

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 July 2001

Low turnout in South Korean national strike

Participation in the July 5 national strike called by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) was well down on the union's estimated turnout of 100,000. The strike was called to oppose the government's economic restructuring plans and to protest against police violence and the arrest of union leaders and activists.

While the KCTU claimed 80,000 workers took part, government sources reported only 18,000. Given that over 40,000 workers from the key motor and metal industries did not strike as expected, the true figure is likely to be around 40,000, a fraction of the federation's 620,000 strong membership. Reports indicated that thousands of workers only came out for half a day.

Last month the KCTU aborted a long-prepared national strike for wage rises and instructed member unions to seek separate deals with individual employers. The result has been a collapse in support.

Unions covering the 38,000 workers at Hyundai Motors, Korea's largest carmaker, voted on July 4 not to join the strike. More than 7,000 workers from Daewoo Shipbuilding, the world's second largest shipyard, decided not to strike, as did 20,300 workers from Hyundai Heavy Industries and workers at Hanjin Heavy Industries.

The KCTU has now appealed for a summit meeting with South Korea's president Kim Dae-jung to end what it describes as a "catastrophic confrontation" between workers and the government. This is under conditions where police attacks on strikes are continuing and warrants have been issued for the arrest of KCTU president Dan Byung-ho.

Korean tyre workers continue strike

Over 4,000 workers at Kumho Industrial plants in South Korea struck on July 3 for a pay claim. The union has agreed to an eight percent pay increase offer by the company, but workers are refusing to accept a "no-work no-pay" clause in the new work agreement. Last week workers held a series of daily four-hour rolling strikes after wage negotiations stalled.

The company claimed it had lost 6.4 billion won (\$US4.95 million) in the first two days of the strike. Kumho is the country's largest tyre maker with plants in the southwestern city of Kwangju and nearby Koksung.

Cathay Pacific pilots begin work-to-rule campaign in Hong Kong

Pilots at Cathay Pacific began a "go slow, work-to-rule" campaign on July 4 to support their claim for a new work contract and a pay increase.

The pilots will report to work at the company-appointed time of one hour and 20 minutes before a scheduled departure, instead of clocking in 20 to 30 minutes earlier. Pilots use the pre-flight time to check weather, wind, speed, fuel and weight. According to the union, strictly adherence to company standards will eventually lead to flight delays.

Pilots may also begin a "sick-out campaign"—reporting in sick just before flights are due to depart. In 1999 a similar campaign led to widespread flight disruptions for two weeks.

Philippine workers oppose Social Security System privatisation

Workers held a lunchtime rally in Davao City to condemn government plans to privatise the Social Security System (SSS). Social security staff were joined by workers from several other union and labour organisations,

including ACCESS (Alert and Concerned Employees for Better SSS), Bayan Muna, Kilusang Mayo Uno, Anak Bayan, Gabriela, Courage, Alliance of Concerned Teachers, and the Assumption School of Davao Union.

The government plans to fully privatise the SSS by 2004. A union spokesperson said the move would cost jobs in the investment, information technology and housing loan departments. He also claimed that workers' benefits would be reduced if they were transferred to a private company.

The workers plan to continue lunchtime protests and will wear black armbands at work to show they oppose privatisation. ACCESS, the campaign coordinator, is planning protests at other SSS buildings around the country.

Bangladesh port workers strike again over private container terminal

Nearly 10,000 workers at the Chittagong Port, the largest port in Bangladesh, staged a 24-hour strike on July 3, the second within seven days. The workers are protesting against the government's decision to allow US company Stevedoring Services to build a \$US500 million private container terminal.

The strike action brought operations at the port almost to a complete standstill, affecting work on at least 46 ships. Unions have threatened to call an indefinite strike on July 7 if the government does not reverse its decision. The industrial action is being organised by an alliance of 22 unions.

Health workers stop work in Western Australia

Over 1,300 health workers attended a stopwork meeting in Perth on July 4 to discuss a campaign for a 15 percent wage increase over two years, improved working conditions and permanency with job security for workers on temporary contracts.

Many workers at the meeting, including scientists, technical staff, therapists, radiographers and clerical staff, expressed anger that the newly-elected state Labor government had not yet made a pay offer even though the current enterprise agreement expires on July 19.

In a pre-election statement in February Labor had acknowledged that there was a crisis in the health system and that "health workers on the front lines should get what they deserve".

A radiographer from Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital said the government "relies on a large amount of our goodwill, including working unpaid overtime in the interests of patients". She pointed out that low wages in the hospital system, including low weekend penalty rates, had resulted in some night shift radiographer's positions not being filled for over a year.

Another radiographer from Charles Gairdner Hospital expressed concern that the HSOA (Hospital Salaried Officers Association) would try to "water down" demands in negotiations with the government and said: "We should tell the government what we want, not wait for them to tell us what they want to offer".

The meeting voted to begin a work-to-rule, carrying out only those duties specified in work contracts and for further industrial action if the

government did not agree to a wage rise by July 19.

Queensland building workers strike over unpaid work

About 70 building workers employed on a \$20 million apartment building at Kirra Beach on Queensland's Gold Coast struck on June 29. The workers are striking in support of sub-contractors who are owed hundreds of thousands of dollars by the main contractor, Jezer Constructions Group.

Michael Choi, a Labor member of the Queensland parliament, founded the company in 1991. Even though Choi resigned as a director of Jezer after he was elected, his wife is still the company board secretary. The workers say they are hostile that a Labor MP is associated with a company "that treats workers in a shoddy manner".

Helenvale contractor Ed Ahern said that the workers had previously walked off the job in February because Jezer had not paid subcontractors in full or on time.

Australian bank workers campaign for wage claim

Over 70,000 bank workers employed at the Westpac Bank, National Australia Bank and the ANZ Bank are holding rolling stoppages to demand a 15 percent wage increase over two years and improved working conditions. The banks have offered workers an eight percent increase over two years. Bank workers have also raised concerns about queue lengths, branch closures and staffing levels.

Stopwork meetings this week in Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, Launceston, Cairns and Warwick in Queensland closed bank branches for over two hours. More than 300 workers from 60 branches in the Hunter Valley in New South Wales struck on June 29.

Amcor workers continue strike without union support

Workers at Amcor packaging are continuing to picket two of the company's three Melbourne plants over workplace health and safety breaches. The strike action began last month after a worker at Amcor's Brooklyn factory lost his leg in a workplace accident. The man was injured when he was crushed between an automatic trolley and a workbench. According to workers, the Brooklyn site manager has breached several health and safety laws since he was placed in charge of the factory three years ago.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) initially supported the strike action but withdrew support after a Federal court hearing last week banned any industrial action by the Amcor workers. The workers are now conducting strike action illegally and could be fined or imprisoned.

Fiji power workers give notice of strike

The Fiji Electricity Authority and Allied Workers Union lodged a 28-day notice of intention to strike this week after management deferred a meeting on June 29 to discuss a log of claims, including a cost of living wage rise due to be paid on August 1.

A meeting of 440 electricity workers last month voted to give the union executive a mandate to call industrial action if progress on the wages issue stalled. The workers are also demanding the provision of safety footwear, an electricity concession, improved retirement and superannuation benefits, and payment of unused sick leave.

New Zealand probation workers end six-day strike

Striking probation workers in New Zealand returned to work on July 3 after the Public Service Association (PSA) reopened discussions with the Community Probation Service (CPS) over the suspension of 50 staff. The staff members were suspended early last week after taking industrial action during a pay dispute.

On June 29, the country's 600 probation workers overwhelmingly voted to reject a new pay settlement recommended to them by the PSA and declared that they would not return to work until the suspended workers were reinstated.

The Probation Service this week said it had agreed to the reinstatement and would continue negotiations over pay. PSA national secretary Richard

Wagstaff praised the CPS for agreeing to "get round the table" and said that any solution would involve "talking and engaging".

The contract covering workers in the probation service expired in November. When the contract was originally negotiated in 1998, the PSA leadership claimed it was a forward-looking agreement that promised pay increases based on "competencies". Very few workers reached the competency standards and the majority have not received any pay rise in the past two years.

Strike at NZ fish processing plant enters second week

The strike by workers at Sanford's Timaru and Bluff fish processing plants in New Zealand's South Island has entered its second week. About 100 staff are picketing both factories. Police stepped up their presence at the picket at the Bluff plant on Tuesday after 40 workers tried to stop shipments of fish from entering the plant.

Workers at the Bluff site were locked out last week after a 24-hour strike for a collective contract for the two plants and a pay rise. The Timaru workers went out in support. It is the first strike action ever taken by Sanford workers in the South Island.

The company made a \$NZ54 million profit last year but Sanford workers remain the lowest paid in the industry. A union survey released last week showed that Sanford was paying workers up to \$75 a week less than other fish processing companies. Workers at the Bluff site are currently paid \$9.40 per hour, the lowest pay rate in the Sanford group.

NZ journalists strike as owner visits paper

New Zealand Herald journalists walked off the job again on July 4 to coincide with a visit by Anthony O'Reilly, the Irish owner of the Wilson and Horton publishing company, New Zealand's second largest newspaper publisher. About 100 journalists and other editorial staff from throughout the North Island struck and formed picket lines outside the *Herald's* head office in Auckland.

The strike is part of an ongoing dispute over the company's refusal to negotiate a new collective employment agreement. The company wants to eliminate 29 senior positions and is demanding that journalists carry out a range of additional tasks and be prepared to work in other areas for no extra pay.

This week's walkout follows a series of strikes by printers and journalists around the country protesting against plans by both the main newspaper companies, INL and Wilson and Horton, to break down collective contracts and attack existing conditions of employment.



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