Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 July 2001

Hong Kong pilots continue action

Cathay Pacific pilots in Hong Kong voted on July 18 to continue their two-week work-to-rule action for a pay increase and improvements in rostering arrangements. About 170 pilots marched from Hong Kong's Star Ferry pier to join colleagues meeting at the Mariners' Club in Kowloon.

The meeting also demanded the reinstatement of 52 pilots dismissed by Cathay Pacific management last week. Some of those sacked are members of the union's negotiating team.

John Findlay, general secretary of the Hong Kong Aircrew Officers Association, told the media that the industrial action would continue indefinitely, but said the meeting had not discussed whether to escalate the campaign.

Although Cathay Pacific chairman James Hughes-Hallett claimed the airline's services had "returned to a level that gives confidence to our customers", flights are being cancelled or delayed for up to 90 minutes.

Indonesian aircraft workers strike for pay increase

Over 9,000 workers at PT Dirgantara Indonesia, the state-owned aircraft manufacturer, went on strike in Bandung on July 17 to demand an increase in their base salary. The workers are also demanding removal of the company's director, Jusman S. Djalal, for "failing to eradicate corporate graft and corruption".

The company has rejected the pay demand and claims it can only pay current salaries for the next six months. Jusman said that the company had been hit badly by the economic downturn. "We just made it out of the intensive care unit and still have to repay the company's past debts," he said.

The Workers Communication Forum, which is organising the strike, said that Dirgantara could easily fund the pay increase from the profits of its various subsidiary companies. The strike has held up an order for two CN-235 aircraft ordered by the South Korean Ministry of Defense.

Indonesian bus drivers oppose rental increase

Forty-two bus crews from the Mayasari bus company in Jakarta struck on July 17 to protest over an increase in vehicle rental fees. The strike ended within two hours after the company promised to discuss the drivers' complaint.

The company increased daily rental fees from 250,000 rupiah (US$22) to 300,000 rupiah. Striking crews, who work the Blok M-Pulogadung route, said the rental increase cut into their earnings. Mayasari is the largest of the 14 bus companies in the city, with about 900 vehicles.

Indian teachers demand union recognition

Primary school teachers in southern Indian state of Karnataka staged a dharna (sit-down protest) in front of the Mahatma Gandhi monument in Bangalore to demand the state government recognise their union, the Karnataka State Primary School Teachers' Association (KSPWTA). The teachers also want their salaries paid on time, crèches for their own children and the establishment of centres to allow staff to register work complaints.

Filipino Social Security employees campaign against privatisation

On July 17, Social Security System (SSS) employees in the cities of Bacolod and Baguio began a series of lunchtime protests to oppose the privatisation of the SSS.

In Bacolod workers carried placards declaring, "No to SSS privatisation" and "Nanagas [SSS president] Resign". In Baguio demands were also raised for Nanagas to step down.

Jobs at the SSS are being outsourced as the first step in the government's plan for full privatisation by 2004. National Employees Union representative Sheila Vasquez, said that outsourcing would mean that employees will lose their security of tenure and will no longer be covered by civil service rules.

The union also fears that the workers' social security fund will be plundered if handed over to private

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enterprise. Every month, 23 million Filipino workers contribute 600 to 1,000 pesos ($US12 to $20) from their wages for social security. The SSS currently holds 185 billion pesos ($US3.7 billion) in deposits.

Australian nurses take action over staffing

Over 1,500 nurses met at the Dallas Brooks Hall in Melbourne on July 17 and voted to strictly enforce nurse-patient ratios in public hospitals across the state of Victoria in an effort to force the government to hire more staff.

Australian Nurses Federation Victorian secretary Belinda Morieson claimed that while the government had recruited 2,300 nurses since August last year, over 2,600 were needed to maintain the one nurse to every four patients ratio required in acute and sub-acute wards.

Despite the existing shortages, the government intends to shift 1,000 nurses out of their existing assignments to provide staff for 60 nursing home beds at the Austin Hospital and Caulfield Medical Centre, as well as a 15-bed short-stay facility at the Royal Melbourne Hospital. The ANF has warned the government that if it moves nurses to cover the new services it will lead to more bed closures.

In other action by Victorian health workers, carers of intellectually disabled people held a stop work on July 19 to demand an 8 percent pay rise, improved health and safety, reduced work loads and more funding for client programs. The workers have been offered a 3 percent pay rise by the government.

Western Australian health workers continue protest for wage rise

Professional, administrative, clerical and technical health service staff in public hospitals in Western Australia (WA) are continuing a work-to-rule campaign they began last week for a 15 percent wage rise over two years and improved working conditions.

The WA Labor government has refused to hold talks with the Hospital Salaried Officers Association while industrial action continues. The government announced this week that 1,500 jobs would be cut in the public health system over the next period, as part of axing 2,500 over the next two years.

Bluebirds Foods workers strike for better pay

Workers employed by Bluebirds Foods in New Zealand have gone on strike for a new collective contract, including better pay and redundancy provisions. About 300 striking workers in Auckland were joined last week by 50 from the company's Washdyke plant in Timaru on the South Island.

The Washdyke workers initially planned to return to work on July 17. They decided to stay out indefinitely after the company refused to discuss their contract claims.

New Zealand fish processing workers hold protest march

Some 200 fish processing workers and their families marched through the southern New Zealand rural centre of Timaru on July 14. The protest was part of a month-long struggle by workers at Sanford Fisheries for a multi-site contract with improved pay rates, to cover Sanford's two processing plants at Timaru and Bluff.

Sanford workers at the Bluff site were locked out two weeks ago after an initial 24-hour walkout, while 70 workers at the Timaru factory have been on strike since June 25 in support. The Bluff workers are currently the lowest paid in the industry, earning about $9.40 per hour.

PNG Bank workers walk out

Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation (PNGBC) employees walked off the job on July 16 over a range of issues stemming from the government's plan to privatise the bank. The union is demanding no loss of conditions for redeployed workers, job security and shares for workers in the privatised entity.

On July 19, PNG Chief Justice Sir Arnold Amet refused to grant an injunction to force the strikers to return to work. Amet said he would not issue a return to work order while a meeting between the parties involved in the dispute was still pending. The Court also dismissed an application by the PNGBC Staff Association to stop the sale of the bank until their log of claims was settled.

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