

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 July 2002

Hong Kong government workers march against wage reduction

About 35,000 civil servants and their families marched through Hong Kong's main city roads last weekend to oppose government plans to cut their pay. The government plans new legislation, known as the Public Servants Pay Adjustment Bill, to slash public sector wages by up to 4.42 percent this year and reduce its \$US8.1 billion budget deficit. One worker, a civil servant for 20 years, told the media that if the administration pushed through the new legislation, "our pay and benefits will never be secure again".

Overseas Filipino workers protest Saudi contract to cut pay

On July 9, a group representing overseas Filipino workers and their families protested outside Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) offices at Cagayan de Oro, Mindanao, in the Philippines, against a government-approved \$50 monthly wage cut. The protest also involved Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) officials and DOLE workers.

Demonstrators called for the resignation of Labour Secretary Patricia Sto Thomas, who recently signed an agreement with her Saudi Arabian counterpart to reduce the minimum monthly wage for unskilled Filipino workers there from \$US200 to \$150. DOLE Regional Director Emmanuel Roldan claims the wage cut was necessary so Filipino workers could "compete" with cheaper labour from Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The protestors also objected to the delays in government funding to OWWA, the organisation's pending merger with DOLE and the Philippines Overseas Employment Agency, and a proposal to transfer its Medicare Program to PhilHealth Insurance Corp.

South Korean auto workers step up industrial action

Workers at Kia Motors in South Korea voted on Monday to step up their industrial campaign for pay rises and improved bonuses by increasing the present four-hour daily stoppages to eight hours.

The workers have been conducting the 4-hour daily strikes since June 24, costing Kia, South Korea's second largest auto maker, about 79 billion won (\$US66 million) in lost sales and production.

Kia unionists are demanding a monthly pay increase of 128,000 won and a special one-off bonus equal to 300 percent of monthly salary. The management has offered a 78,000 won pay increase and a 150 percent bonus payment.

Union ends Doosan strike

Workers at Doosan Heavy Industries and Construction in South Korea ended a 47-day strike this week after the union accepted a draft agreement worked out by regional mediators at Changwon in South Gyeongsang province, where the company's main plant is

located.

Production ceased at the Changwon plant on June 18 when workers intensified strike action begun in late May against company legal action against workers involved in previous industrial campaigns. The company agreed to lift civil and criminal lawsuits against union members in order to secure a return to work.

The Doosan union is now working closely with management to boost production and guarantee contracts with General Electric in the US and a power plant project for the United Arab Emirates.

Indian teachers campaign for salary increases and strike pay

College teachers in Dumka in the Indian state of Bihar began a weeklong dharna (sit-in protest) inside university premises on July 2. The teachers are seeking salary rises in line with the University Grant Commission pay scale and payment of wages lost during a three-month strike action.

The state government previously agreed to pay teachers for the three-month period, provided they made up the lost teaching time with additional work. While teachers met this condition, the government failed to honour its promise. The teachers are planning to call a public meeting on the issue.

Sri Lankan estate workers strike for compensation

Some 1,000 workers at the Rockatenna estate in Sri Lanka struck for two days on July 5 to demand compensation for a fellow worker over the death of his mother. The seriously ill woman died because management failed to allocate a vehicle quick enough to take her to hospital. The estate is situated in a rocky location, 14 kilometres from the town of Badulla.

The worker, Shanmugam Madawan, requested a vehicle early in the morning to take his mother to hospital. Management responded by demanding that he first obtain a letter from the estate doctor to verify that his mother was ill. He was also sent to repair a defective lorry on the estate.

A vehicle was eventually allocated to transport the sick woman, but only after it was used to carry out routine work such as transporting tea and fertilizer. His mother was admitted to the hospital at 11.30am but died within minutes. Doctors said they could have saved her if she had been admitted a half hour earlier.

Union leaders ended the strike action after management agreed to pay 5,000 rupees (\$US52) compensation, even though the workers initially asked for double this amount.

Hospital staff strike over harassment

Staff at the base hospital in Negombo, 35 kilometres from Colombo, struck on July 2 against management harassment of

workers over the disappearance of 100,000 rupees (\$US104). Workers are demanding an impartial inquiry to investigate disappearance of the cash, which was partly used for paying salaries.

The entire hospital workforce, including doctors, has threatened an indefinite strike next week unless the harassment ceases and the administrative officer responsible for it is suspended.

Glass workers strike for pay increase

About 150 workers at the Pilkington glass factory in Dandenong, Victoria took indefinite strike action on Thursday over a new work agreement. Their demands include a 10 percent pay increase over two years, job security and the provision of an onsite safety officer and nurse. Another 250 workers at two company sites in NSW will strike on Monday.

According to an Australian Workers Union spokesman, the company has slashed its national workforce by 50 percent over the past two years.

Pilkington supplies glass for three out of the four Australian car manufacturers and a protracted strike will impact on national car production and could lead to standdowns. The Howard government, which is seeking to amend the Workplace Relations Act to virtually outlaw car component and other supply industry stoppages, immediately condemned the strike.

Queensland nurses ordered to lift bans

The Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) in Queensland on July 11 ordered nurses to end all industrial action for 48 hours. Union leaders rapidly complied with the order, despite earlier threats that they “would not rule out unprotected industrial action” in defiance of the IRC.

Nurses have conducted an unprecedented campaign of industrial action, including strikes and work bans, over the past six weeks. They are demanding a new agreement, including an 18 percent pay increase over two years. The bans have closed hundreds of beds and led to the cancellation of surgery.

Last week nurses rejected a revised government offer of pay increases of between 6 and 9.5 percent over two years, depending on experience, and a one-off \$1,500 qualifications payment. Union officials have now begun closed-door negotiations with the government.

In a separate dispute, pathology workers across Queensland stopped work on July 11 in protest against Queensland Health’s plan to centralise pathology services in Brisbane, the state capital. Workers claim the move will lead to the closure of regional pathology centres and result in job losses.

WA nurses win pay increase

Enrolled nurses in Western Australia have ended a weeklong statewide industrial campaign of rolling stoppages after the state Labor government agreed to pay an 18.7 percent pay increase over two years. Enrolled nurses work under the professional guidance of registered nurses and are poorly paid.

Even with the current pay increase most enrolled nurses will only be paid \$18 an hour and those on Level One just \$17. Advanced skilled nurses will be paid \$19.20 an hour.

Lakes Creek workers continue dispute

On July 11, meat workers at the Lakes Creek abattoir in Rockhampton, Queensland, began a five-day strike and re-

established a picket line outside the plant. The strike, which is about production levels in the boning room, is part of an ongoing dispute over the conditions of a new work agreement.

The dispute began in December when Consolidated Meat Group, the plant’s owners, locked out the workers to force them to accept wage cuts, a six-day production schedule and unlimited overtime. Meat workers were forced back to work under a federal award which meant a \$320 wage cut for some workers.

New Zealand customs officers to strike over pay

Customs officers at Auckland International Airport voted to strike on July 17 after negotiations over a pay increase broke down. The Customs Officers Association said union members had not received any effective pay increases or cost of living adjustments since 1991. The long-running dispute affects most of the 814 customs service staff.

Auckland hospital workers to strike over pay

Unions representing 240 orderlies and kitchen staff have given 14 days notice of a 48-hour strike from July 18 at four hospitals—Auckland, Starship Childrens, Green Lane and National Womens.

The hospital workers are angry that the Auckland District Health Board (DHB) only offered a 2 percent pay increase. The Service and Food Workers Union says the board is attempting to scapegoat its lowest-paid and most vulnerable staff in a bid to control a budget deficit of up to \$86 million. The DHB called in a mediator to try to head off the strike.

Work stops to remember two men killed in steel fall

Workmates of two men crushed to death under falling steel at the Pacific Steel rolling mill in South Auckland last week stopped work on July 4 to attend a memorial service held on the site. Gareth George, 55, and Raymond Wilson, 56, died when a two-tonne bundle of steel fell from an electromagnetic crane at the plant.

The mill remained shut for most of the week while an engineer investigated the crane. Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) inspectors issued a prohibition order banning use of the machine until they receive the engineer’s report. But an OSH spokesman said it might take months to find out exactly what went wrong and whether legal action was called for.

While Pacific Steel management claims the accident was inexplicable, “after a four-year effort to raise safety standards,” but the mill has a notoriously poor workplace health and safety record.



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