Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 July 2001

Thousands join Chinese miners' protest over unpaid wages

The major railway line connecting the north-eastern Chinese provinces of Jilin and Heilongjiang was blocked on July 9 by thousands of coal miners, their families and retired workers demanding the payment of outstanding wages and pensions. An express passenger service and several cargo trains were delayed.

Around 10,000 protesters converged on the Jishu township station in Jilin province early in the morning and around 3,000 to 4,000 began a blockade of the line. More than 500 riot police were called in but made no move to clear the workers.

An official at the Shulan Mine Industry Bureau admitted that some workers had not been paid for 30 months. He told the media: "We don't have any money because we can't sell our coal". But workers claim that corruption within the bureau's management body is one of the reasons they have not been paid.

Unrest is widespread among Chinese coal miners. Thousands of mines have been bankrupted or privatised, costing tens of thousands of workers their jobs, wages and pensions.

Cathay sacks Hong Kong pilots to break dispute

On July 10, Cathay Pacific sacked 49 pilots in an attempt to force an end to a dispute by cabin crew seeking improved wages and working conditions. The management is also demanding that the remaining 1,450 pilots accept the latest company pay offer.

The sackings include 23 captains and 26 first officers, bringing the number of staff dismissed since the dispute last week to 52. Among the 49 sacked was the pilot's union secretary and currently involved in negotiations with the company. The Hong Kong Aircrew Officers' Association condemned the terminations as "a shameful and disgraceful act".

Cathay Pacific's director of corporate development Tony Tyler admitted that the company had begun "a review of pilots' records" to establish grounds for the dismissals "a few days ago when the union made it clear it was going to escalate industrial action".

To date the pilots have imposed a "work-to-rule", showing up to pre-flight briefings no earlier than 30 minutes before the official scheduled time. Some 173 flights have been cancelled and more than 290 have been delayed since the union started its action, despite the company chartering aircraft.

The company's latest pay offer is only 9 percent, down from the 10.5 percent offered in negotiations in June.

Korean synthetic textile industry strike continues

A strike by workers at the Taekwang Industrial synthetic textile unit in South Korea entered its second month on July 10. The strike erupted over management's plan to force 250 workers to take early retirement on the grounds that the plant was no longer competitive.

According to management, losses from the prolonged walkout have snowballed to over 200 billion won ($US154 million). Four meetings between the management and union have failed to find a resolution.

Government employees in Bangladesh stage 72-hour strike

Government employees and primary teachers in Bangladesh went on strike for 72 hours on July 7 for improved working conditions. The strike action affected a range of public offices, hospitals and educational institutions.

The strikers organised a sit-in demonstration and mass rally on July 9, the final day of the strike. The president of the Liaison Committee of Bangladesh Government Employees Coordination Council said the strike erupted because "the government did not pay any attention to the demands of the government employees and teachers".

Bangladesh port strike called off

Union leaders have called off a planned 48-hour strike by workers at Chittagong port to protest against government approval for the country's first privately-owned container terminal. The strike, due to begin on July 9, was abandoned after talks between an alliance of 22 trade unions and the Port Authority. Details of the negotiations are not yet known.

When the government announced at the beginning of July that it would allow a major US firm to build the terminal, workers staged a series of strikes to oppose the decision. These included a 36-hour strike by over 20,000 workers on July 5, which affected 65 ships carrying 1.3 million tonnes of cargo.

Workers fear the new $US500 million private container port, which will be capable of handling 800,000 containers annually, will lead to the closure of Chittagong port which has only half the capacity.

Pakistan power workers demand compensation for electrocuted fellow worker

Thousands of workers employed at the Ghazi Barotha Project, the largest power project in Pakistan, have been on strike since July 6 to demand a 500,000 rupee compensation payment for the family of a fellow worker electrocuted at the site.

Dong Feng Electric, a Chinese firm, employed the worker. Dong Feng has tried to avoid paying compensation by claiming that he was not killed by an electric shock but died of heart failure.

Australian postal workers call for industrial action

Postal workers throughout New South Wales are threatening

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industrial action over Australia Post's decision to contract out work done by three permanent workers at the Stockton Delivery Centre near Newcastle, north of Sydney. The workers will be redeployed to part-time positions at the Newcastle mail centre.

Nearly 200 delegates from the Communication Electrical and Plumbing union met on July 12 to discuss a campaign of industrial action. Union branch secretary Jim Metcher said rallies are being planned in the coming weeks to demand reinstatement of the permanent positions at Stockton.

Submarine construction workers take strike action

Over 250 workers employed by the Australian Submarine Corporation at Osborne, in Adelaide, struck for three days on July 13, after negotiations on a new enterprise work agreement and improved conditions broke down.

The workers, including electricians, fitters and welders, are demanding that the company substantially increase its latest 3.5 percent pay offer.

Water workers strike over outsourcing

About 50 workers employed by Central Highlands Water in Ballarat, Victoria, walked off the job this week in a dispute with management over staffing.

The workers established a picket line outside the Authority's headquarters in protest over staff estimates in a consultants' review of the organisation. Workers believe that the company is understaffed with vacant positions not being replaced and many functions outsourced.

Protest supports locked-out New Zealand workers

On July 6, a 200-strong protest march by locked-out fish processing workers and their supporters was held in Bluff, New Zealand's southernmost town. The Sanford fish processing workers were locked out last week after staging a 24-hour strike to demand a multi-site agreement and pay rise.

Bluff workers are the lowest paid in the Sanford group, earning an average of $9.40 an hour. They want their wages increased and conditions improved in line with those applying at the Timaru site. Staff from Sanford's Timaru processing plant have joined locked-out workers on picket lines outside the Bluff factory.

Sanford is insisting that all of its six South Island plants remain on separate site agreements. According to management, several single site agreements have already been negotiated this year with the Service and Food Workers Union.

PNG nurses demand payment of outstanding salaries

Nurses at the Modilon General Hospital in Madang began a sit-in strike this week to demand hospital management pay them outstanding allowances and salaries. The payments include higher duty allowances, a two percent cost-of-living adjustment and leave and resumption pay.

The Madang Nurses Association and the Madang Public Employees Association are supporting the sit-in. The hospital's outpatient department has been forced to close.

PNG Bank employees campaign to secure entitlements

Over 2,000 Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation (PNGBC) employees will vote this week on national strike action. The workers, members of the PNGBC National Staff Association, demanded industrial action after the bank management failed to implement a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) negotiated with the union on June 20.

The management had also failed to respond to a list of disputed matters handed to them on June 26. These included demands that the bank write-off all housing loans owed by union members, a 7 percent wage rise backdated to January 1 and a 25 percent staff shareholding in the PNGBC when it is privatised. The list also calls for a better retrenchment package with entitlements taxed at only 2.5 percent.

Bank management has refused to negotiate, claiming the demands are "unrealistic" and would send the PNGBC broke. The union has applied to the National Court to force management to implement the MOU.

Sheraton hotel workers end strike

A strike by 200 employees at the Sheraton Resort at Denarau in Nadi, Fiji ended on July 12, after discussions between the union and the management. The workers, who are members of the National Union of Hotel and Catering Employees, struck on July 10 over the management's decision to ignore seniority when it recently appointed a new reservations manager.

The strikers claimed that at least two workers with years more service than the employee selected by management were ignored. They were also protesting over a management decision to dock a day's pay from workers who attended a union meeting last month.

In a joint statement, the union and Sheraton Resorts said discussions held under the auspices of the Fiji Hotel Association and the Fiji Trades Union Congress "were successfully concluded". The statement did not provide any details about the agreement.

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