year, workers responded by launching a hunger strike to defend their jobs. The factory was later reopened under the control of the government-owned Peoples Bank, which is a major creditor. The bank is now refusing to provide any financial assistance to the plant.

Food factory workers face unemployment

Fearing the closure of the factory, workers at the Mister Hop Lanka food plant in Padukka, 30km east of Colombo, have complained to the Sri Lankan Labour Department that the company is deducting monthly instalments from their wages for the Employee Provident Fund, but not depositing them in the relevant accounts as required by law.

Workers said the management had threatened them for making the complaints but they felt they had no choice because the company reportedly owes 100 million rupees (US\$1.33 million) to banks. The workers suspect that the owners are going to shut down and open a new plant in the southern province of Galle.

Around 20 workers lost their jobs last year when the delivery section was contracted to the Heymas company. The average monthly wage of a worker at the food factory is less than US\$40 and they have no basic facilities such as drinking water, toilets and restrooms.

Railway workers threaten action

Railway workers are threatening industrial action if the government does not meet their demand for a monthly allowance of 3,000 rupees (US\$38) to meet the rising cost of living. The Peoples Alliance government has imposed price increases to finance its war against the separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam. The Train Services United Workers Front recently submitted a letter to President Chandrika Kumaratunga demanding the monthly allowance, backdated to 1998. Union president W.W. Wickramasinghe said that if the government's response was not fair, the union would stage a strike.

Indian LPG transporters launch strike action

The LPG Transporters Federation of India, which represents around 90 percent of tank-truck transporters across the country, decided to launch an indefinite national strike from midnight Monday to protest the

commissioning of a gas pipeline. The pipeline's construction will lead to more than 9,000 trucks becoming surplus, leaving drivers without work.

The Jamnagar-Loni gas pipeline is likely to be operational by October this year. Over 2,000 tank truck drivers, who transport 80 percent of all LPG, will immediately face a crisis because many have taken out loans to purchase trucks and tanks. The oil companies have also refused to renegotiate tenders and contracts with drivers, leaving many trucks idle.

South Korean unions call off bank workers campaign

A national bank workers campaign page in South Korea was called off on Tuesday when the Korean Financial Industry Union (KFIU) reached a compromise with the government over bank mergers and loss of jobs. The Korea Federation of Bank and Financial Labor Unions (KFBU) announced the agreement with the government on Tuesday evening, ending a nation-wide protest that had only begun that morning.

Despite the KFIU's prediction that 90,000 bank and other workers would participate in the campaign, only around 15,000 bank workers did so. This was in no small way due to the union's refusal to call strike action, preferring to recommend members take annual leave to avoid laws prohibiting bank strikes.

Most banking services were still available and none of the country's 6,200 bank branches actually closed as management used casual and managerial staff to maintain operations and mobilised extra security guards and police in the event of clashes with strikers. The government indicated that it would arrest and prosecute all striking bank workers and those who opposed the plans to restructure the banking sector.

The government has now reportedly agreed not to force any bank mergers and assured the unions that no jobs will be lost. Nevertheless, government officials have insisted that a second round of bank restructuring is not negotiable.

The restructuring of South Korea's banking sector was a key demand of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in exchange for a \$58 billion bailout in the aftermath of the Asian currency crisis in late 1997. In the first round of restructuring that followed the IMF bailout, more than 40,000 bank workers lost their jobs.

Riot police attack Lotte Hotel workers

South Korean workers from the Lotte Hotel were violently attacked on Monday afternoon when thousands of riot police were mobilised to disperse their sit-down protest at the hotel. Thousands of workers were dragged away and union leaders, including KCTU President Dan Byung-ho, were severely beaten.

On Monday morning over 1,000 workers from the Lotte Hotel Workers Union attempted to enter the hotel as part of the union's attempt to resume negotiations with management. The union leadership delivered a letter the previous Friday to management urging a resumption in collective bargaining negotiations on Monday morning.

The hotel management responded, however, by saying it saw no reason or grounds to hold negotiations as the Seoul Regional Labour Relations Commission had already handed down a new collective bargaining agreement. Demonstrations involving up to 5,000 workers were held every day last week to protest the government's violent dispersal the previous week of the hotel workers' occupation of the Lotte Hotel.

Philippines transport operators strike over fuel prices

Transport groups on Monday launched a nationwide strike against rising petroleum prices. Many routes were paralysed as jeepney operators and taxi-drivers participated in the protest. Northern Metro Manila officials deployed dump trucks and council buses to transport people along the affected routes. The strike comes after months of demonstrations and protests over the government's deregulation of the oil industry, which has allowed oil companies to increase petroleum prices by 55 centavos to P1.50 (US\$0.033) per gallon.

PNG Teachers Association split over pay claim

Papua New Guinea Teachers Association (PNGTA) National Capital

District branch president Peter Auru has called for the sacking of PNGTA general secretary Hosea Johns, claiming he is misleading the nation's 26,000 teachers on their pay demands.

Johns and the PNGTA National Management Committee (NMC) claimed that teachers' demands for wage rises of 100 to 200 percent were unrealistic and reduced the claim to 60.52 percent. The NMC also condemned threatened industrial action, claiming it was illegal. Teachers met in late June and threatened to resign en masse if the government did not reverse its original decision opposing their demands.

More than 10,000 teachers from the Highlands province held a meeting last weekend in Mount Hagen and voted to ignore the NMC and agreed to resign on Monday if the 60.52 percent rise was not in their pay packets this week. They said their claim for a 200 percent rise still stood. They have given the government until September 8 to meet the claim.

Teachers in the New Britain province are also ignoring the NMC's call for restraint. The teachers, who claim they speak for their colleagues in the Island region as well, said they are willing to accept a 60.52 percent pay rise but warned the Government and the PNGTA that if the claim is not settled by July 27 they will take industrial action and seek to remove Johns from office.

Building workers take strike action

Nearly 1,000 Australian building and construction workers took strike action last week to protest the new Victorian state Labor government's changes to the Workcover injury compensation scheme. Members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), demonstrated in Melbourne's CBD, disrupting city traffic.

CFMEU official Martin Kingham said the government had broken its election promise to restore common law rights to injured workers. Previous changes to the Workcover legislation left 3,000 workers without the right to sue employers for negligence. Kingham said workers were worse off under the Labor government than they were under the Liberals.

Nurses vote against pay offer

Victorian nurses have rejected a three percent pay rise offered by the state government and are due to meet on August 9 to consider further industrial action. More than 500 nurses walked off the job for two hours to join the mass meeting called by the nurses union. Some of the nurses' demands include an 8 percent pay rise and a return to a 40-hour working week.

Queensland hospital strike spreads

Non-medical staff at the Mater Hospital in Brisbane have voted for a 24-hour strike. Hospital workers are continuing their campaign against the Queensland government for its refusal to negotiate a new agreement. The state government has rejected the 33 percent pay claim and is also resisting demands to increase staff levels at public hospitals. Workers at the BMLS contract laundry, which handles hospital laundry across southeast Queensland, were also due to hold stopwork meetings this week after the government refused to discuss their demands.

Varley workers strike

Workers at the manufacturing firm Varley in Carrington, New South Wales, returned to work on Thursday after a 24-hour strike. The 90 workers were striking over the breakdown of enterprise bargaining negotiations, including a claim for a 4 percent wage rise over 12 months. The latest walkout follows a 48-hour strike two weeks ago over the same issue. Workers will meet again next Wednesday morning after talks with management set down for Tuesday.



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