

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 June 2002

Indonesian tyre workers stage rally

Hundreds of workers at bicycle tyre manufacturer PT Banteng Pratama rallied in Jakarta on Monday in protest against threatened retrenchments. Over 1,500 workers could lose their jobs if PT Goodyear Indonesia fails to renew its contract with Banteng when it expires in October.

Banteng produces 22,000 Goodyear-branded bicycle tyres daily for export to Europe, Latin America, and Middle East and African countries.

Korean unions wind down strike action

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) promised this week to end all industrial action before the World Soccer Cup finals started yesterday. KCTU acting president Baek Sun-hwan told a Seoul press conference: "We will do our best to conclude all negotiations with employers before the World Cup finals kick off".

On Sunday the KCTU reported that taxi drivers in Seoul, the South Gyeongsang province and in Uijeonbu in Gyeonggi province were ending their five-day strike while Korea University Medical Centre employees returned to work after reaching an agreement on a pay claim.

To let off steam the KCTU held a 20,000 strong rally in downtown Seoul to demand the government implement a promised five-day week. Over 3,000 taxi drivers staged a separate rally.

Indian power engineers fight privatisation

About 3,200 power engineers employed by the Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation have decided to continue industrial action against government moves to privatise four state-owned distribution companies. The campaign will run until June 15—a deadline set by the World Bank for the government to implement the sell-off plan.

In the first phase of the campaign 1,500 engineers forwarded resignation letters to the union to be submitted to authorities at a later date. More resignations are planned. Engineers also staged two-hour rolling strikes between May 13 and 15, demanding the removal of Indian Administrative Service officers placed in the corporation to facilitate the privatisation process.

Bangladesh port workers oppose private terminal deal

Hundreds of Bangladeshi port workers rallied in Dhaka on May 28 in protest against a government plan for Stevedoring Services of America to build a private container terminal in Chittagong port.

Even though the plan was shelved in 1997, following a series of strikes by port workers, the Khalida Zia government elected last

October is attempting to revive it. The government is persisting despite a High Court injunction against the proposal.

Workers fear the private terminal is a step towards closure of the state-owned Chittagong port. The port handles 400,000 containers a year or 80 percent of Bangladesh's exports and imports. The proposed \$500 million private terminal will have an operational capacity of 800,000 containers annually.

Sri Lankan garment workers demand back wages

Thousands of garment workers previously employed by Tri Star Garments in Sri Lanka have begun a poster campaign to demand full payment of wages to those dismissed when the company closed 10 factories. The plants were located in remote areas such Giranduru Kotte, Kamburupitiya, Buttala, Hasalaka, Welimada, Bandarawela, Badulla, Kekenadura, Matara and Ambalantota.

According to a deal between the Labour Commissioner and the company, the 4,200 affected employees will only be paid half of their monthly wage. The workers have rejected the arrangement as illegal and are demanding their full entitlements.

Management claims the closures were caused by a slump in overseas demand and that the plants will re-open in three months. Tri-Star Garments is one of the largest garment manufacturers in Sri Lanka and operates 30 plants.

Audit officers protest brutal attack

Some 1,400 government audit officers in Sri Lanka staged a two-day work boycott on May 28 to protest a brutal acid attack on one of their colleagues. The man, Lalith Ambanwela, suffered severe burns and is in a critical condition.

The Sri Lanka Audit Examiners' Service Association believes the attack was related to Ambanwela's investigation into illegal transactions worth 40 million rupee (\$US400,000) in the Central Province Education Department. Ambanwela was not given any police protection before the attack, even though he told police that he had received threatening phone calls.

While audit officers picketed government offices in Kandy and Colombo earlier this month to demand an investigation the police have taken no action.

Sri Lanka Audit Examiners' Service Association President H.M.K. Herath said that although Ambanwela told police that three Education Ministry officers were involved in the incident they had not been questioned "because of their political connections".

Phosphate workers continue month-long strike

About 100 workers at Christmas Island Phosphates have been on strike for four weeks after rejecting a new work agreement that

included provisions for forced redundancies and the use of contractors. The company has also refused to discuss arrangements to place workers entitlements, such as long service and holiday pay, into a trust fund.

Workers have also accused the company of using the plight of 20 crewmembers on an Indonesian ship to pressure them to end the strike. The Christmas Island Workers Union said that the company allowed the ship to come pick up phosphate at Christmas Island, even though they had been told about the impending strike action.

Wages of the Indonesian crew are dependent on them returning to their homeland with a cargo. Workers and residents on Christmas Island have taken up a collection to assist the crew.

Meat workers out again

Workers at the Lakes Creek Meatworks in Rockhampton, north Queensland, struck for 24 hours on Monday, the second time in less than a week. The workers are demanding the plant owner, Consolidated Meat Group, provide better pay and working conditions.

The Australian Meat Industry Employees Union negotiated an end to a five-month lockout last month by allowing the company to cut wages and change work practices. This week a union spokesman admitted that the “safety net” conditions under which it recommended a return to work “were little better than the dole”. Workers have lost more than \$300 a week under the new pay deal.

Workers picket over unsafe conditions

Casual demolition workers at the Gazebo Hotel in Sydney are still picketing the site after being sacked for refusing to work without basic safety provisions. The 13 workers, mainly young backpackers, were hired by the Australian Development Corporation, which is run by Gazebo’s owner, the multi-millionaire yachting personality Sydney Fischer.

The workers, who are paid \$15 an hour or about half the industry rate, had worked for five weeks but were not given basic work induction or safety training. Last year Fischer sacked the hotel workforce and announced that the building was being demolished to clear the way for high cost luxury apartments.

Construction works stop work over crane accident

Workers on the Doric building site in Mindarie Keys, north of Perth, walked off the job this week after a 40-tonne crane carrying a nine tonne concrete panel toppled over. According to a construction union spokesman, part of the flooring under the crane, known as soak wells, had collapsed under the weight of the load.

Workers returned to the site the next day after management arranged to remove concrete slabs and cordon off affected excavation areas. Worksafe investigators are presently investigating the accident.

New Zealand teachers union calls meetings to push pay deal

The New Zealand secondary teachers’ union, the Post Primary teachers’ Association (PPTA), began a series of stop-work meetings on May 30 in an attempt to persuade members to ratify the recent contract agreement it struck with the Labour-Alliance government. In order to push through the ratification and head off growing opposition among teachers the government waived the usual for 14-day notice required for stop-work meetings.

The meetings took place at the end of a second week of wildcat stoppages by teachers in defiance of a union directive ending all

industrial action. Teachers struck at schools across both the North and South Islands, including in Wellington, Rotorua and Auckland. Staff at Rangitoto College, the country’s largest school with 2,600 students, voted to strike every afternoon for a week.

The union-brokered deal provides for pay increases of 5.5 per cent over 3 years, a one-off allowance payable for to teachers who meet certain criteria for the introduction of the new qualifications system, and limited “non-contact” time.

Union steers redundancy dispute into court

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) in New Zealand said this week it would consider the “legal options” after Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) reaffirmed plans to axe 381 jobs at the Kinleith pulp and paper mill in Tokoroa.

When CHH first revealed the job cut plans EPMU officials used union delegates to convince workers to “remain calm” while the union devised what it termed a “battle ban”. The union refused to call industrial action and began negotiations with CHH on how the redundancies would be implemented and contract changes for the remaining workers.

Having ruled out industrial action, the union is now pushing the dispute into the industrial court action claiming the company negotiated in “bad faith”. The EPMU’s national secretary Andrew Little admitted that despite two months of negotiations CHH had “barely steered off its original plans”. Little also confirmed that the union made “a range of significant concessions” but that CHH had still decided to go ahead with its plan to contract out maintenance work affecting 190 jobs.

New Zealand nurses vote on pay deal

Nurses in the Wellington region began voting this week on an employment agreement covering 4,000 public hospital nurses and midwives in New Zealand’s southern North Island. After nine months of negotiations, the Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has struck a deal with seven district health boards (DHBs) to merge 11 former collective agreements into one.

The deal, covering 21 months to the end of 2003, provides for a variety of pay increases. The largest is for 6.2 per cent for nurses at Whanganui DHB. Nurses at Capital Coast DHB will get a series of one-off payments. The deal will allow the majority of nurses to be paid the same rate for the same job.



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