

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 July 2002

Indonesian plantation workers threaten occupation

Hundreds of villagers employed at the PT Budi Dharma Godam Perkasa-owned oil palm plantation in North Lampung, Indonesia have gone on strike and are threatening to occupy the 2,000-hectare estate. The strike is over management's refusal to solve a long-running land dispute.

The workers, mostly from Blambangan Pagar village, are demanding the company pay compensation for communal land that was forcibly appropriated under the former New Order regime and handed over to a Jakarta businessman. Following the fall of former President Suharto, the company promised to give 8 percent of its annual profits to the villagers but has paid nothing.

Several strikers were injured in clashes with police last week when they went to the plantation to confront management. Head villager Syahrur said the strikers want the issue resolved in two weeks. "I cannot prevent residents from occupying the company's office and taking over the plantation if no solution is found," he said.

Hong Kong building workers protest unpaid wages

Hong Kong police arrested 23 construction workers on July 19, after they clashed with their employer and security guards in a protest over unpaid wages. A policewoman drew her revolver and threatened employees during the tussle. The confrontation took place after the employer dismissed demands by a delegation of workers that he pay seven months back wages totalling \$HK10 million (\$US1.3 million).

Other workers were injured in a melee that erupted outside the building when police blocked protestors attempting to join the delegation, which was under attack in the employer's third floor office.

The protest was the second in four days in Hong Kong over unpaid wages. Earlier, police wrestled with 30 subcontractors who tried to storm their employer's office in Hong Kong's Central district to demand payment of \$HK70 million in contractual fees and back pay.

Union ends campaign at Kia Motors

The union representing workers at Kia Motors in South Korea suspended a month-long campaign of industrial action on July 19, following a marathon negotiation session. Kia unionists across the country were ordered to cease industrial action immediately and return to full production. They were to vote on the tentative agreement this week.

The union-management agreement includes a 9.1 percent or 95,000 won (\$US80) monthly wage increase, a one-off payment equal to 150 percent of the monthly salary, and a 800,000-won special performance bonus. The deal also includes the introduction of various welfare measures for regular and part-time workers and their families. Management previously offered a 78,000-won increase and a bonus payment of 150 percent.

The agreement provides much less than the 128,000-won monthly increase and special bonus equal to 300 percent of the monthly salary originally demanded by Kia workers.

Migrant workers protest deportation plan

About 50 migrant workers and their Korean supporters began a sit-in protest at the Myeongdong Cathedral in central Seoul on July 22 to oppose a government decision earlier this year to order all so-called

"illegal" migrant workers to leave the country by next March.

The protestors are also critical of a government trainee scheme that allows overseas workers to work in Korea for up to three years. Under this scheme, workers are often exploited and abused by the designated employers. If they run away to find jobs with better conditions they are deemed "illegal" residents. Other employers are then able to take advantage the workers' illegal status to withhold wages or dismiss them without warning.

Patna municipal workers strike over overdue wages

About 3,000 municipal employees in Patna, the state capital of Bihar, India, have gone on strike over the non-payment of wages during the past seven months. The striking workers, who are also demanding a pay increase and an improved bonus, began a five-day demonstration outside Patna municipal offices on July 19. Bihar Urban Development Minister Narayan Yadav has declared the strike "illegal" and threatened "severe action" against workers if their industrial action continues.

Daily wage workers demand protection from abuse

Twenty five thousand daily-wage state government workers in the southern Indian state of Karnataka began indefinite strike action on July 22, demanding regulations to protect them from abuse and from being forced to carry out personal work for senior department officials. They also want the government to end its retrenchment of daily-wage workers in the Public Works, Forest, Irrigation, Engineering and other departments and for the provision of service benefits, including retirement pensions.

Child care workers strike for improved conditions

Anganwadi Centre (child care centres) workers in Pondicherry and Karaikal in southern India have been on strike since July 8 to demand the introduction of laws governing their conditions of employment.

Anganwadi Centres provide supplementary nutritional food to pre-school children in addition to health care and educational facilities. There are about 700 Anganwadi Centres in the three regions providing for 50,000 children. Anganwadi staff wage costs are presently shared between the central and state governments.

Sri Lanka Telecom workers fight job cuts

Sri Lanka Telecom workers demonstrated outside the company's offices in Colombo and Kandy on July 18 to demand that the Nippon Telegraph Telecommunication management withdraw plans to lay off 4,000 employees. The Japanese-owned telco has a 35 percent share in the former state-owned company. The Sri Lankan government plans to sell the remainder to private bidders.

The workers also want the present secret salary and evaluation system ended and the introduction of measures to streamline recruitment, promotions and transfers. Other demands include a 25 percent salary increase and a 10 percent share distribution to employees.

Hospital workers demonstrate in Colombo

On July 17, about 2,500 hospital workers picketed Sri Lankan Ministry of Health premises in Colombo as part of a campaign for a 10-point log of claims. Their claims include a salary increase to 5,000 rupees (\$US50) and further pay rises to compensate for cost of living increases. They also

want the current 2,500-rupee uniform allowance increased to 7,000 rupees, an accident allowance, improved training for hospital attendants and permanency for all casual and temporary employees.

The workers are planning a weeklong national strike if the authorities do not respond to their demands within two weeks.

Tri Star garment workers occupy factory

About 375 garment workers employed by Tri Star Apparel in Bandarawela, Sri Lanka have been occupying the company factory since July 13. Eight days earlier, the company announced that workers would be sent on compulsory leave for three months without pay. The occupation began when the management attempted to shut down production and seal-off the plant. Management has not paid wages, overtime or welfare payments for May and June.

Tri Star Apparel is the biggest garment manufacturing chain in Sri Lanka, operating about 30 plants. The company has closed more than 10 of its factories following a drop in the garment export market.

Court ends nurses' campaign

The Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) terminated the bargaining period in the long-running state nurses' pay dispute this week and ordered the matter into arbitration. The IRC decision means that any further industrial action by Queensland nurses to obtain a decent pay increase and improved working conditions will be deemed illegal.

Queensland Industrial Relations Minister Gordon Nuttall attacked the nurses' union after the IRC decision declaring that it had "to be held accountable for their actions".

The nurses have been campaigning for more than seven weeks for a new work agreement, including an 18 percent wage rise to be implemented over two years. The state Labor government has refused to budge on its offer of 6 and 9.5 percent over two years, depending on nurses' experience, and a one-off \$1,500 qualifications payment.

Clothing workers occupy company office

Around 50 workers from the Neat 'n' Trim clothing factory in Noble Park, Melbourne, struck on July 22 for improved wages and conditions. On Wednesday the strikers, members of the Textile Clothing and Footwear Union, occupied the company's boardroom for four hours. Management has rejected workers' requests that they be allowed to discuss their claims with the company's owner. The strike is continuing.

New Zealand hospital workers strike over pay

About 230 food staff and orderlies at four Auckland hospitals held a 48-hour strike on July 18. The workers rejected a 2 percent pay rise offer by the Auckland District Health Board (DHB) and voted for a three-day walkout unless it is improved. A spokesman for the workers said they wanted at least 3 percent and were determined "not to accept a below-inflation offer".

The DHB defended its offer as "fair and realistic" declaring that it was under orders from the Labour-Alliance government to cut \$25 million from an \$85 million deficit.

As the orderlies' strike took place, the nurses' union signed off on a multi-employer collective agreement for 4,500 nurses and midwives across the Auckland region's three health boards. Nurses will receive a 9 percent pay increase over three years, including 4 percent backdated to February. There were widespread pockets of resistance to the deal, which was accepted by just 60 percent of nurses who cast votes.

Teachers' strikes cancelled

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) cancelled a series of rolling strikes this week, on the eve of New Zealand's parliamentary elections. The union is taking the 16-month dispute over pay and conditions into arbitration after the recommendation to do so was approved by 76 percent of the PPTA membership.

The move to arbitration was promoted by the Labor-Alliance government after months of sporadic industrial action and widening rebellion against the union's handling of the dispute. Faced with an all-

out strike one day before the election, Education Minister Trevor Mallard said he was "exceptionally relieved" with the decision.

All "high-level" industrial action, such as strikes, will be postponed until the arbitration panel brings down its recommendations on a new pay deal in about three weeks time. Low-level action, including a number of bans, will continue. Union members have twice rejected government-union deals.

Sacked television workers take court action

Sacked staff from NOW television in Christchurch are pushing ahead with a compensation claim against the station's former owner, CHTV. Court proceedings will be filed next week on behalf of the 25 people who lost their jobs when NOW went off the air on July 4, after a takeover by regional rival Canterbury Television.

The compensation claim is likely to exceed \$500,000. Former NOW employees are still owed holiday pay and money in lieu of notice. A CHTV spokesman said keeping NOW afloat had been costing about \$200,000 a month and was "the biggest cash drain" for parent company London-based West 175 Media.

Air Pacific workers strike

Members of the Fiji Aviation Workers Associated (FAWA) at Air Pacific walked off the job on July 24. The 500 workers, mainly engineers, flight attendants and terminal staff, are seeking pay increases, cost of living adjustments and improved working conditions. There are a number of other unresolved issues, including problems associated with redundancy arrangements for 13 workers sacked in 1998. The union had complied with the Registrar of Trade Unions requirements and given 28 days notice of the strike.

The strike was called following a short campaign involving workers calling in sick, causing minor disruptions to Air Pacific flights. An attempt by Air Pacific management to use Air Terminal Services staff as strike breakers failed when the Federated Airlines Staff Association backed FAWA members and refused to cooperate. Air Pacific is using charter aircraft from Qantas and Air New Zealand and managers are transporting customers to and from Nadi International Airport.

FAWA general secretary Attar Singh said Air Pacific has refused to conduct further negotiations and the dispute has been referred to arbitration. A date for the hearing date is yet to be set.

Fiji airport workers win back pay

Permanent Arbitrator John Semisi this week ordered Airports Fiji Limited (AFL) to pay members of the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) \$4,000 (\$US1893) each, backdated to January 1. The payment will bring FPSA members' pay into line with AFL contract workers who received a similar payment in January 2000. The tribunal also ordered that FPSA members receive the increments paid to other AFL employees.



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