

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 August 2001

Thousands of hospital workers in Sri Lanka join “sick-out”

Three thousand hospital workers throughout Sri Lanka reported in sick on July 31 and August 1 as part of an industrial campaign for the upgrading of supplementary training to a diploma course level and an increase in “call duty” allowance. The workers, including X-ray technicians, pharmacists, physiotherapists and medical laboratory technologists, are also demanding that the government appoint a new director for medical services.

The “sick-out” action was scheduled to continue but trade union officials called off the agitation, claiming the health minister had agreed to the demands. Many workers remain skeptical that the minister will honor his latest commitment. The government had given similar assurances in February and May after workers threatened to go on strike but nothing was done.

Indian teachers launch hunger strike

Nearly 50 members of the Haryana Rajkiya Adhyapak Sangh (a teachers union) in Ambala began a hunger strike on July 31 to demand the elimination of irregularities in teachers’ salaries and promotions and the withdrawal of an Haryana state government order placing primary schools under the control of the local government body. The teachers are receiving support from Haryana Roadways and Electricity Department Association members and other workers throughout the state.

Junior doctors continue action in India

Ten thousand junior doctors in the Indian state of Karnataka are continuing an indefinite strike begun on July 23. While most pre-planned surgery has been canceled, doctors treating emergency cases have been exempted from the strike.

The strikers are demanding that the government introduce an allowance for junior doctors involved in post-graduate training courses. A doctors’ spokesman warned this week that the strike would continue until the government responded positively.

Philippines union office bombed

Two M-203 grenades were fired into the office of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) near the city of General Santos on Monday night. Although no one was injured, sections of the building were severely damaged.

The bombing has been linked to the dispute between the KMU and Dole-Philippines (Dolefil), an American-owned pineapple processing company, over a stalled collective bargaining agreement. Dolefil workers went on strike after the company refused to grant a 125 peso (\$US2.50) per day wage increase and a 30,000-peso bonus when the new contract is signed.

KMU coordinator Felix Fernandez said: “[T]he bombing was meant to harass and pressure the labourers to stop their protests”. The company has denied any involvement in the bombing and said they were considering resuming negotiations with union.

Filipino social security employees continue anti-privatisation protests

Workers employed in the Social Security System office (SSS) in Bacolod staged a four-hour rally this week to oppose the privatisation of SSS. They called for the resignation of SSS president Vitaliano Naagas,

who wants to outsource the information technology and identification card function centres as well as the company’s pension fund and real estate portfolio.

The Civil Service Commission claims the campaign is illegal and SSS management have threatened legal action against the workers. Rally coordinator Shiela Vasques from Alert and Concerned Employees for Better SSS told local press that protest actions would continue until Naagas resigns.

Indonesian paper workers fight for pay increase

Five hundred workers at PT Indah Kiat Pulp & Paper and PT Lontar Papyrus, subsidiaries of Asia Pulp & Paper (APP), went on strike for two and a half days last week. The mills are located in the Perawang Riau, Tebing Tinggi and Jambi provinces of Sumatra. The workers are demanding an increase in their pay rate, which is currently just above the government-set minimum wage for the region.

The company’s chief financial officer claimed he would begin discussions with the unions this week to resolve the dispute “without further disruption to the operation of the mills”. But management has already made clear that it will not consider a pay rise because of APP’s ongoing financial crisis.

The Sinar Mas group, Indonesia’s second largest conglomerate, controls APP. It is currently undergoing a massive restructuring with more than \$12.2 billion debts. The Jakarta stock exchange suspended trading in Indah Kiat and another APP unit, PT Pabrik Kertas Tjiwi Kimia, on July 13, after they failed to submit financial reports for the year 2000 on time.

Hong Kong pilots reject company offer

Cathay Pacific pilots in Hong Kong have overwhelmingly rejected the company’s new contract offer. The pilots have been involved in a “go slow” industrial campaign over the last three weeks. Under the proposed deal, standard work hours would increase from 585 hours a year to 900 hours.

The company offer also demanded shorter rest periods, ending the provision of bunks for pilots on medium haul flights, and a reduction of pilot crews from four to three on flights to Auckland and Anchorage. The offer did not address wage and benefit increases sought by the pilots.

A union spokesman said that pilots were outraged over management attempts to change working conditions without consultation and in breach of labour contract conditions. Around 85 percent of pilots have written letters of protest. While the company promised this week not to take action against pilots who refused to sign the deal, it has already sacked 52 pilots since the dispute began.

Chinese officials attempt to cover up tin mine disaster

Up to 200 miners were killed when an underground tin mine flooded in China’s southwestern Guangxi province on July 16, according to an eyewitness. Water rushed into the mine when the workers broke through an adjacent water-filled mine shaft.

National and local officials have denied these claims but according to the *Shanghai Youth Daily* rescuers have already recovered about 70 bodies. The newspaper reported that the families of dead miners had been

given 20,000 yuan (\$2,500) by the mine's private owner to keep quiet about the accident. Government officials also blocked information on the accident from surfacing for over a week, claiming earlier reports were "completely fabricated".

Auto-plants begin mass stand-downs in Australia

Major auto plants across Australia are moving to stand down thousands of workers because of a weeklong stoppage by 350 workers at vehicle steering and suspension component manufacturer TriStar in Sydney.

TriStar supplies components to all four Australian vehicle manufacturers employing a total of 25,000 workers. General Motors-Holden has already halted production at its Adelaide factory and stood down 4,000 workers on full pay. Ford will close its Melbourne plant within days and Mitsubishi and Toyota are expected to face acute parts shortages by next week if the dispute continues. If production ceases at the major plants it will impact on all component manufacturers and trigger further stand-downs.

TriStar general manager Vincent Kong has asked the Industrial Relations Commission to order a return to work on the grounds that the dispute "is damaging the economy". The Industrial Relations Commission hearing is still in process.

The TriStar dispute is part of a national campaign by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). The union is demanding companies pay a 1.5 percent payroll levy into its Manusafe fund, set up to ensure workers' entitlements—holiday, long service and redundancy pay—are paid in cases of company bankruptcy. According to the union, 900 AMWU members have lost a total of \$9 million in entitlements in company bankruptcies in the last nine months.

Workers at three other vehicle component manufacturers in South Australia are also in dispute over the claim and could take industrial action soon. Workers at Maintrain, which services trains for the NSW state rail network, have been on strike for four weeks over the issue and employees at white goods manufacturer Electrolux held a 24-hour stoppage recently. The union has now lodged Manusafe claims with BHP, OneSteel and Qantas.

GM-Holden workers hold national stop-work meetings

Thousands of car workers employed by General Motors-Holden attended stop work meetings called by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union last week. An existing work agreement expires on August 14 and negotiations for a new one have broken down.

Workers walked off the job at the company's Fisherman's Bend plant in Victoria and at its Elizabeth factory in Adelaide. Holden workers also met in the Dandenongs, east of Melbourne, and Lang Lang in regional Victoria. They are demanding an 8 percent pay increase over three years and greater job security. According to the union, the company has reduced the workforce at Fisherman's Bend by a third.

Disability carers take strike action

About 150 carers at Melbourne's Kew Cottages walked off the job on July 30 and marched to the centre's administration office over a new work agreement. The industrial action is part of a statewide campaign by carers in Victoria for an 8 percent pay increase and improved staff training. Workers at Kew Cottages care for 450 intellectually disabled residents.

The Health and Community Services Union is also seeking extra government funding for "client programs" and has demanded that it address recruitment and retention issues, health and safety concerns and excessive workloads.

Major problems in the health system emerged after the previous Liberal government slashed thousands of jobs and employed unqualified people on low wages. The present Bracks Labor government has refused to acknowledge the need for more skilled staff and improved training.

Nestlé workers threatened with plant closure

Locked-out Nestlé workers at the Echuca yoghurt factory were told by

the company last week that it is considering closing the multi-million dollar plant and relocating to South Australia. The company claims it has received a lucrative offer from the South Australian government.

The 130 workers were locked out on June 19 after refusing management demands that they accept radical changes to rostering, including a seven-day working week. The company's proposal also included the introduction of flexible hours to suit production needs. Production at the factory is worth around \$85 million a year.

Amcor workers continue strike for safety and wages

More than 500 workers at Amcor plants in Victoria and New South Wales are continuing a month-long strike over safety issues and a pay claim. The strike erupted when a worker at the Brooklyn plant in Victoria was seriously injured and lost his leg. Amcor manufactures cardboard boxes for major food companies. The dispute is expected to go before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission next week.

Garbage collectors strike for wage increase

City Council garbage workers in Maitland went on strike on July 31 over a new enterprise work agreement. The workers are demanding a 6.5 percent annual wage rise over three years, an increase in annual holiday leave from four to five weeks and a reduction in their daily workload. Local government officials report that the stoppage has sharply disrupted garbage collection in the Maitland district.

Rallies support striking New Zealand fish processing workers

On July 27, supporters of striking Sanford fish processing workers picketed the company's head office in Auckland. About 100 process workers at Sanford's Timaru and Bluff factories have been in dispute for six weeks, demanding a pay rise and a multi-site contract to cover the two South Island plants.

While Sanford is the second biggest fishing company in New Zealand and posted a \$NZ54 million profit last year, its South Island workers are the lowest paid in the industry, earning about \$9.50 per hour.

At the start of the dispute, Bluff workers walked off the job for 48 hours and were locked out by Sanford management. Workers at the Timaru plant then struck in support of their co-workers. After two weeks the Department of Work and Income decided to discontinue paying hardship benefits to the striking workers.

The NZ Council of Trade Unions launched a nationwide appeal for financial assistance for the Sanford workers this week but has not planned any supporting industrial action. Secondary strikes and boycotts remain illegal under industrial laws passed last year by the Labour government.

PNG bank strike enters its third week

Over 900 striking employees of the Papua New Guinea Banking Corporation (PNGBC) refused to return to work last week after talks between the bank management, the government's Privatisation Commission and the PNGBC National Staff Association failed to agree on the terms of a union-sponsored Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).

The striking workers' pay has been stopped and their employment suspended. An application by the bank to the National Court to allow it to sack the striking workers failed when Chief Justice Sir Arnold Amet said that the PNGBC management was not making genuine efforts to address the issues raised by the strike.

In the latest MOU proposal the union has demanded management continue negotiations for an improved retrenchment package and other allowances and that all outstanding superannuation entitlements are paid to fund manager Finance Pacific with accrued interest. PNGBC management responded to union demands by sending termination letters to the striking workers. Union president Luke Elijah said the workers would continue their strike action until the arbitration tribunal meets this week.



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