

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 May 2002

South Korean government threatens crackdown on strikes

Over 31,000 metal workers and chemical employees in South Korea struck for four hours this week over pay and working hours. The strike is among a series of actions planned by up to 70,000 workers before the World Soccer Cup finals begin in Seoul on May 31.

President Kim Dae-jung has demanded the unions guarantee there will be no industrial action until the World Cup is over. On May 21, the prime minister's office issued a statement warning that "the government will deal sternly with illegal strikes and collective actions".

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions has worked for months to shut down all industrial action before the event begins. It ended the recent power workers' strike against privatisation, despite the fact that hundreds of workers were victimised during the dispute. A number of unions, including the hotel workers union, have signed no-strike agreements for the duration of the World Cup.

Indonesian truck drivers attacked by police

Police fired shots into the air to break up a rally by truck drivers in Bandung this week. The drivers were demonstrating against illegal levies charged by the police on trucks using the Padalarang and Sadang toll road. The drivers say that the levies, ranging between 50,000 rupiah (\$US5.5) and 200,000 rupiah, are more than the official toll charge and the truck companies will not reimburse them. One driver, Deden Fachrurozi, said: "If we have to pay the levies ourselves, we cannot afford to eat."

Police claim they intervened when the truck drivers clashed with "local residents" supposedly angry that drivers were causing traffic congestion. However, those attacking the drivers are believed to be thugs hired by the police to stage a provocation. At least three truck drivers were injured in the clashes, with one rushed to Sartika Asih Hospital suffering serious wounds.

This week's demonstration is the second organised this month by the Indonesian Port Transportation Labor Union.

Thai textile company victimises workers

Thailand's Labour Court this week gave the go ahead for Thai Durable Textiles to terminate 13 union members without compensation. The textile workers were suspended by the company, along with 48 others, for organising a campaign against the unfair dismissal of 390 workers. The company is suing the 61 workers for the losses it suffered during industrial action.

Indian hospital staff strike against police assault

Doctors and medical staff at the K.R. Hospital in Mysore, Karnataka, struck on May 18 in protest against a police assault on hospital employees. The police sub-inspector at the Srirangapatna Police Station, Arun Gowda, accused duty doctors of delaying treatment for accident victims when he visited the hospital on May 17.

Gowda manhandled and slapped a number of junior doctors, before threatening to shoot them with his revolver. He also tried to strangle one doctor with a stethoscope and assaulted a hospital attendant. According to doctors, the sub-inspector barged into an operating theatre and abused them while they were attempting to treat patients.

Addressing a press conference on the incident, Medical Officers Association Joint Secretary Dr. Rohan denied the alleged delays in treatment, stating that, "in the event of mass casualties we attend to the patients whose conditions are the most critical". He condemned the policeman's attack as an "insult to the entire medical fraternity" and demanded Gowda's suspension.

The police have so far refused to register the doctors' complaint and threatened a counter-complaint against them for "tarnishing" the reputation of the police. Mandya district Superintendent of Police promised to take action over the incident within 48 hours following the May 18 strike.

Indian brick workers on strike for wage increase

Hundreds of brick workers in Fardikot, India, have taken strike action over the last two weeks to demand a pay rise. The workers, who allege that their wages are less than the minimum fixed by the Labour Commissioner, have attempted to block scab contractors entering the plant. This week hundreds of strikers surrounded the Fardikot police station and forced the release of 22 arrested strikers.

Sri Lankan workers strike in several industries

Sri Lankan hotel workers have begun a campaign for 14 demands, including a minimum monthly salary of 8,000 rupees (\$US85), confirmation of permanency for casual workers and an end to the deduction "breakage" money from the workers' "service charge payment". The Union of Hotel Workers called a demonstration on May 23 outside the Labour Secretariat in Colombo and has launched a poster campaign.

Hospital workers struck at the Kandy Hospital on May 20 to demand authorities pay salary arrears that have accumulated over the last five years. Hospital management has refused to pay the overdue amount despite repeated requests by the joint union committee at the hospital.

Bus drivers and conductors on the island have also taken industrial action to demand the government repair the Elpitiya Palawatte road, about 75 kilometres south of Colombo. Drivers are concerned that unless it is fixed there will be serious accidents. The strike halted operations by nine private and two state-owned buses. Workers plan further strike action if the road is not repaired.

Australian union workers strike

About 300 office staff employed by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) voted this week for a half-day national strike after rejecting the union's attempt to force them to trade-off working conditions in return for a pay rise. The trade-offs affect annual leave, long service leave and rostered days off.

Thw workers have not had their enterprise wage agreement renewed since 1998. Union secretary Wendy Caird dismissed the strike vote as "one of those things that happens" in the "cut and thrust of bargaining". The CPSU is one of Australia's largest unions and covers Commonwealth government workers. Over the last decade it has presided over massive job losses and the wholesale destruction of working conditions. Since 1996, 100,000 federal public service jobs have been axed.

Power workers strike over threatened jobs cut

Around 50 mine maintenance workers employed by Yallourn Energy went on strike on May 21 in protest over the possible destruction of 30 jobs. The one-day strike followed a Yallourn Energy announcement that its mine maintenance work would be outsourced to Silcar contracting company next month.

The company's outsourcing plan was facilitated by the unions, which ended a long running dispute by maintenance workers in December last year and signed off on a new enterprise agreement. The deal allows the company to shed half its maintenance workforce and increase the number of contractors. In return, the unions were guaranteed coverage of the new contract labour.

An Electrical Trades Union spokesman said the unions were not considering any serious action over job losses and that the latest strike was "just a protest" by workers "over the way Yallourn has been treating them".

Respite care workers walk out

Residential care officers for Disability Services Queensland (DSQ) in Toowoomba, Ipswich and Brisbane went on strike on May 20 for 24 hours. The workers are protesting against low staff levels and inadequate training procedures at respite centres, in particular, training in handling patients with behavioral problems. Workers from Toowoomba traveled to Brisbane on May 23 to rally outside the main DSQ office.

Labor government locks out building workers

Construction and maintenance workers employed on the Queensland government's Q-Building project were locked out on May 21, following a breakdown in enterprise bargaining negotiations. Earlier, 300 workers marched to parliament house and held a rally to demand parity in wages, working hours and superannuation benefits with government office workers. The government has offered to increase the wage rate for construction workers but it still remains two percent below that paid to other state employees.

At the same time, state rail workers throughout Queensland voted to take strike action later this month in protest against government plans to streamline freight rail operations. Workers believe that the restructuring will result in massive job losses.

Lake Creek meat workers out again

Meat workers at the Lake Creek abattoir in Rockhampton, north Queensland went on strike on May 23. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) has accused the plant's owner, the Consolidated Meat Group (CMG), of issuing "misinformation" concerning the agreement struck two weeks ago to end a five-month lockout.

The workers were locked out in December when the company refused to restart operations after the Christmas shutdown and demanded cuts to wages and working conditions. The union now claims that CMG is offering to pay only \$19.47 an hour to level one employees, not the \$20.55 it previously agreed to.

AMIEU assistant secretary Brian Crawford said the union had given the company "significant concessions". These included wage reductions, six-day production and the right of the company to demand unlimited overtime and extra days working. Under the agreement, Lake Creek workers were also forced to accept federal award conditions which means a wage cut of up to \$320 a week for some workers.

Teachers strike in defiance of union

Wildcat strikes by New Zealand teachers have erupted again in a 14-month pay dispute. The teachers are opposing a second deal between the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and the Labour-Alliance government. In February the teachers rejected another settlement package in a nationwide ballot.

Teachers at Havelock North High School in Hawkes Bay and at Taita and Nae Colleges in Lower Hutt walked off the job on May 22 and 1,000

students at Onslow College in Wellington were sent home every afternoon this week after staff voted for rolling strikes. Action by teachers at Orewa College in Auckland closed the school on May 24.

Last week, the PPTA endorsed a new government offer and ordered an end to strike action. The deal was signed off on the eve of a Labour Party congress in Wellington, which teachers were threatening to picket. Education Minister Trevor Mallard said that the government's \$155 million offer was the limit. Defiant teachers are accusing the PPTA of being too close to the government and the union's president Jen McCutcheon is under fire over revelations that she attended the Labour conference as a delegate.

The latest union-government deal involves 5.5 percent increase over 3 years and an allowance for the introduction of the National Certificate in Educational Achievement, a new national qualifications system. Teachers are particularly incensed that the allowance will only be paid until 2004. While there is a provision for guaranteed non-contact time, the amount granted essentially entrenches existing conditions of overwork.

Nurses' stopwork meetings postponed

Stop-work meetings by nurses at seven lower North Island district health boards (DHBs) were postponed last week after unions failed to agree on a settlement proposal. The nurses meetings were planned at Manawatu, Wanganui, Taranaki, Hawkes Bay, Wairarapa, Capital Coast and Hutt Valley district health boards.

The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) met again this week with the employers. The union has been attempting to consolidate 11 different collective employment agreements into a single agreement to ensure that nurses employed in the seven DHBs receive the same pay and conditions.

New Zealand polytechnic staff strike

About 135 staff at the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand (TOPNZ) went on strike on May 23 after two-month long negotiations for a new work contract ended in a stalemate. The Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) claims that pay offers by the polytechnic were unsatisfactory and that staff conditions do not meet the standards of other institutions.

The teachers rejected a 2 percent salary increase each year over 3 years because it would not keep up with the anticipated rate of inflation. An ASTE spokeswoman said that TOPNZ could afford to improve its wage offer because it is "a highly successful polytechnic" and has achieved surpluses of \$4.13m and \$4.82m over the last two years.

The union also claims that TOPNZ staff has less leave than their counterparts in other polytechnics and that demands for greater productivity, research output and improved qualifications have increased continuously.

PNG maritime union ends strike

A five-day national strike by waterside workers in Papua New Guinea, which closed all six major ports, ended on May 16 when the National Court ruled in favour of an Employers Federation application and ordered the strikers back to work. The PNG Maritime Workers Industrial Union was so eager to end the strike that they instructed members to begin work before they received official notification of the court's decision.

During the dispute the union indicated it was prepared to drop a 40 percent pay claim and accept 10 percent, but the Employers Federation refused to negotiate while the workers remained on strike. With workers back on the job, the Federation has failed to attend scheduled meetings with the union for a week, claiming its representatives were "too busy".

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