

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 August 2002

Korean security guards assault hospital workers

At least 100 security guards stormed Halla Hospital on Chejuin, a southern resort island in South Korea, in early hours of August 24 and evicted striking nurses and technicians. One witness said police “merely looked” as the company thugs assaulted the mainly women workers. Twenty were injured. The incident occurred three days after the management sacked 108 of the 115 workers who participated in the strike action. The health workers had been occupying the building since May 29 to demand improved working conditions for casual staff, a 12 percent pay increase and a guaranteed monthly wage of 850,000 won (about \$US707).

In a separate dispute, more than 1,000 health workers at six hospitals have been on strike for nearly three months over management failure to negotiate improved wages and conditions. The strike is illegal under the government’s new compulsory mediation laws. On August 22, government prosecutors indicted union leaders at the Kangnam St Marys Hospital and another hospital in Seoul. In all, five officials have been charged.

Police seize labor activists in Indonesia

Armed police arrested two labour activists in the West Java capital of Bandung on August 27. The arrests are part of an ongoing government campaign to suppress opposition in the province to two controversial anti-labour bills presently being debated in the House of Representatives. To date, 34 activists have been arrested.

The two workers, who are employees of PT Matahari in the Cimahi industrial zone, have been charged with leading strike action against the bills and demonstrations against violent police attacks on protesters. Police armed with machine guns detained the workers while they were demonstrating with 200 strikers outside PT Matahari’s warehouse.

On August 26, police arrested 32 workers for allegedly inciting a confrontation between protestors and security officers. The incident is alleged to have occurred when thousands of workers from a number of industrial estates marched through Bandung to demand the West Java legislative council lobby the national House of Representatives to reject the anti-labour bills.

Indian bank employees go on national strike

On August 29, some 200,000 public and private sector bank employees took national strike in India to demand a wage rise. The workers also want the government to accelerate the flow of credit to farmers to facilitate “employment generation and poverty alleviation”. On August 23, workers protested outside bank head offices in all state capitals.

All India Bank Officers Confederation General Secretary Shantha Raju, said bank officers had been “forced to resort to strike” because the Indian Banks’ Association and the government had failed to redress workers’ grievances.

On August 24, bank workers from 36 unions in Karnataka state marched from Bangalore’s State Bank of Mysore to the governor’s office in protest against the privatisation of public sector banks.

Indian college teachers on strike

Up to 7,000 professors and lecturers attached to 67 government arts and science colleges in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu have been on strike since August 21 against government attempts to place the colleges under university control.

College staff held gate meetings on August 26 and a mass hunger strike the next day. A *dharna* or sit-in protest was planned for August 31 and rallies on September 5 and 6. The Democratic Students’ Organisation and the Students’ Federation of India are supporting the actions and over 200,000 students are boycotting classes.

India’s 1,100 government colleges, which are almost fully financed by the national and state governments, provide affordable higher education to middle and working class youth. The Tamil Nadu government’s attempt to convert them in constituent units of the universities is a blatant cost-cutting measure, aimed at transferring costs directly onto the students. In this occurs, fees would soar dramatically. Students studying a Master in Computer Application course, for example, would see tuition costs rise from 1,500 rupees (\$US30) a year to 30,000 rupees (\$620). It will also mean that students lose other subsidies, such as free board and a 1,000-rupee study allowance.

Doctors in Sri Lanka strike

More than 300 residential medical officers working in government hospitals and dispensaries in north and east Sri Lanka struck on August 20 to demand a “special mission allowance” equal to the monthly basic salary.

The current allowance is only paid to non-residential doctors to encourage them to work in the war-torn areas. A Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) spokesman said that GMOA branches in the regions will meet shortly decide on whether to launch an indefinite strike.

Sri Lankan health workers strike for overtime pay

Nurses and health workers in seven rural hospitals in Sri Lanka struck on August 26 to demand overtime payments that have been delayed for the past six months. Workers employed in rural and

central dispensaries in the Monaragala district joined the strikers. Three days earlier, staff in government hospitals in Polonnaruwa and Anuradhapura in the country's north-central province held a lunchtime protest against the non-payment of overtime, transport allowances and daily wages.

Sri Lankan insurance workers fight privatisation

Insurance workers from the Sri Lanka Insurance Corporation's head office and 75 branch offices walked off the job for two hours on August 20 in protest over government plans to privatise the company. The stoppage is part of a campaign begun two weeks ago that has included demonstrations in Colombo, Kandy, Galle and Matara.

Australian health workers union moves to call off hospital dispute

Queensland Health made an improved pay offer to public sector non-nursing hospital staff this week in a bid to end a two-month long industrial dispute that has led to the imposition of widespread work bans and a series of stoppages.

The authority had offered an annual three percent increase for the next three years but this was overwhelmingly rejected by health workers. Even though the offer has been increased to just 3.8 percent, the 10 unions representing more than 30,000 workers will call representative meetings this week to recommend its acceptance.

If meetings endorse the proposal, a strike planned for next week will be canceled and all bans lifted. The recommendation will then go to general membership meetings for ratification.

Air traffic controllers ordered not to strike in Australia

A national five-hour strike by 1,100 air traffic controllers scheduled for August 30 was called off at the last minute after the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) deemed it illegal and ordered it not to proceed. The strike was called by Civil Air, the controllers' union, over a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement.

The AIRC ruled that because the union had an "in principle" agreement with the employer, Air Services of Australia, the strike was not protected under the Act, which only allows industrial action during work agreement bargaining periods. The union, however, claims there are still outstanding issues relating to fatigue and leave entitlements that Air Services refuse to discuss. An agreement has never been ratified by a general meeting of controllers.

New Zealand train crews strike over sacking

All commuter trains in the greater Wellington region stopped for 20 hours on August 22 and 23, when train crews struck over threats to sack a driver. Tranz Rail sought an injunction against the strike, which was illegal under the Employment Relations Act. The crews returned to work after Tranz Rail agreed to schedule talks with the union.

The driver was stood down for allegedly passing through a red light. It was his second such offence in just two months. Co-workers have blamed management, claiming that the driver, who has been diagnosed with clinical depression, has been pressured back to work. He was told he had taken too many sick days and would be sacked if incapable of working.

It was the second strike this year by rail workers. In February,

staff walked out after a conductor was sacked. A spokesman for the rail workers said that the wildcat strikes were symptomatic of a "massive break down in relations" between staff and management.

Otago University staff to strike over pay

Staff at New Zealand's University of Otago voted to strike on September 2, despite threats by the university administration that employees could be suspended without pay. The strike was called after unions representing academic and general staff rejected a 1.5 percent pay increase and refused to continue negotiating until the university came up with a "reasonable" offer.

In a separate dispute at the university, the Public Service Association (PSA) is taking legal action to prevent the university advertising for new staff. The PSA claims that the university has breached "management of change" provisions in a collective employment agreement by not offering displaced staff the first available positions.

NZ Phonebet operators campaign for equal pay

Operators at TAB Phonebet staged a work-to-rule on August 24, as part of a campaign to win pay parity. The operators take telephone bets during race meetings. The TAB has set-up a two-tier employment pattern in its Phonebet service. Operators termed as "non core" are paid \$NZ1.41 an hour less than those classified as "core" employees even though both groups do the same work.

The Service & Food Workers Union said TAB had agreed to a union claim to close the gap between the two categories, but management had failed to settle on a timetable to implement the change. Union members will target key race meetings over coming weeks. Phonebet call centres in Auckland, Hamilton, Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch will be affected.

Tahiti newspaper workers strike over wages

Printers, technicians and journalists employed by Tahiti daily newspapers *La Depeche de Tahiti* and *Les Nouvelles de Tahiti*, began indefinite strike action on August 19, after negotiations with the management broke down. The workers are demanding wage improvements for journalists and shift workers. The union has demanded a meeting with Hersant, the newspapers' Paris-based owners, to resolve the issue. The dispute involves 150 workers.



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