

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 July 2002

Union brokers deal to end car dispute

Kia Motors, South Korea's second largest automaker, made a new wage and bonus offer this week in an attempt to end rolling strike action that began in late June. Workers originally demanded a 128,000-won (\$US109) monthly pay increase and a special one-off bonus equal to 300 percent of their monthly wage. While few details have been released, the pay increase is expected to be around 83,000 won. Union leaders have urged members to endorse the deal and end all industrial action before July 29.

Ssangyong Motor employees voted down a union-brokered deal this week to freeze wages for 12 months in exchange for a one-off 10 million won bonus. The deal is part of Ssangyong management's "debt workout" which allocates 30 percent of full-year profits to employees, 30 percent to creditor institutions and 40 percent for reinvestments.

Luggage workers protest against company attacks

On July 16, over 200 Light House luggage workers in Thailand demonstrated outside parliament over wage and job cuts. The luggage company sub-contracts for American multinational, Samsonite Corporation which has many production sites across the world, including factories in China and Mexico.

The company sacked 600 of the 1,400-strong workforce in October, most of these women with more than 10 years service. Overtime benefits were also cut and the daily wage slashed by 25 percent to \$US3.60, despite a dramatic increase in workloads. Last month the company sacked all 20 elected union representatives at the plant and 849 workers who stopped work in protest.

Sacked hotel workers protest outside Supreme Court

Former Shangri-La workers demonstrated outside the Supreme Court in central Jakarta this week. The hotel workers want the court to uphold an earlier decision of the State High Administrative Court, which ruled that the sacking of 500 workers during a prolonged strike that began in December 2000 was illegal. Management is appealing the lower court decision.

The Independent Workers Union Federation, which has thousands of members working in five-star hotels and restaurants throughout Indonesia, promised industrial support for the Shangri-La workers when they were sacked last December. One month later, however, the peak union body ruled out any industrial action and instead ordered members to wear black armbands in protest.

Since then, union support has been confined to legal action and calls on government ministers to intervene on behalf of the sacked worker. This week's demonstration outside the Supreme Court was attended by only a handful of workers.

Council workers protest over withheld wages

On July 12, workers employed by four municipal councils in Naushahro Feroze, Pakistan, marched through the district capital to protest over the non-payment of salaries for last three months. The march, which organised by the Baldia Workers Federation of Naushahro Feroze, began at the Naushahro Feroze council office and ended at the press club where

the workers staged a symbolic hunger strike.

Sugar workers demonstrate against retrenchment

Workers at the government-owned Al-Noor Sugar Mills in Moro, Pakistan, demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club on July 12 to demand reinstatement of 250 retrenched workers. According to the union, the management has laid off 650 permanent employees over the last three years and operates the mill with mainly contract labour. The demonstration was organised by the Pakistan Trade Union Defence Campaign.

Sri Lankan teachers protest over employment conditions

Teachers from Trincomalee district in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province picketed the Regional Education Office on July 17. They were protesting against moves by the Regional Educational Director to block transfer applications by teachers with less than eight years service. Even before the latest restrictions teachers generally had to have transfer applications approved by the Provincial Governor or Educational Secretary.

One week before in Ratnapura, 80 kilometres from Colombo, 1,000 teachers picketed the Sabaragamuwa Provincial Council complex demanding the resolution of a series of grievances. The teachers planned to hand a memorandum outlining their complaints to the Provincial Education Secretary but police were called to stop them entering the complex. They decided to burn the memorandum in protest.

Bank workers protest government changes

Workers from Sri Lankan state banks demonstrated outside the Department of Finance building in central Colombo on July 11 to protest the government's decision to allow state sector enterprises to open accounts with private banks.

The measure, which will put state-owned banks into direct competition with private institutions, is considered a step towards forcing their privatisation. State banks could also face closure if they cannot successfully compete with private banks for government accounts.

Rubber plantation workers protest over general manager

Workers from five rubber estates in Kurunegala district in Sri Lanka's northwestern province have been on strike since July 5 to demand the removal of the estates' general manager over his ruthless treatment of workers. Estate workers also want the company to reinstate Lanka National Estate Workers Union local branch secretary who has been suspended. Protests have also been held in front of the offending manager's bungalow.

The Pitikande, Muwankanda, Notting Hill, Morathanna and Keppetipola estates belong to the Bogawantalawa Plantations Company, one of the largest plantation companies in the country.

Serco workers fight pay cut

About 50 maintenance workers walked off the job and picketed City West Water in St Albans, Melbourne on July 16, after Serco Pty Ltd refused to pay them while they held rolling stoppages and maintained overtime bans for a new enterprise agreement.

The dispute began earlier this year when City West Water ended its maintenance contract with British-owned Serco and handed it over to

American company Halliburton. The transferred workers were to be paid \$18 an hour by Halliburton, up from \$17.30 an hour at Serco. But after the recent collapse of the Halliburton deal, City West resumed contracting with Serco, which then cut workers' hourly rate to \$16.80. The new pay rate is \$8,000 a year less than contract workers' wages at other City West Water jobs.

The company has called in private contractors to carry out regular maintenance but workers have warned that any emergency could cause flooding, cut supplies and result in sewage overflows. City West Water covers more than 580 square kilometres, including Melbourne's central business district and its western suburbs.

No resolution to meat dispute

Workers at Lake Creek meatworks in Rockhampton, Queensland returned to work on July 18, after a four-day strike over wages and conditions. They have voted to continue industrial action against the company, vowing to work only three days a week.

The meatworkers are fighting for a new work agreement after being locked out last December and forced onto the reduced wages and poor conditions under the Federal Meat Processing Award. Some employees have lost up to \$300 a week.

Health workers demand pay increase

Non-nursing staff, including orderlies, dieticians, catering staff and pharmacists in Queensland public hospitals struck for 24 hours and attended protest rallies on July 18 over the lack of progress in negotiations for a new work agreement.

The hospital workers are demanding a 12 percent pay rise, manageable workloads and improved training opportunities. The Queensland Labor government has ruled out any increase in its current offer, despite widespread stoppages and threats of further industrial action.

The Queensland nurses' dispute also remains unresolved after more than six weeks of industrial action that has forced the closure of hundreds of beds and delayed surgical procedures. Negotiations between the government and the nursing union continued this week but have made little headway.

Australia Post workers defend workmate

Australia Post has been forced to reverse an earlier decision to fine call centre worker Cori Girondoudas for refusing to remove one of four photographs from her desktop.

Call centre management in Melbourne claimed Girondoudas had breached company policy, which says that employees are only allowed three personal items on their desks. Her pay was reduced by two increments for two years—the equivalent of \$3,000 a year. Management dropped the fine after 40 of Girondoudas's workmates decided to defy the stipulation and decorate their own desks with numerous personal items and photographs.

The harsh treatment of Girondoudas is typical of conditions in call centres, which are notorious for low pay, broken shifts and constant monitoring of workers' performance.

New Zealand teachers continue strikes

Ignoring an appeal by Education Minister Trevor Mallard to the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), New Zealand secondary teachers will continue strike action up until the July 27 election. Teachers began rolling strikes on July 17, sending selected year levels of students home each day. Industrial action will culminate in the closure of all schools on July 26, the day before parliamentary elections.

Teachers have so far voted to down two deals negotiated by the union. The latest government offer rejected by teachers included a 5.5 percent pay increase, with an additional allowance for the introduction of new national qualifications and limited guarantees of "non-contact" time. Teachers said they did not regard the offer as a long-term solution to the continuing run-down of state education. The PPTA is currently balloting its 14,400 members on government moves to take a 16-month dispute

over pay and workloads into arbitration.

Air New Zealand pilots' strike cancelled

The NZ Airline Pilots Association (ALPA) called off scheduled 48-hour strike action on July 19, a week before the forthcoming parliamentary elections, and agreed to resume negotiations with Air New Zealand on a new collective employment agreement.

The strike was authorised by Air New Zealand's 500 pilots after the company announced plans to roster some of pilots onto its budget carrier, Freedom Air, threatening their job security. The ALPA withdrew its strike notice in return for Air New Zealand dropping its application to the Employment Court to have the strike declared illegal.

Union loses case over mill layoffs

New Zealand's Employment Relations Authority ruled this week against the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). The ruling stated that forestry company Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) did not breach the "good faith" requirements of the government's Employment Relations Act when it laid off 400 employees at its Kinleith pulp and paper mill and contracted-out maintenance work before consulting the union.

When the layoffs were first announced two months ago, the EPMU promised to produce a "battle plan" to fight the mass sackings. However, the union suppressed industrial action and took the dispute to the court. Engineering contractor ABB now plans to start recruiting staff by the end of this month but the laid-off mill workers have decided to hold out against joining the outside contractor.

CHH has just announced a net profit for the six months to the end of June of \$NZ73 million, compared to a loss of \$15 million for the same period last year.

Striking Fiji doctors to take legal action

Despite a three-week long campaign of work-bans by public hospital doctors, the Fiji government has refused increase an earlier pay and conditions offer.

The government had only offered a \$10.00 (US\$4.60) standby allowance for on-call duty and a 12.5 percent wage increase. Doctors rejected this as inadequate and plan to take legal action against the Public Service Commission (PSC). Dentists working for the Colonial War Memorial Hospital said this week that they could also take court action if the PSC continues to ignore their pay demands.



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