

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 June 2002

Bangladesh jute mill workers oppose government closure

Thousands of workers at the state-owned Adamjee Jute Mills in Narayanganj, Bangladesh began mass protests on June 25, in opposition to the government's decision to shut the factory. Fearful of mounting opposition by workers, the government immediately deployed army, police and fire service personnel inside the mills.

The world's largest jute mill, the factory employs 17,162 permanent and 6,252 temporary workers. A "Save Adamjee Jute Mill" committee with the representatives from 14 trade unions has been formed to fight the closure. The government claims that increasing competition from India and China has made the cost of running the plant too high.

According to a union spokesman, many workers who accepted redundancy when mills closed under the previous Bangladesh National Party (BNP) government between 1991 and 1996 did not receive any payment. The spokesman said Adamjee workers could face the same fate. "The authorities will pay money to some 50 workers, publicise it prominently through the media and then close down the mills. The other workers will lose everything forever," the official said.

The International Monetary Fund and World Bank, which categorised the Adamjee Jute Mills as a loss-making business and have pushed for its closure since 1992, welcomed the government decision.

Indian police kill tea plantation worker

A worker was killed and at least five others injured when police opened fire on a protest at a state-owned tea plantation in West Bengal. The workers were demonstrating against the government's decision to privatise part of the Chandmoni estate. Police began the attack after workers erected roadblocks to prevent the new owners entering the property.

Sri Lankan power workers defend union activist

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers picketed outside CEB offices in Colombo, Sri Lanka, on June 21 to demand the reinstatement of union activist, T.B.M. Peris.

Protest convener, Priyantha Wickremasinghe, said further action was planned if Peris, who is well known for defending workers' rights, was not reinstated immediately. Management attempted to get rid of Peris by transferring him to another area. When he refused to accept the transfer they suspended him.

Six workers injured in police attack in Indonesia

On June 26, dozens of police attacked thousands of striking workers from manufacturing company PT Maspion in Indonesia's Gedangan area in East Java. Five workers were injured as well as a journalist from the *Kompas* daily newspaper, who was struck by the police while photographing the demonstration. Police confiscated his film.

The attack took place as the strikers, who are employed at PT Maspion's Unit 1, were marching to the company's Unit 2 in the Buduran area to call on workers there to join the strike.

PT Maspion Unit 1 employees began strike action on June 25 in protest against a company decision to limit the workweek to five days. The move will further slash low-paid workers' earnings, whose take home pay was

cut four months ago when the company reduced overtime from 4.5 hours a day to 1.5 hours.

Low paid teachers in Indonesia demand wage increase

About 200 private school teachers in Central Java's Banyumas region struck on June 26 to demand comparable salaries with teachers in state-run schools. Many of the region's 3,500 private school teachers are only paid a teaching fee.

The teachers rallied outside the Banyumas Region Legislative Council while a delegation met with the secretary and chairman of the council's social welfare commission to discuss their grievances. Protestors demanded the local government legislate a standard salary for all teachers.

Private high schools teachers are only paid 150,000 rupiah a month. The situation is far worse for private kindergarten teachers, who receive just 25,000 rupiah (\$US2.90) a month.

Sacked hotel workers in Jakarta refused reinstatement

Management of the five-star Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta dismissed an International Labor Organisation (ILO) appeal on June 25 for reinstatement of some of the 500 workers sacked during the protracted dispute which erupted in December 2000 over improved pay and bonus arrangements.

Hotel management eventually broke the strike in March 2001 with the aid of police, who escorted contract workers through the picket line, and some Shangri-La union officials, who broke ranks and led a large group of strikers back to work.

Last year, the Central Committee for the Resolution of Industrial Disputes, as well as the State Administrative Court, endorsed the dismissals. The State Administrative High Court overturned the lower court's verdict. An appeal by the Shangri-La management against the High Court ruling is presently before the Supreme Court.

The Independent Workers Union Federation, which has thousands of members in five-star hotels and restaurants throughout Indonesia, promised to back the sacked workers. However, by the beginning of January, the peak union ruled out any industrial action and ordered its membership to wear black arm ribbons in sympathy.

The IUF, the international union covering hotel, hospitality, food and catering workers, also promised to organise an "international campaign" in support of the Shangri-La strikers. Apart from criticising hotel management and various empty appeals to Indonesian government officials, it did little.

Sacked Malaysian journalists awarded settlement over severance pay

Legal action by five journalists retrenched by the *Sun* early this year were settled out of court this week after the newspaper agreed to meet the employees' claims. The journalists allege the company breached a collective work agreement when it sacked them and refused to pay their annual salary increment and a contractual bonus.

The *Sun* retrenched 53 employees in January, citing financial difficulties. Journalists claimed, however, that union members were deliberately targeted. One month later, the company terminated another

256 of its remaining 411 staff when it learnt that another media company was planning to buy a stake in the publication. The *Sun* has lost 200 million ringgits (\$US52 million) since its inception in 1993.

Philippine construction workers locked out

Construction workers employed by A.B. Santiago, a subcontractor for Puregold Dau, were locked out this week, one day after a lunchtime meeting to discuss working conditions on the site. The company had already hired replacement workers in preparation for the lockout.

The 142 locked out workers marched to the municipal hall in Mabalacat to register a complaint with the local authorities. The mayor promised to send a municipal engineer to Puregold contractor's office to "work out the problem".

Union ends Philippines port strike

Port workers at North Harbor Port, Luzon returned to work on the recommendation of their union, the Samahan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pantalan (SMP), after an eight-hour strike on June 25. The workers were demanding payment of their mid-year bonus and a commutation payment, collectively worth over 8 million pesos (\$US160,000).

The strike ended after the National Conciliation and Mediation Board called a meeting between the employer, the United Dock-handlers Incorporation (UDI), the SMP and the Philippines Ports Authority.

While UDI agreed to pay the commutation amount immediately to about 1,000 port employees, it refused to negotiate on other issues, such as the hospital benefits, grievance procedures and safe working conditions.

Strike continues at South Korean engineering plant

Workers at Doosan Heavy Industries, the largest heavy engineering firm in South Korea, are continuing strike action begun on May 23 for a new work contract and improved pay and working conditions.

The prolonged strike has stopped production at the company and prevented the shipment of heavy equipment produced for various overseas projects, including a desalination plant for the United Arab Emirates and parts for General Electric in the US. About 100 in-house suppliers and subcontractors have also been forced to suspend operations due to the strike and 1,600 outside suppliers have also been affected.

The government has targeted 20 Doosan union leaders for arrest, including Korean Metal Workers Union President Kim Chang Keun.

Korean car workers strike over pay claims

South Korea's car industry is facing strike action as workers demand new work agreements. Kia workers in Sohari, Hwaseong and Gwangju walked off the job for three hours on June 26 demanding a 12.5 percent pay increase and an improved bonus scheme. They have threatened rolling stoppages if management refuses to pay the increase.

A Kia union spokesman said this week that despite 16 separate discussions with management, the company had "not even offered a proposal on a wage hike". The company claims that an "uncertain business environment in the second half of the year" prevents it offering a pay rise.

Union delegates at Ssangyong Motor, where workers are demanding a 12.4 percent pay increase, met this week to discuss joint action with the Kia workers.

At the same time, workers at Hyundai Motor's voted down a union-brokered deal on a proposed wage agreement. Following rolling strikes for more than a month, the Hyundai Motor union agreed to accept a management offer that would have increased pay by 95,000 won (\$US78). This included improved allowances, as well as performance and incentive bonuses. The management-union package was far short of the 128,880 won pay rise, plus bonuses, sought by the workers.

According to media reports, the union is considering nullifying the ballot, claiming an error in the vote count. If union officials discount the vote, they plan a re-run to pressure workers to accept an agreement.

Australian health workers clash with Labor government

This week more than 30,000 Queensland Health workers, from

pathologists to cleaners, decided to push ahead with work stoppages of up to 24 hours for a 6 percent wage increase as part of a new two-year work agreement. The decision came after workers rejected an offer by the Queensland Labor government as inadequate.

Two thousand disability services carers also began a series of stoppages and bans on June 26, in pursuit of better working conditions and improved security in the work place.

Nurses are also taking industrial action. On June 20, more than 16,000 nurses across the state went on strike for 24 hours, demonstrated outside major hospitals and voted to close one in every four beds from June 26 to reduce patient-to-nurse ratios.

In an attempt to end the nurses' dispute the government offered a new package on June 27. Under the deal, nurses would receive a one-off \$1,500 qualification allowance with enrolled and assistance nurses paid an \$18, or 3 per cent pay rise. The nurses want a 6 percent wage increase.

Rope workers offered new severance deal to end dispute

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) is to put a new severance pay package to a meeting of 130 workers sacked from Kinnears rope works in Melbourne on June 24, in an attempt to end a dispute over the dismissals. The business was sold the previous week to Tapex, which plans to strip out the machinery and relocate it to its plant in Sydney.

On June 25, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission recommended that the company pay severance pay on the basis of a 4.5 percent pay increase that was due to be introduced next week and that had not been factored into the original redundancy package. Under the new terms, the sacked workers would receive up to \$600,000 in extra pay and benefits. The IRC said that the company should make a \$300,000 special payment to staff to settle litigation threatened by the union.

AWU national secretary Bill Shorten dismissed any struggle to defend jobs. "This isn't going to get these workers' jobs back, but the strong involvement of the union and the commission have allowed the workers some self-respect," he said.

New Zealand newspaper staff face closure

Staff at New Zealand's Wellington Newspapers met on June 27 to discuss a shock announcement this week that the city's evening newspaper, the *Evening Post*, is to close. Some 90 people, including virtually the entire editorial staff of 60 journalists, will lose their jobs.

The *Evening Post*, which was founded in 1865, is to be "merged" in a few weeks time with the city's morning newspaper the *Dominion*, to form the *Dominion Post*.

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) did not announce any plans to fight the job losses. Union secretary Andrew Little confirmed that the EPMU is in discussions with the Murdoch-controlled company about the "level of job losses and the redundancy process".

Fiji aviation workers vote for three day strike

All flights in and out of Fiji will stop for three days from July 12, if 400 Air Pacific workers go on strike. Fiji Air Workers Association (FAWA) general secretary served the strike notice on Air Pacific this week over claims for salaries, benefits, rosters, productivity payments and unpaid severance pay dating back to 1998.

The strike has been timed to start three days before commencement of the African Caribbean Pacific meeting in Fiji. If the strike goes ahead, the meeting may have to be cancelled. Labour Minister, Kenneth Zinck, said if differences between the union and Air Pacific were not resolved by next week, the government would intervene in the dispute.



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