

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 July 2002

Chinese textile workers fight three-day battle with security guards

Thousands of workers from the privately owned Nanxuan Wool Textile Factory in Shuikou, Guangdong province fought running battles with security guards over three days last month. The conflict began on June 24, when security guards tried to force workers to queue in the company canteen. The guards are known for their rough handling and bullying of employees.

When 800 of the factory's 15,000 employees walked out in protest against being manhandled, the guards responded by brutally beating striking workers with steel pipes. Photographs of the clashes published in the *Yangcheng Evening News* showed blood trails around the factory grounds.

The strikers, joined by other workers from the plant, responded by fighting back, smashing factory windows and burning a company car at the plant entrance. Clashes continued for three days before riot police arrived to quell the rioting.

Nanxuan Wool Textile is typical of many Pearl River area factories, which employ mainly young migrant workers from China's poor rural provinces. Housed in overcrowded compounds, the workers are forced to work 12 to 14 hour shifts, seven days a week.

Retired women workers demand pension increase

Some 2,000 retired women workers from the Daqing Petroleum Administration Bureau (DPAB) in China's Heilongjiang province, protested outside the company headquarters on June 24 to demand the state-owned firm increase their pensions. The women, who worked for the company for more than 20 years, receive only 50 yuan (\$US6) a month from DPAB. The minimum monthly income required to live in China's poorest areas is around 150 yuan.

The pensioners have been demonstrating since April, alongside thousands of oil workers retrenched by DPAB.

Indonesian security guards demand better conditions

About 400 security guards employed at the Kota Wissata, a luxury house estate in Indonesia's Bogor region, began strike action on July 2 over the suspension of 13 guards last month for demanding overtime payments.

The security guards are not paid lunch or transportation allowances. Last week, management ordered two guards to pay for an air-conditioning compressor unit that was stolen from the estate during their shift.

The dispute was settled after management agreed to include lunch and transportation allowances in the guards' monthly salary and to introduce monthly overtime payments.

Teachers dismissed for striking

About 60 teachers from the Al Azhar Islamic school in Kemang, South Jakarta were dismissed on June 25, after demanding improved working conditions, including better welfare provisions and a salary increase.

The kindergarten, elementary, junior and senior high school teachers began campaigning for a salary increase with strike action in February. School management initially responded by suspending a number of teachers but was forced to reinstate them after remaining teachers joined

the strike.

The teachers' current base rate is between 200,000 and 300,000 rupiah a month, depending on their grade and length of service. They are demanding an increase to bring them into line with the 500,00 rupiah (about \$US58) minimum regional wage rate.

Indian veterinary workers oppose changed working hours

Veterinary hospital workers in the India state of Kerala staged a dharna (sit-in protest) outside the Pathanamthitta Mini Civil Station on July 1 against the introduction of split shifts. Previous shifts began at 8am and ended at 2pm. Under the new arrangements, employees are required work from 8am to 12 noon and return at 3pm for another two hours work until 5pm. As well as being inconvenienced by the new work times, employees will not be paid for the three hours idle time between shifts.

Sri Lankan tea estate workers demand higher wages

Workers at 84 tea estates in Badulla district, 200 kilometres from Colombo, the Sri Lankan capital, struck on June 28 to demand a daily wage increase to 200 rupees (\$US2). Plantation head offices in Hingurugamuwa, Badulla were picketed by striking workers during the protest.

Teachers maintain protest for job permanency

Some 138 Sinhala voluntary teachers from schools in the war-ravaged regions in north and east of Sri Lanka are continuing the sit-down protest they began a month ago outside the Education Ministry's head office in Colombo. The teachers want the government to provide them with permanent full-time jobs. Seven hundred teachers are involved in the dispute. Many have worked in a voluntary capacity for more than 10 years, and all have served between two and ten years in the remote locations.

Nurses threaten further action over pay

Ten thousand Queensland nurses are preparing to walk off the job for a second time if talks between state government health officials and the Queensland Nurses Union (QNU) fail to resolve the long-running dispute over wages, working conditions and staffing. Work stoppages and bans have closed hundreds of hospital beds across the state and led to the cancellation of an estimated 1,000 elective surgery procedures.

While the Labor government has agreed to a one-off \$1,500 qualifications payment and wage increases of between 6 and 9.5 percent over two years, depending on experience, this offer falls far short of the 18 percent over two years demanded by nurses. A QNU spokesman said the nurses were planning a statewide stoppage and a rally outside state parliament on July 12.

The threat of further industrial action comes as 30,000 health workers, including hospital cleaners, maintenance workers and pathology staff, plan to step up their industrial campaign for better pay and conditions. The health workers have imposed bans in many state hospitals, limiting the transport of patients from wards to operating theatres and reducing linen collections.

Construction workers strike after wall collapse

Four hundred construction workers at the \$280 million Suncorp Metway

Stadium site in Brisbane, Queensland walked off the job on June 28 after a 15cm-thick concrete wall crashed to the ground during strong winds. While no one was injured, engineers have ordered that other concrete walls be braced on the site.

Workers will not return to the job until all safety matters have been addressed, including replacement of a faulty safety siren. They have also demanded that management provide procedure details on the forthcoming installation of horizontal concrete decks.

Allegations were made in the Queensland parliament after the wall collapse that the state government “was cutting corners” on the stadium. The building is scheduled for completion by next May.

Nurses walk out at five Perth hospitals

Enrolled nurses at five major hospitals in Perth, the capital of Western Australia, walked off the job last week in protest against the government’s offer of only a 14.5 percent wage increase over two years. Nurses in the state’s regional and rural areas have also threatened stoppages if the offer is not improved.

Nurses are demanding a suitable pay increase to compensate for the extra work and responsibilities caused by chronic staff shortages. Negotiations have dragged on since May, when the enrolled nurses’ enterprise work agreement expired.

Alcoa contract workers protest exclusion from health study

Hundreds of contract workers employed on Alcoa alumina refinery sites in Kwinana, Pinjarra and Wagerup, south of Perth, walked off the job on June 28 to demand their inclusion in a study on cancer and respiratory problems among Alcoa workers.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the contractors, who had spent most of their working lives in Alcoa refineries, did not have the same access to health and safety as other employees.

The comprehensive study conducted by the University of Western Australia and Victoria’s Monash University of some 11,000 current and former Alcoa staff in both states, found a higher than average rate of lung cancer, melanoma and mesothelioma.

Miners demand restoration of lost conditions

More than 160 mineworkers at the Pasmenco Rosebery mine in Tasmania went on strike for 48 hours last Sunday. Members of the Australian Workers Union, they want the company to restore pay rates and working conditions given up three years ago when the management threatened to close the mine, claiming financial difficulties. The workers have threatened further industrial action if the matter is not resolved quickly.

Qantas staff protest icy working conditions

Check-in staff at the Qantas domestic terminal in Melbourne called a snap one-hour strike on Tuesday to protest bitterly cold conditions in the workplace. It was 6.4 degrees Celsius in the terminal when staff walked off the job.

The 250 workers have been complaining for months that the freezing drafts from baggage chutes and doors near their workstations have made conditions unbearable. Management has refused to allow staff to wear coats, claiming it contravenes the company’s dress code.

Australian Service Union officials and Qantas management are due to begin negotiating a new enterprise bargaining agreement covering 9,500 Qantas customer service and technical staff. The workers are demanding an annual 5 percent pay increase for the next two years and improved job classifications. Qantas has offered a 3 percent annual rise.

New Zealand pilots to strike over job security

About 500 Air New Zealand pilots flying domestic and international air services will strike for 48 hours on July 19, in protest against impending job losses and lack of career protection.

The pilots have been negotiating with the airline for 16 months over company plans to give several Air New Zealand routes to its budget subsidiary, Freedom Air. Pilots fear this will lead to job losses at Air New

Zealand. They are also concerned that if a foreshadowed sale of Freedom Air goes ahead, pilots transferred to fly the routes will lose long-standing employment benefits.

The Airline Pilots Association says that 40 percent of the transferred pilots have more than 20 years’ service and stand to lose loyalty benefits and career advancements. The association is also worried that Air New Zealand is attempting to save 15 to 19 percent in pilot operating costs and plans to eliminate at least 32 “surplus” pilots.

Sawmill workers lobby over dioxin poisoning

Sawmill Workers Against Poisons (SWAP), a New Zealand timber workers’ action committee, is lobbying the Labour-Alliance government for free health care for 60 former sawmill workers and their families who are exhibiting signs of chemical-related illnesses.

A survey commissioned by SWAP reveals that a large number of former timber workers from Whakatane had symptoms associated with exposure to the chemical PCP. It contains reports by workers suffering respiratory problems, high blood pressure, depression, dermatitis, mood swings, blood disorders and cancer. The report also found that the wives of mill workers had similar patterns of illness, and that 38 percent of those surveyed had experienced miscarriages, well above the 15 to 20 percent national average. SWAP spokesman Joe Harawira described the report, released last week, as “alarming”.

Accident Compensation Minister Ruth Dyson indicated that the government would resist any compensation claims, saying the report did not establish a conclusive link between the health problems and workplace-related chemical poisoning.

Fiji doctors’ dispute enters sixth day

Doctors in Fiji’s public hospitals began a work-to-rule on July 1, closing children’s outpatient services and all special clinics in Suva, the capital. Emergency and some outpatient services are being provided at the Suva General Hospital and residents living outside the city have been told to go to local private doctors.

The industrial action is in protest against continuing Public Services Commission (PSC) delays in handling their log of claims. The doctors are demanding the payment of overtime for extended working hours. Soon after doctors began their industrial action, the PSC offered to pay them \$10 (\$US4.6) an hour for registered on-call duty and \$12 for after-hours calls, but this proposal has yet to be approved by Fiji’s Cabinet.

Strikers not reinstated

Pacific Batteries workers in Lami, Fiji, returned to work this week, ending a strike that began on March 13. The 46 workers walked out after four of their colleagues were sacked for organising the workforce into the National Factory and Commercial Workers Union.

Company attempts to break the strike failed because they could not get scabs through pickets outside the plant. The union ended the strike after the management agreed to recognise the union. The sacked workers have not been reinstated and their case has been submitted to arbitration.



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