Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 May 2001

Telkom workers strike in Indonesia

Thousands of workers in Central Java and Yogyakarta began a four-day strike on May 8 against the partial privatisation of the state-owned communications carrier, PT Telkom. Company assets worth $US375 million are being sold to private operator PT Indosat and job losses are expected. This is the second time within three weeks that the workers have taken strike action.

While workers were preparing for a mass demonstration outside the PT Telkom shareholders general meeting, the communications union sent a cringing message to the provincial administration of Central Java and Yogyakarta saying: “With all due respect, we apologise that we had to go on strike. We ask for your blessings for our struggle.”

Telkom workers in Jakarta are planning to demonstrate next week outside the offices of the Coordinating Minister for Economic Affairs, the Finance Ministry, the Telecommunication and Transportation Ministry and the Jakarta Stock Exchange.

Korean Telecom workers strike against restructuring

A strike by South Korea Telecom workers against plans to restructure the state-run communications company entered its second week on Monday. The restructure will result in 1,600 workers either losing their jobs or being relocated. Management announced plans to sell Telecom's information and overdue-payment sections early next year, to prepare the way for the company's eventual privatisation.

Some workers began a hunger strike on Sunday and others went to the homes of Telecom board members to lobby them to vote against the sale. Over 700 communication workers have also been occupying the lobby of Telecom's headquarters in Pundang, south of Seoul, since the strike began.

Up to 54 miners feared dead in Chinese mine blast

Up to 54 miners are believed to have been killed in a massive explosion that ripped through the Nanshan Coal Company mine in Hegang city, northeastern China. According to China's official media, nine workers are confirmed dead, while 45 others who were underground at the time of the blast are still missing. The mine is state-owned but was recently contracted out to a private coal operator.

Despite repeated promises by the government that it will act on mine safety, at least 5,300 miners perished in the country's notoriously unsafe mines last year. The carnage is continuing, with almost weekly reports of multiple deaths in cave-ins and gas explosions. Explosions at two mines in northern Shaanxi province last month claimed 84 lives. Hegang, the site of the latest explosion, has a history of mine disasters. In just two months of 1998, 105 miners died in five separate explosions.

The government has launched a campaign to shut thousands of small and illegal coal mines. This is motivated not by safety concerns however, but by a desire to cut overproduction and stop the fall of coal prices.

Indian blood bank employees ban work over several demands

Red Cross Blood Bank employees in New Delhi staged a two-hour stop work on May 8 to press for improved working conditions. The demands included the introduction of a patient care allowance (PCA), a guaranteed career progression scheme, the removal of salary anomalies and an increase in the nursing and washing allowance. The workers are also demanding a revision of the pay scale for social workers and the establishment of a pension fund.

A spokesman for the Red Cross Blood Bank Employees Association said that Blood Bank workers had been denied the same PCA paid to other government hospital and health ministry employees.

Indian aluminum workers' strike ends

On May 8, trade union leaders ended the 67-day strike by workers at Bharat Aluminum Company (BALCO). Although the management has reportedly agreed to 24 of the 25 demands put forward by the workers, the main issue, the government's move to privatise the industry, remains unsettled and will be placed before the courts.

Earlier this year the Indian government announced its plan to sell 51 percent of BALCO equity to Sterlite Industries in the country's largest sale of state assets to date. The sale of BALCO is a part of a broader government drive for an extensive privatisation of public sector enterprises.

Australian bus drivers strike over wages, safety

Over 2,000 private bus drivers in Sydney, the South Coast and Newcastle regions in New South Wales began a snap 24-hour strike at midnight on Wednesday.

The drivers called the strike after representatives from the Bus and Coach Association (BCA) walked out of negotiations with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) for a wage increase and improved safety standards. Services in the Sydney suburbs of Parramatta, Penrith, Hawkesbury and Blacktown were the worst affected, with 90 percent of private bus services not running.

The TWU had originally demanded an eight percent pay increase over three years but then reduced the claim to five percent. The BCA has refused to increase its offer of only 3.5 percent.

The safety issue raised by the drivers is the lack of security. In a recent survey, 72 percent of drivers reported they had been verbally abused, spat at or threatened with violence. Forty percent stated they had been physically attacked or robbed. One driver said: “I've been assaulted with a screwdriver, robbed, had my ribs broken and my faced punched in, all during work.”

Justice Francis Marks of the Industrial Relations Commission condemned Wednesday's action by bus drivers as “futile” and “a waste of time”. Following the condemnation, a spokesman for the bus union apologised for the strike.

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Arnotts workers protest in Melbourne

Arnotts biscuit factory workers and their supporters demonstrated outside the ceremonial joint sitting of federal parliament held in Melbourne's Exhibition Building this week. The workers were protesting against the planned closure of the company's Melbourne plant next year, at the cost of over 700 jobs.

About 100 Arnotts workers briefly blocked the main entrance of the buildings waving placards as the well-heeled guests, including past and present leading Labor Party figures, drove in. Police, including some on horseback, moved the protesters aside and formed a cordon to allow cars to pass through.

Victorian Trades Hall secretary Leigh Hubbard intervened at the demonstration to tell the protesters that “they weren't there to disrupt the celebrations”. The union has called off industrial action and is attempting to restrict opposition to calling for a boycott of Arnotts' products.

The following day, 300 workers from the Bradmill textile factory demonstrated outside the Victorian State Parliament as Prime Minister Howard inspected the Federation Guard. The workers have been demanding a meeting with Howard since the Bradmill Undare Group was placed in receivership on February 28, putting 900 jobs at risk.

Workers strike over penalty rates

Workers at the JAC self adhesive factory in the Melbourne suburb of Footscray struck on May 2 and established a 24-hour picket, after the company refused to continue negotiations on a pay dispute. The 100 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union are demanding the company honour an agreement to pay penalty rates 20 percent above normal hourly wages for working on public holidays. To date the company has refused.

Ink factory workers strike over job cuts

Workers at the SICPA ink factory in the Melbourne suburb of Altona have been on strike for over a week against the company's plan to shed 25 percent of its 50-strong production staff. The workers are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant. One worker was injured when he was struck by the manager's car.

SICPA, which manufactures ink for the printing industry, has applied to the Federal Court to level damages against union officials and the striking workers.

One worker on the picket line said: “The company used to operate one man per machine, now its one man for every three machines. With the introduction of new machinery there will be a massive increase in productivity and more jobs will go”.

New Zealand High Court grants injunction against dock workers

On May 7, the High Court in Wellington granted an injunction sought by the forestry company Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) and its port contractor, Mainland Stevedoring, against the Waterfront Workers Union.

The court has ordered the union, its members and supporters to cease disrupting the loading of CHH ships, claiming that the workers actions were infringing the two companies' “right to pursue their legitimate business”.

The injunction forbids the Waterfront Workers Union (WWU) and its members from “directing, encouraging or inducing, conspiring in or being party to any trespasses, assaults, intimidation or other conduct” which has the effect of “preventing or hindering” CHH and Mainland from carrying out their business.

CHH applied to the court last week after it walked out of government-sponsored mediation talks with the union. The talks were seeking to end the bitter five-month dispute over Mainland's use of casual labour to load logs at four South Island ports. The union claims that the companies are casualising work previously done by permanent workers, undermining safety standards and denying work to local waterside workers.

The WWU denies that there has been any violence on the part of union members during the dispute. Pickets set up to oppose Mainland's operations have been subjected to concerted intimidation and violence including baton-wielding police using flying wedge tactics to breakup picket lines. Many workers were also arbitrarily arrested.

The court's order will remain in place at least until a substantive case for damages brought by CHH and Mainland has been heard.

PNG postal workers strike over back pay

Papua New Guinean postal workers went on strike on May 4 over the non-payment of back pay. Currently Post PNG owes 500 workers more than 110,000 kina ($US36,000). At the outset of the industrial action, PNG Communication Workers Union secretary Emmanuel Kairu threatened that postal services would be closed until the salaries were paid. However, the union ended the strike two days later after management called on the union leaders “to bear with them” while they sorted out financial difficulties.

PNG teachers take legal action for entitlements

Teachers in the Eastern Highlands primary and community schools voted on May 5 to begin legal action to force the provincial government to pay 600,000 kina ($US196,000) of entitlements owing to them since 1994. The teachers are raising the funds to pay a law firm to take their case back to court.

Last year the teachers thought they had won the battle for their entitlements when in March the National Court ordered the provincial government to pay up. The National Court decision, however, provided the means for the government to delay payment further by inserting into the order the phrase “teachers will be paid their entitlements upon the availability of funds”.

Like most of the provincial authorities throughout Papua New Guinea, the Eastern Highlands government is facing acute financial problems. All of the schools in the Eastern Highlands are still awaiting their first and second quarter school fee subsidies for this year. Teachers have expressed concerns that there will be insufficient school materials and that they will have to scale back the number of classes.

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