

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 June 2001

South Korean hospital unions end strikes

The Seoul National University Hospital union ended a 13-day strike on June 25, after signing an agreement that abolishes a seniority-based severance payment system, a key management demand. The union executive voted 37 to 9 to accept an 8.23 percent wage rise and a 300 million won (\$US230,000) donation to a union fund. The union claims management has agreed to postpone any further restructuring at the hospital until 2004. The strike was ended despite the opposition of workers, some of whom are calling for the resignation of the union executive.

On June 26, the union executive at the Chonnam National University Hospital in Kwangju also ended strike action. The press reported: "Both sides agreed to scrap the controversial progressive retirement payment system". The deal includes a 5.5 percent wage rise and a donation by the hospital of 100 million won (\$77,000) donation to the union's fund. To date no agreement has been reached to end the strike at the Chungbuk University Hospital in Chongju.

On June 13, nurses and administrative staff at eight medical hospitals joined the general strike called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), but five returned to work immediately after the KCTU closed down its campaign.

Korean media workers end protracted strike

A nine-month strike by 200 producers and reporters at the Christian Broadcasting Service (CBS) ended this week when their representatives reached an agreement with management.

The company will revise its statutes to allow workers to sit on management committees and allow non-church leaders to become members of the board of directors. The deal includes a 10 percent pay increase and the company will donate 400 million won (\$308,000) to the union fund. CBS is an extreme right-wing broadcaster that was closely associated with South Korea's former military regimes.

South Korean workers call for general strike

Thousands of workers attended rallies in Seoul and Ulsan on June 23 to call for a national strike on July 5 against job losses and police violence. The rallies were organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), which called off a national strike action earlier this month.

Some 8,000 workers from the financial sector rallied on June 24 against police violence. They also demanded the introduction of the five-day working week and an end to discrimination against part-time workers. A spokesman for the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) threatened a general strike of financial sector workers in the second half of the year.

The KCTU and FKTU also held a joint press conference last week to call for an inquiry into the violent attack by police and hired thugs on striking workers at the Hyosung factory in Ulsan. South Korea's

President Kim Dae-jung responded by warning "stern action will be taken against any illegal walkout or violent demonstration".

Cambodian garment workers demand release of activist

Workers from six garment factories marched through an industrial zone outside Phnom Penh on June 25 demanding the release of a worker being detained for carrying out union activities. The workers also protested against poor working conditions and job losses.

While more than 200 garment factories opened in Cambodia after 1994, many companies are now relocating their operations to China and elsewhere, searching for even cheaper sources of labour and tougher restrictions on workers' rights. According to a government report, 20,000 garment workers have lost their jobs in the past two years, reducing the total number of employees in the industry to 160,000.

A union spokesman said that garment employers often force employees to work overtime without pay, refuse to provide time off and sometimes do not pay the minimum wage. About 80 percent of garments produced in Cambodia are exported to the United States.

Chinese workers escape slave labour conditions

Over 200 workers employed by a steel-casting factory in a free trade zone in China's Central Asian Xinjiang province have defied company security guards to escape from virtual slave labour.

A total of 867 men and women from the rural Sichuan and Guizhou provinces were recruited to work for the Xinjiang Yilizhou Iron and Steel Duty Company in January. The workers were forced to manufacture radiator parts in temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius for between 12 to 20 hours a day. Those who failed to turn up to work because of fatigue were fined and sometimes beaten.

Up to 10 single workers or five married couples were crammed into dormitory rooms of barely 13 square metres. When six workers attempted to escape in April they were caught by security guards, whipped with belts and fined. Another 14 escaped in May but were caught and beaten with steel clubs.

The 200 escaped workers have launched legal proceedings against the company and local officials claim they are investigating their allegations.

Chinese taxi drivers protest new fee

More than 1,000 taxi drivers in Hubei province, China went on strike this week in opposition to a new government fee that will cut their income by up to one third. If the fee is introduced it will mean that the 1,588 taxi drivers currently operating in the province will have to pay 30,000 yuan (\$US3,630) each for a five-year license. The drivers only earn on average 20,000 yuan a year.

The drivers are considering a street blockade of Jingzhou city after government officials refused to soften their position on the fee.

Workers strike at Bangladesh's largest port

Operations at Chittagong Port, the largest port in Bangladesh, were closed down for eight hours on June 27, after nearly 10,000 workers went on strike to protest against a government decision to allow a US company to build a \$500 million privately-owned container terminal.

On June 26, Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina announced that the government would sign an agreement with Stevedoring Services of America for the project. The government claims that the private container terminal, the first in the country, is to be built in the Bay of Bengal to ease congestion at Chittagong. Unions believe it is intended to compete with the state-run operation and will eventually be used to justify Chittagong's closure or privatisation.

Sri Lankan hospital staff demand better security

Hospital staff at the Piliyandala government hospital in Colombo staged a protest strike on June 25 to demand improvements in security, following an assault on two hospital employees by a gang of 15 men.

The gang came to the hospital in taxis and attempted to abduct a patient from one of the wards. When a number of hospital employees intervened to prevent them, they were attacked. The thugs are reportedly supporters of a local politician belonging to the ruling Peoples Alliance government.

Colombo port workers demonstrate over pay demand

Workers at the Colombo Port Authority demonstrated on June 21 and 23 to demand the payment of a salary increment. The increment is supposed to be paid every three years and the last increase was granted in 1998.

In discussions on June 17, the Southern Development Minister said he accepted the "necessity" of a salary increment but said that the amount being demanded was too high. He also called on the union to deliver increased productivity and efficiency in exchange. The unions agreed to cooperate, if the government curbed "corruption" and "wastage" at the Port.

Metroself workers maintain strike in Australia

Workers at Metroself, a Sydney company that manufactures supermarket shelving, are continuing a four-week strike and picket over the sacking of 50 of their colleagues. While the management claimed the sackings were due to a downturn in business, the workers say it was because the majority of the workforce had decided to change unions.

The day before, the job delegate had supplied management with a list of workers who had left the Australian Workers Union (AWU) and joined the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) in an attempt to get better representation.

Management has hired 55 casuals to do the work of the strikers and the AMWU has not attempted to mobilise support for the Metroself workers. AWU members are continuing to work at the plant on the instructions of their union. On June 15, the management decided to dismiss all workers who remained on strike.

Staff to stop work at major Australian banks

Over 50,000 workers employed by the National Australia Bank, Westpac and the ANZ Bank will stop work throughout Australia on June 29 over a wage claim. The workers will attend meetings to discuss plans for a series of rolling strikes in pursuit of a 7.5 percent wage increase.

The stopwork, called by the Finance Sector Union, will be the first coordinated industrial action taken by bank workers in more than a decade. The three major banks all reported record profits this year. Over the last six years, banks in Australia have cut 40,000 jobs and closed down over 2,000 branches.

Jupiter's Casino locks out workforce

Management locked out 500 gaming table workers at Jupiter's Casino on the Gold Coast for 48 hours from Friday, June 22, in retaliation for a strike that evening. The workers staged the one night stoppage to protest the slow progress in negotiations toward an enterprise work agreement, including a wage increase.

Lock out at New Zealand seafood factory

Workers at Sanford Bluff Seafood plant in New Zealand were locked out on June 26 after going on strike for one day over the refusal of the management to negotiate a multi-site work agreement. Workers at the company's other plant in Timaru also took industrial action.

A union spokesman said that workers at Sanford Bluff reported for work after the strike but management refused them entry unless they gave an assurance they would not take further industrial action. The workforce at Timaru has since walked off the job to protest the lockout at Sanford Bluff. The union said this week that it is planning to take legal action against the company.

New Zealand probation officers strike

Some 600 Community Probation Service staff throughout New Zealand walked off the job on June 26 over management's refusal to reinstate workers suspended for taking industrial action for a new work agreement. The workers have placed bans on supervising anyone on periodic detention, home detention or parole. Many workers picketed outside courthouses in the main cities during the week.

Workers at offices throughout the country, including Nelson, Christchurch, Rotorua, Te Kuiti and Greymouth, were suspended.

The Public Service Association (PSA) said it had called the limited industrial action as a "last resort" after nine months of contract negotiations failed to produce a satisfactory outcome. Late this week, following three days of strikes, the management made a renewed pay offer that the PSA said it would recommend to its members.

Waterfront union calls off port strike

The Waterfront Workers Union (WWU) called off a planned strike by 250 workers at New Zealand's main port of Auckland this week despite not having resolved a dispute over a new work agreement. Workers were due to go out for 48 hours on June 28, after striking for 24 hours last week.

According to WWU Auckland Branch President Denis Carlisle, "progress" made during the week with management was "enough to warrant the lifting of the strike notice to allow negotiators a chance to resolve the dispute".

While the union has issued a strike notice for July 9, union officials said that they hope the "goodwill" expressed by the union will be "reciprocated by the ports company".



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