

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 August 2002

Reebok workers protest over job losses

About 1,000 Indonesian employees of Reebok protested outside the US embassy in Jakarta on Monday chanting, "Reebok the oppressor" and "Reebok the killer". The demonstration was called to oppose the international shoe company cutting orders without notice to its contractor plant in Bandung, West Java in April. PT Primarindo Asia Infrastructure owns the Bandung plant and unless another contract can be found to replace Reebok orders, workers will lose their jobs.

One of the protesters said Reebok was relocating to Vietnam to take advantage of lower operating costs and cheaper wage rates. "We want compensation... but Reebok doesn't care about us. We've talked to Reebok but they've never kept their promises," he said.

Last week, Massachusetts-based Reebok announced a 2 percent fall in its second quarter international sales to \$250.9 million from \$256 million in the corresponding period in 2001. Its US sales, however, rose from \$315.4 million to \$334 million in the same period.

Rally opposes Malaysian anti-immigrant laws

Workers and officials from several labour organizations rallied outside the Malaysian Embassy in South Jakarta last Wednesday to protest new Malaysian immigration laws. The laws, which took effect on August 1, allow the government to deport thousands of so-called illegal immigrant workers as well as imposing six-month mandatory jail terms and up to six strokes of the cane for those refusing to leave.

Since March, Malaysia has deported 300,000 workers, or about half of an estimated 600,000 alleged to be in the country illegally. There are about two million guest workers currently in Malaysia.

The demonstrators carried banners that read, "Malaysia is truly racist Asia", "Without migrant workers, the Malaysia government will collapse" and "Who do you think works on Malaysian plantations?" They demanded that Jakarta protect threatened Indonesian immigrant workers and provide health care, logistical support and legal services for deported workers. "The government should not just keep silent, as the country has enjoyed money the workers sent home," one protester shouted out.

The demonstration was organised by the Indonesian Migrant Workers Defense Consortium (Kopbumi), the National Network of Indonesian Migrant Labor, the Indonesia Legal Aid Association for Women Empowerment and Justice, and the Indonesia Legal Aid Foundation.

Pakistani cement workers continue hunger strike

A hunger strike by six workers from the Zeal Park cement factory in Hyderabad entered its tenth day on July 27. The workers are protesting outside Hyderabad Press Club to demand payment of compensation, gratuity and provident funds dues promised by the Zeal Park management. They have also called for the factory owner to be arrested, alleging that he defrauded them of tens of millions of rupees. The workers claim the company issued 240 cheques and other documents relating to provident dues that proved to be false.

Plantation workers launch work to rule

About 300,000 tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka began an indefinite "work to rule" campaign on July 31 in support of their demand for a pay

increase. The workers, from eight plantation districts, have banned overtime and refused to perform optional duties such as attending vegetable patches and tending livestock at plantation superintendents' homes.

The campaign, organised by the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC), the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union and the Joint Plantation Trade Union, is to demand the basic wage be increased from 121 rupees (just over \$US1.2) to 151 rupees per day. On Wednesday, the Employers Federation and the Regional Plantation Companies offered 136 rupees a day plus an additional six rupees attendance bonus, which requires a 75 percent attendance each month.

The CWC national organiser Ramalingam Yogarajan, who is also a member of parliament, rushed to assure the government that the campaign was not a strike and that employees would report for work as usual. "There will be no adverse effects on the economy," Yogarajan promised.

Sri Lankan technical officers demand salary increase

About 1,000 technical officers from the Technical Service Association demonstrated in Colombo on July 26 to demand salary increases in line with the recommendations of the Devendra Commission report on wages. The report was submitted to the government some time ago. Technical officers called on the government to release the report and act on it. They are demanding an end to salary anomalies, inclusion of their present 2,000 rupee (\$US20) monthly allowance in the basic pay rate and introduction of an indexed cost-of-living allowance.

Hospital staff campaign against cut to water supply

Doctors and health workers at the government-owned Wellaway district hospital in Sri Lanka struck for one day on July 26 over council water cuts to the hospital. Wellaway Regional Council cut the water supply, claiming that the hospital had not settled outstanding bills and declaring that it would not restore the service until all the arrears were fully paid. The council agreed to temporarily restore supply after the strike action.

Qantas airport workers strike over wage claim

About 6,000 Qantas check-in, freight and IT staff held a series of 12-hour walks-offs across Australia on August 2 for a new work agreement, including a 5 percent wage rise per annum for two years and improved working conditions. The industrial action mainly affected domestic passenger flights.

The workers, members of the Australian Services Union, decided to strike after rejecting a management offer of 3 percent per annum for three years. The union said there might be further strike action because Qantas has refused to continue negotiations. A union spokesperson said that while workers accepted a 12-month wage freeze last year, Qantas made a record profit of over \$550 million.

Company announces closure of Lakes Creek meat plant

About 700 meat workers at Lakes Creek abattoir in the Queensland regional town of Rockhampton were told this week that the plant would close on September 4. Lakes Creek, owned by Kerry Packer's Consolidated Meat Group (CMG), has told workers they will not receive

any severance pay until the official closure date.

The workers have been in conflict with the company since December when CMG imposed a lockout. Citing financial problems, CMG demanded cuts in wages and working conditions. Workers were forced to accept Federal Award conditions in May this year under a union-brokered agreement that saw that weekly wages slashed by up to \$320.

A series of strikes broke out between May and July after the union accused management of renegeing on previously agreed conditions. The workers also refused to accept production and wage levels imposed by the company in the boning room. The annual after-tax wage for an experienced boner last year was \$38,000 and this was cut to just \$30,000.

Brisbane therapists begin rolling strikes

About 80 radiation therapists at the Royal Brisbane, Princess Alexandra and Mater hospitals in Brisbane, Queensland walked off the job for a day on July 31 to demand improved wages and conditions. They have decided to strike every Wednesday.

A spokesman for the striking workers said Queensland therapists were paid far less than their colleagues in other Australian states. "These highly skilled workers are leaving the state to pursue their careers in other parts of Australia, and even overseas, because they are being offered higher pay and better working conditions," he said.

According to the union, patient waiting lists for radiation treatment often exceeded international standards and in regional centres like Townsville 25 percent of radiation therapists positions were unfilled. Therapists in Townsville are considering joining strike action next Wednesday.

Hotel workers vote down agreement

Hilton Hotel workers in Adelaide voted down a management-proposed enterprise work agreement on July 26-27. Under the deal, workers could be forced to work 20 consecutive days, receiving less in overtime penalties. They could also be rostered off, if not needed, resulting in take-home pay reductions.

The Hilton workers have been campaigning for more than six months for a new agreement. Union officials claim they were denied right-of-entry to discuss issues while management conducted one-on-one meetings with workers in an attempt to convince them to vote yes in the ballot.

Union calls strike over inquiry submission

Up to 900 building workers employed by Grocon in Victoria struck for 48 hours this week. The workers were protesting over a submission to the building industry royal commission by Bob Howard, the company's former industrial chief.

His submission called for the unions' role in safety to be "redefined". He also criticised the lack of "practical protection" against what he termed "unlawful industrial action" and proposed a national agency to "police industrial relations".

Workplace Relations Minister Tony Abbott called the royal commission last August, a few months before the federal election, following a report from the government's Employment Advocate, claiming union intimidation and corruption in the industry.

To date, most major building companies in Victoria have supported the inquiry because they have long-established relationships with the building unions that have guaranteed them industrial peace. According to a union spokesman, the 48-hour stoppage at Grocon was the first company-wide strike action.

Air New Zealand pushes through wage freeze

Air New Zealand engineers withdrew threatened strike action this week and ended a three-month long dispute over an employment agreement. The new agreement includes a 12-month wage freeze. The company had told the union that continued industrial action could result in the loss of a maintenance contract with Qantas.

Even so, only 57 percent of the 900 engineers at Air New Zealand covered by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Airline Technicians Association voted for the 18-month agreement that

gives them a 2.5 percent pay rise in 12 months' time and another 1.2 percent three months later.

The final settlement sets the stage for a wider assault on wages and conditions as the troubled air carrier moves to cut costs and attract business. The company unveiled plans on July 31 to turn its domestic operation into a budget "no frills" airline and drastically reduce fares.

Qantas backs Air Pacific to break strike

A strike by over 400 employees at Fiji's national airline Air Pacific has entered its second week. The strikers, members of the Fijian Airport Workers Association (FAWA), are demanding the company resolve long standing pay, allowances, working condition and redundancy issues dating back to 1998.

The union referred the redundancy issue to Fiji's Court of Appeal after Air Pacific won a High Court case which ruled the airline did not have to pay a \$1.5 million redundancy payout stipulated in a 1999 award.

Air Pacific has used planes and crew provided by Qantas to carry 10,000 passengers in and out of the country each week during the strike action. Qantas owns 46 percent of Air Pacific.

FAWA general secretary Attar Singh said his members would not budge on their demands and the strike would continue until management addressed their grievances.

Fiji public servants strike over job evaluation negotiations

About 140 workers at the Fiji National Provident Fund walked off the job on July 30 in the middle of a union report on negotiations on a job evaluation exercise. The workers, members of the Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union, took strike action because management changed proposals on the job evaluation process. A union spokesman said: "It was supposed to be a meeting to update the members and some decided to interpret it as a walk-out."

Solomon Island teachers strike enters its third week

Over 7,000 Solomon Island teachers are on strike because their salaries are not being paid on time. While education authorities claim the strike by National Teachers Association (NTA) members is illegal, NTA officials are continuing to meet with the government.

The government is facing a \$28 million (\$US4 million) blowout in salary and wage expenses and is unable to settle bills amounting to \$2 million. All government workers are facing disruptions to pay arrangements and basic services are gradually grinding to a standstill. Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza is considering a plan to sack 1,300 workers from 5,000-strong civil service, claiming the government cannot afford to pay them.



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