

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 August 2000

## South Korean hotel strike ends

The 74-day strike by 1,200 workers at South Korea's five-star Hotel Lotte came to an end on Monday. The dispute received international publicity on June 29 when over 3,000 riot police stormed the hotel to evict occupying workers.

The strikers were demanding that all contract and part-time workers, who made up nearly 60 percent of the 2,800 strong workforce, be given permanent status. The workers also sought a 10 percent pay rise.

The final deal struck between the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and hotel management fell far short of the workers' demands. Temporary employees will only be granted permanent status after they have been employed for three years and will continue to be paid 50 to 70 percent of the wages earned by permanent workers.

All the strikers now face disciplinary action for their participation in an "illegal strike" and the hotel's management has only agreed to "act leniently". The KCTU has agreed to settle out of court a sexual harassment case brought by 270 female hotel workers against 16 managers in exchange for an agreement by the management to withdraw its claim for damages against union leaders.

The deal was signed while hundreds of police armed with truncheons and riot equipment remained on standby outside the hotel. Over 28 percent of the strikers voted against the KCTU deal.

## Philippines SEC employees protest retrenchment plan

Two hundred employees of the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) staged a one-hour picket over proposed job cuts in the lobby of the SEC building in Manila last Monday. Lunchtime protests have been scheduled for the rest of the week.

The SEC has offered a separation package of two months pay for every year of service or, for employees with over 20 years service, a retirement package that will include three months pay for every year of service.

## Explosion at steel plant in China

Twenty workers died, 24 were injured and at least 10 others remain missing following an explosion on Monday in the Pingxiang Iron and Steel Plant in China's Jiangxi province.

The explosion caused part of a two-storey cement and brick workshop to collapse. The blast occurred when a leaking generator, used to pump oxygen through molten steel to burn off impurities, was switched on.

This is the third fatal factory explosion in China since March. Another 60 workers were killed in explosions at two fireworks

factories.

## Indian municipal workers end strike over unpaid wages

Over 1,200 workers at Kolhapur Municipal Transport (KMT), in the Indian city of Mumbai, called off a five-day strike earlier this week after the municipal commissioner agreed to pay them wages owed for April and July.

The authorities agreed to pay the unpaid wages by the end of August and to withdraw disciplinary notices issued against 369 of the striking workers. They have also agreed not to penalise the workers who went on strike, reclassifying the dispute as a "privileged leave period".

## Raids on Indian firms uncover child labour

Government raids last Sunday in Davangere, Mumbai, discovered 18 children and teenagers being used as bonded labour in confectionery manufacturing factories. Ten of those freed were children aged between eight and 14.

The raid follows the release, a few days earlier, of another 25 child workers. Many of the children are from the state of Tamil Nadu and had been sent to Mumbai by contractors, who received all of their wages. The children told authorities they were forced to work from 5am till 11pm and were provided with very little food.

## Sri Lankan security guards strike for permanency

Some 800 security guards attached to the government-owned Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) in Sri Lanka began strike action on August 21, demanding job permanency. They are maintaining a picket line to block the movement of oil carriers into the Corporation's premises.

The workers are still employed on a contract, despite having completed three years of service. In that time another 400 guards have been recruited on a permanent basis. The CPC management has threatened to sack the strikers if they do not return to work immediately.

## Sri Lankan workers demonstrate against thug attacks

About 300 workers at Synthetic, a factory in Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, demonstrated in front of the Labour Ministry building on August 22 to protest against an attack by company thugs on two workers.

The treasurer and an active member of the newly-formed branch of Inter Company Workers Union, controlled by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), were attacked on August 17 while collecting union funds at the morning tea break. Following the attack the police arrested the two on false complaints lodged by their assailants.

The two thugs are employed in Synthetic's Environmental and

Security Division, which was established in July alongside the factory's regular security force. Workers say the division, run by an ex-police officer, was organised in order to intimidate them after they began a campaign for union recognition.

The previously state-owned factory was privatised in 1992. The private owners have cut hundreds of jobs, forced the workforce into contract employment and refused to recognise the union.

#### **New Zealand nurses slam union over pay talks**

Wellington-based nurses employed by Capital Coast Health (CCH) voted last week for strike action if their employment contract is not settled satisfactorily.

During an angry and heated debate at a stop-work meeting of 300 nurses, midwives and nurse aides, the union came in for stinging criticism for failing to fight for a sufficiently large pay increase. The NZ Nurses Organisation had originally lodged a claim for a 7 percent pay increase, restoration of penal pay rates and minimum staffing levels in each ward. The nurses rejected the proposal as inadequate and instructed the union to increase their demands when negotiations resume on September 6.

The nurses are demanding pay parity with teachers and police officers. The CCH nurses, currently among the lowest paid in the country, earn an average wage of \$37,500 a year. Parity with teachers at the top of the pay scale would mean lifting nurses' wages to nearly \$50,000. The Nurses Organisation claimed it had been told by CCH that the demands already on the table could not be met.

Last month Health Minister Annette King reiterated an earlier warning that the Labour-Alliance Government would provide no extra money for pay rises for doctors and nurses, despite chronic staff shortages in some areas. King said hospitals would have to find money for any pay rises out of their existing budgets. This year, Capital Coast Health has been forced to postpone or cancel hundreds of operations because of staff shortages.

CCH nurses have planned two further stop-work meetings for late September to discuss possible strike action.

#### **PNG government punishes teachers for industrial action**

The Papua New Guinea Education Minister Dr John Waiko announced this week that he intends to "punish" teachers who took part in recent industrial action over pay and conditions. In Parliament on Monday he said: "Teachers, especially in the Highlands provinces, who walked off their jobs will not have a third term holiday break. I am going to be very tough given the massive increase given to our teachers... They will have to remain in the class rooms to catch up for the education the students lost."

The teachers walked out of classes in mid-July after not receiving any pay and allowance adjustments since 1995. They were seeking pay rises from 100 to 200 percent but were forced back to work by the union after it made a secret deal with the government, granting the teachers a 31 percent pay rise.

#### **Niue schoolteacher suspended for TV appearance**

A senior teacher at Niue High School has been suspended from teaching after appearing on television to discuss teachers' demands for a pay increase. Epsy Puheke, the spokesperson for teachers at the school, gave an interview to TV Niue News.

A majority of the 22 teachers at Niue's only secondary school struck for two days last week in support of a \$2,000 increase.

Puheke was authorised by the acting principal to speak to the television station when the teachers walked off their jobs on August 18. Her story was broadcast following an interview on the strike given by Niue's Deputy Premier and Minister of Education Young Vivian.

Puheke appeared on TV Niue News for a second time on Tuesday. The Public Service Commission suspended Puheke for two weeks, accusing her of breaching a government regulation that prohibits government employees from talking to the press without the official permission.

#### **Ford Australia ends stand-downs**

Half of the 1,870 workers stood down for three days this week at Ford Australia's Broadmeadows plant in Melbourne returned to work on Friday. Another 1,930 workers are due to return next Monday morning. The standdowns were imposed in response to industrial action at the parts supplier Natra.

The workers at Naira went on strike as part of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union's (AMWU) "Campaign 2000" to gain an 15 percent pay increase over 33 months for workers employed by a number of manufacturing firms across Victoria. While the union claims to be conducting a united campaign, it has struck separate agreements with at least 160 companies, including Transfield, Bosch and Siemens, exempting them from further strike action.

Last week the union suspended all industrial action at Email for two weeks to hold discussions with the company on a separate agreement. A company spokesman said the union's decision suggested that it "had abandoned its idea of a centralised outcome". An AMWU spokesman said the union "was always prepared to negotiate on a site-by-site basis".

#### **BHP miners to strike**

Mine workers from BHP coal mines in the Illawarra region, south of Sydney, and at three other sites in Queensland, voted to strike for 48 hours on August 28. The workers are seeking a 15 percent wage increase over three years as part of a new enterprise agreement. The union has been unable to reach an agreement with the company despite being in negotiations for over 10 months.



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