

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 April 2001

South Korean workers demonstrate over Daewoo attack

Over 10,000 workers demonstrated in 27 cities across South Korea on April 21, against the brutal attack by 1,500 riot police on 350 sacked Daewoo workers on April 10. The sacked workers had attempted to enter the union premises located inside the company's main Pupyong plant in Incheon city.

While an April 6 court directive allowed the sacked workers the right to enter the union office, they were attacked by police who beat them with batons, riot shields and kicked them. The assault was so vicious that one worker may lose his eyesight, two others were temporarily paralysed below the waist and another suffered a broken rib that punctured his lung.

Workers at Saturday's demonstrations demanded the resignation of the National Police Agency head and for attempted murder charges to be brought against the police involved in the Pupyong incident. They also called for the resignation of President Kim Dae-jung. This week information was released revealing that senior police officials had pressured the media to "present police in a more favorable light".

South Korean bus drivers strike over wages

Bus drivers in the Korean cities of Taejon and Taegu brought services to a standstill on April 27 when they took strike action for improved wages. Strikes in other cities, including the capital Seoul, Pusan and Incheon, were called off after employers granted a 5.5 percent wage increase.

Drivers had initially demanded a 12.7 percent wage rise, a reduction in monthly working hours and an increase in long service allowances. Over 92 percent of the drivers, who are members of the Korea Automobile and Transport Workers Union (KATWU), voted for the nationwide strike in a ballot held last week. The drivers have poor conditions and work an average 11-hour day over a six-day week.

In negotiations with bus companies, the KATWU abandoned the workers' demands for reduced hours and long service allowance raise and more than halved the wage claim. A union official justified this on the grounds that the bus companies had withdrawn a threat to cut back their operations by 30 percent, an action that would have meant job cuts.

The bus drivers' strike is the first of a series expected across Korea over the coming weeks. Living standards fell sharply during the Asian financial crisis and unions are coming intense rank-and-file pressure to press for pay rises.

Korean workers disrupt bank merger ceremony

The official signing of a merger agreement between South

Korea's Kookmin Bank and the Housing & Commercial Bank (H&CB) was deferred this week after members of Kookmin Labor Union occupied the Sapphire Ballroom of the Lotte Hotel in Seoul where the signing ceremony was to take place. The protestors dispersed after the signing was called off.

Members of H&CB Labor Union also demonstrated outside the Westin Chosun Hotel in Seoul where the banks' directors were discussing the merger. Bank workers fear that the merger will lead to the same widespread job losses that have accompanied other recent government ordered bank consolidations. The two banks plan to carry through the merger by October 31 this year.

Gas explosion kills 46 Chinese miners

A gas blast ripped through the Xiayukou mine in the northern Chinese province of Shaanxi on April 21, killing 46 miners. Four miners from the 52-strong crew underground at the time survived and two are still missing.

The privately owned mine is located 100 kilometres from another mine where 38 miners perished in an explosion at the beginning of April. The entire area is known for its high gas deposits making mining, particularly under China's lax safety standards, extremely hazardous. The Xiayukou mine was operating illegally but the provincial authorities had ignored this.

The provincial mining bureau has now ordered the suspension of work at all mines located in the area while an investigation is conducted. However, previous official investigations have failed to produce any real improvement in safety conditions or their enforcement. Numerous government officials either have stakes in the mines or are bribed to overlook regulation breaches.

Demonstrations in Indonesia over murder of two strikers

Workers from PT Kadera AR Indonesia and about 80 representatives of several non-governmental organisations marched through Jakarta to the police headquarters on April 23 to demand that the police step-up their investigations into the murder of two workers by company-hired thugs on March 29.

The 500 thugs attacked 400 striking workers occupying the factory grounds in East Jakarta. The two workers, Kimun Effendi and Rachmat Hidayat, sustained fatal injuries from a bomb thrown by the assailants.

This is the second rally this month over the case but so far no charges have been laid and police have detained only one of five suspects.

Surya Tjandra of the Jakarta Legal Aid Institute (LBH Jakarta), who led the march, said: "The sluggish investigation process has led us to the conclusion that several police units may be involved."

Tjandra claimed that, based on information gathered from witnesses, there were two trucks loaded with police parked near the factory on the morning of the assault and also two trucks with military personnel inside the compound. The security forces did not attempt to prevent the attack.

Meanwhile, the management of PT Kadera has lodged a submission at the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration to dismiss the striking workers.

Sacked transport workers in Pakistan stage protest

Sacked workers from the Sindh Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) in Pakistan's Sindh province demonstrated outside the Press Club in Hyderabad on April 22, demanding the payment of wages owing to them when they were dismissed 16 months ago. The protestors chanted slogans condemning the government.

The protest campaign was organised by a committee formed by the former SRTC workers. A spokesman for the committee said that the company had reneged on a written agreement assuring workers that they would be paid. A spokesman for the committee said: "Now our families are starving and our children are unable to go to school as we do not have a income."

Union ends five-day bus strike in Perth

Bus drivers from three of Perth's four private bus companies ended a five-day strike on April 25 on the recommendation of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), following talks with the newly-elected Western Australia Labor government.

The union ended the strike even though none of the drivers' demands had been met. The industrial action, involving drivers from Perth Bus, Southern Coast Transit and Path Transit was part of a campaign for improved working conditions aimed at curbing fatigue and pay problems.

The industrial action had cut Perth's bus services by half. At one point PathTransit management called in police to intimidate picketing workers at its central depot. Drivers are angry that while the government criticised them for striking it has not said anything about the shameful record of the bus companies. A report from WorkSafe released this week found that PathTransit had drawn up rosters for some of its drivers that did not include any rest breaks. Last week PerthBus was issued with a prohibition notice for rostering a driver to work for 17 days straight with only one day off.

Despite the breaches, union spokesman Paul Aslan urged the companies to "take control of bus scheduling" and promised that the union "would hold meaningful discussions with the companies to sort out issues of rosters, shifts and rest breaks". Perth's buses have been privatised since 1996.

Tasmanian doctors take industrial action over pay

Salaried doctors in Tasmania's public hospital system imposed work bans April 18 to demand a 19 percent wage increase over three years. The government has offered to pay only 14 percent.

The bans initially affected surgery at the Launceston General and Royal Hobart hospitals but were lifted after the government agreed to begin discussions. The doctors also refused to bill private patients at three major hospitals. A spokesman for the doctors said that further bans could be imposed if the government refused to increase the pay offer.

New Zealand waterfront dispute continues

New Zealand's long-running waterfront dispute is set to continue after forestry company Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) and its port contractor Mainland Stevedoring pulled out of mediation talks this week.

Since November last year port workers have mounted a series of protests and pickets at South Island ports over the company's use of Mainland, which employs a casual workforce. The union has accused CHH and Mainland of attempting to casualise the waterfront industry and break down working conditions.

CHH chief executive Chris Liddell issued a statement that the company was withdrawing from mediation because the process was "futile". Liddell said that CHH and Mainland would now rely on the "protection of the law" to ensure its "right to load ships was not interfered with".

Waterfront Workers Union vice-president Phil Adams said that union members would continue to picket the ports if Mainland returned to do work. The union had entered the government-sponsored mediation talks six weeks ago and according to the mediator had come very close to a deal with CHH.

New Zealand firefighters' union seeks talks with the government

The New Zealand Firefighters Union is seeking a deal with the Labour government to end a dispute with the Fire Service over improved pay and conditions.

Last week, firefighters voted by a 94 percent majority to reject a new contract offer from the Fire Service, with 92 per cent voting in favor of industrial action, including strikes. The union's national secretary, Derek Best, said that experience had shown that "only by involving politicians" could disputes be settled.

Best, a member of the Labour Party and an aspiring politician, said that the Fire Service Commission was only the "middleman" in the negotiations. The union wanted to meet with either Internal Affairs Minister George Hawkins or State Services Minister Trevor Mallard.

Firefighters rejected the service's proposed contract because the pay component of between 6 and 9 percent failed to make up for an 11-year pay freeze. The contract also contains a number of attacks on working conditions, including a 48 percent increase in time allocated to the performance of "non-essential" duties such as cleaning.



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