

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 June 2002

Chinese auto workers protest

Several hundred workers employed by a state-owned vehicle repair factory in Chengdu, the capital of the western province of Sichuan, demonstrated last weekend over unpaid wages and corrupt practices by management and local officials. Five workers were injured and three arrested in a clash with police after the demonstration blocked city traffic. The Chengdu protest coincides with the widespread demonstrations since March against mass layoffs and corruption in China's northeastern provinces.

Indonesian cigarette workers end strike

Workers at Indonesia's largest cigarette manufacturer, PT Gudang Garam, ended strike action on June 10 after management agreed to improve pay and working conditions. The workers are currently paid 400,000 rupiah per month (about \$US50).

Whole areas of production came to a standstill after 3,000 workers walked off the job on June 6 at the company's plants in Kediri, East Java. By the weekend, 15,000 day and afternoon shift workers struck while thousands of night shift workers threatened to join.

Japanese department store announces layoffs

Seibu Department Stores in Japan have announced plans to cut 800 jobs, or about 15 percent of its full-time workforce of 5,300. The jobs will be progressively eliminated by March next year. The first 400 jobs will be cut through attrition and early retirement, targeting workers aged between 35 and 58.

The announcement came as Tokyo Shoko Research reported that 19,365 workers lost their jobs as a result of bankruptcies in April this year, up 23.8 percent from a year ago. The total included 6,298 jobs in manufacturing, 3,951 in construction, 2,835 in the wholesale sector and 2,201 in retail.

Bangladesh ferry workers strike over safety

Operators of 4,000 private Bangladesh river ferries and their crews struck for three days on June 8 in protest over the rising number of criminal attacks on boats. According

to the Bangladesh Noujan (river vessels) Workers' Federation, pirates have assaulted and robbed crew and passengers on at least a dozen occasions in the past three months.

Ferries transport about a million people in Bangladesh each day and also carry a large quantity of merchandise. Bangladesh has 7,000 kilometres of waterways, which are worked by 3,000 state-owned ferries in addition to the privately-owned vessels.

Indian municipal workers protest against contracting

Madras Municipal Corporation workers demonstrated on June 11 against the Tamil Nadu state government's decision to outsource all fourth-grade rated work to private contractors. The move will affect over 6,000 casual workers, some of whom have worked for the city for nine years. The decision to contract out the fourth-grade work is part of a broader privatisation agenda being implemented by the state government.

Queensland health workers strike over conditions

Hospitals and health services in Queensland will be hit by a series of strikes in the coming days. Nurses, doctors, maintenance workers and clerical staff plan to walkout to demand pay rises, improved working conditions and increased staff levels.

Electricians, labourers, plumbers, clerical and transport workers employed in Queensland hospitals began rolling stoppages from June 12. Nurses from the Royal Brisbane, Royal Children's Hospital, the Royal Women's, Toowoomba and the Bundaberg Hospitals attended stopwork meetings on June 11 to discuss a campaign for a 6 percent pay rise and more staff. Nurses at the Emerald Hospital in Central Queensland stopped work for six hours the following day. The meetings agreed to hold a 24-hour strike on June 20.

Doctors employed by Queensland Health have threatened to join the nurses' strike action. The doctors are opposing the inadequate breaks between shifts, which

they claim could put patient's lives at risk. Doctors sometimes work up to 36 hours without a break.

Lake Creek meat workers locked out again

Consolidated Meat Group (CMG), the owner of Lakes Creek meatworks in Rockhampton, Queensland, locked out workers again this week, after employees took 24-hour strike action on Thursday. Meatworkers have been involved in a bitter dispute since last December over the company's efforts to slash workers' wages and conditions. The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union recommended the Lake Creek workers return to work on the company's terms in May, after being locked out for over five months.

Under the deal some workers were to lose up to \$320 a week in pay. CMG, however, has attempted to cut wages even further paying level-one employees only \$19.47 an hour, not \$20.55 the company had agreed to. Australian multi-millionaire and media baron Kerry Packer owns the Consolidated Meat Group.

Air traffic controllers strike called off

After protracted discussions with the employers in the industrial courts, the union representing air traffic controllers, Civil Air, called off the five-hour strike by its 1,100 members scheduled for June 14.

The strike was for improved pay and job security issues but the union scotched the action, even though it had not secured any firm agreement on the workers' demands. Employers only agreed to a "framework for ongoing discussions" that will last until June 28. A union spokesman said the strike would therefore be on hold at least until the end of the month.

Fiji union accepts 30 sackings to gain airport coverage

A 16-month dispute over union coverage at the government-owned Airports Fiji Limited (AFL) was resolved on June 10 when the government agreed to allow airport workers to be represented by the Fiji Public Sector Union (FPSU). The union ended the dispute even though AFL refused to reinstate 30 FPSU members dismissed during the dispute.

Fiji council workers strike over pay and staffing levels

Close to 200 workers employed by the Suva City Council (SCC) walked off the job on June 10 demanding the payment of outstanding bonuses and the employment of more staff. The workers are responsible for an assortment of duties, including rubbish collection, road maintenance, and drain clearance and cleaning at the Suva city market.

While the council agreed that staffing levels should be raised from 254 to 276, it claims to not have funds for the additional jobs. The council, however, has managed to find the resources to hire contract workers to break the strike and claims it could do without the striking workers for up to six months. Strikers have established a picket outside the council's Lama Depot.

New Zealand teachers reject union-brokered deal

Stopwork meetings across New Zealand last week attended by 14,000 secondary school teachers overwhelmingly rejected a deal struck between the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and the Labour-Alliance government on pay and conditions.

The deal offered a 5.5 percent pay rise over three years, an allowance for the introduction of a new qualifications system, and limited "non-contact" time. It was worth \$NZ40 million less than a "compromise" package put to government by the union just weeks ago.

This is the second time in the course of the 15-month dispute that PPTA members have refused to ratify an unsatisfactory settlement recommended by the union's leadership. The 75 percent "no" vote, an increase of nearly 20 percent over the earlier vote against ratification, came after teachers at some 50 schools carried out wildcat stoppages in defiance of the union.

Faced with defeat, the PPTA executive has again issued a new set of plans for limited industrial action, including an immediate ban on extra-curricula activities and a program of rostering students home by year levels. But the union has also announced its intention to resume negotiations in an attempt to find an accommodation with the government. Education Minister Trevor Mallard, who initially responded to the vote by threatening to force teachers onto individual contracts, changed tack and said the government was prepared to talk, but only to "reconfigure" the package.

The government is anxious to get the dispute off the agenda before the federal elections scheduled for July 27.



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