Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 August 2002

South Korean bank workers plan anti-merger strike

On August 8, workers employed at Seoul Bank agreed to strike against company plans to merge with Hana Bank, which they believe will lead to massive layoffs. Bank workers unions are currently discussing the "timing and methods" of the strike. The South Korean government has wanted Hana Bank to take over the bank for some time, in order to recover funds it has injected into Seoul Bank since the 1997 foreign exchange crisis.

Thai suitcase maker victimises union workers

Light House Company in Bangkok, which makes suitcases for Samsonite, is continuing to harass union members after agreeing on July 22 to reinstate 57 of the 130 workers it sacked earlier this year. The workers were sacked for carrying out union activities and taking industrial action.

Among those reemployed were 20 union representatives but they have been assigned to duties outside the plant and cannot enter the factory to conduct union work. On August 2, Light House sacked one of the union officials, claiming he had failed to submit a written application for continued employment.

Management is also victimising the other 37 reinstated workers who resumed duties inside the plant. They have been separated from each other, are not allowed to meet or talk in the plant and have been refused overtime under conditions where it is difficult to survive on the minimum wage. Another 73 workers remain sacked and are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the factory.

Electricity workers rally against privatisation

Workers at the Metropolitan Electricity Authority (MEA) rallied outside Government House in Bangkok on August 6 against plans to speed up privatisation of the state-owned agency. Supporters from the Port Authority of Thailand, State Railway of Thailand, Bangkok Mass Transit Authority and Metropolitan Waterworks Authority joined the MEA workers. These sectors are also facing privatisation.

The protesters demanded the government review its decision to allow a consortium of the Petroleum Authority of Thailand and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand to establish a power plant at Nong Ngu Hao airport. The MEA currently supplies electricity to the airport.

Malaysian public sector workers to picket

About 350 workers employed in five Malaysian government departments voted this week to begin protest pickets against the privatisation of their departments. The departments include pre-press, graphics, printing, stores and distribution, and business and marketing.

Union president Nordin Che Wan said the union did not oppose the government decision to hand over the enterprises to private company Dawama Sdn Bhd but wanted to ensure that workers would not lose benefits they currently receive as civil servants. Benefits threatened include a range of salary increments, job appointments, an annual bonus and the retention of a new remuneration scheme.

Pakistani municipal workers on strike

Some 300 municipal workers at the Taluka City Council in Hyderabad struck for 24 hours on August 3 in protest over non-payment of salaries. While employees have not received wages for the past two months, some were not paid for May, a union spokesman said. The strikers demonstrated in the council compound and on the office-building roof. Four workers staged a token hunger strike.

Sri Lankan co-operative workers oppose forced retirement

On July 30, employees from the government-owned Co-operative Wholesale Establishment protested outside Ministry of Commerce premises in Colombo over the introduction of compulsory retirement for 55-year-old workers. Six hundred workers were forcibly retired on July 31.

Inadequate post-retirement benefits means that those pushed out face severe economic hardship. The protestors also opposed plans to privatise the enterprise and the introduction of a new Value Added Tax.

Bank workers picket against privatisation

Sri Lankan state bank workers staged lunchtime pickets outside their banks over two days from August 7 to protest against government moves to privatise the state-owned institutions. Staff from the country's major banks participated, including the Peoples Bank, Bank of Ceylon, National Savings Bank and State Mortgage Bank.

Thousands of miners on strike in India

About 100,000 mine workers employed by the Singareni Collieries Company Limited (SCCL), one of the largest public sector coal companies in India, went on strike from August 5 over a 40-demand log of claims. One of their major claims is

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for direct payment of salaries, rather than by bank transactions. The strikers are also seeking the removal of a company limit on the amount of free power provided to workers' homes. SCCL operates 67 mines, including 57 underground mines.

Sacked meatworkers refused assistance

The Australian federal government has rejected calls for assistance for the 700 workers dismissed last week from Lakes Creek meatworks in the regional town of Rockhampton in Queensland.

Agriculture Minister Warren Truss refused assistance available under a government scheme that covers workers for unpaid entitlements, despite the fact that the meatworkers will not receive any severance pay until the plant is officially closed on September 4. Truss claimed that workers and the Meat Industry Union were responsible for the closure because they had taken strike action over what he termed "unreasonable pay and working conditions".

Since December, Consolidated Meat Group, the plant's owner, has waged a vicious campaign, including a protracted lockout, to slash previous wage levels, cut staff and impose speed-ups. Limited strike action was conducted under Workplace Relations Act guidelines, which allows industrial action during enterprise bargaining periods.

New Zealand mill workers boycott contractor

Kinleith pulp and paper mill workers in New Zealand decided this week to maintain their opposition to company instructions that they seek alternative work with a contractor. The company plans to lay off 381 of the mill's 770 employees and contract out its maintenance and stores activities.

Last week mill owner Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) wrote to employees urging them to support the scheme and apply for jobs with the designated engineering contractor ABB by August 2. The workers unanimously opposed the letter and are demanding the company maintain an integrated mill workforce.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, however, has suppressed calls for industrial action to defend the jobs and steered the dispute into a legal challenge, arguing that it had not been properly "consulted" over the sackings. The union is appealing the result of its first legal hearing, which found against the union and gave CHH the green light to proceed with the layoffs.

Businessman wins appeal over picket death

On August 6, the New Zealand High Court in Christchurch acquitted businessman Derek Powell of the manslaughter of picketer Christine Clarke. Powell, who had originally been charged with Clarke's murder, was eventually found guilty on a lesser charge of manslaughter. He immediately appealed the conviction, however, and won a re-trial in the High Court.

Clarke, a 45-year-old mother and wife of a waterside worker, died after an incident on a picket line at the Port of Lyttelton on December 29, 1999. Workers had been protesting against the contracting out of wharf labour by the port company. Powell, who was driving a four-wheel drive vehicle, accelerated through picket line, striking Clarke.

The prosecution argued that Clarke was clearly visible as Powell accelerated but the defence disputed the claim. In an attempt to win jury support, Powell's lawyer blamed the striking workers for the incident, claiming they had mounted an "illegal" picket line. Chief Justice Sian Elias, who presided over the re-trial, told jury members to put themselves in Powell's shoes on the day.

Solomon Island teachers continue strike

A strike by 7,000 Solomon Islands teachers continued this week after the government failed to honour an August 2 promise to regularise salary payments and advance all outstanding wages. The teachers, like many other sectors of the civil service, have not been paid their salaries on time for a protracted period.

The government, which is facing a $28 million ($US4 million) blowout in salary and wage expenses and unable to settle bills totalling $2 million, claims it does not have the finances to meet the teachers' claims. Members of the police force, however, received their pay and all outstanding wages last Friday.

PNG union ends action against privatisation

Communication workers employed by government-owned Telikom in Papua New Guinea held work stoppages last week against plans to sell-off the enterprise. Amalgamated Telcom Holdings of Fiji and the Steamship Group will acquire the government's 50.1 share in the company for 108 million kina (just over $US28 million).

On August 6, the Communication Workers Union ended all industrial action after the caretaker cabinet of newly elected Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare agreed to negotiations. CWU secretary-general Emmanuel Kairu said he would call on cabinet to stop the Telikom sale and declared that the union had "confidence in the new prime minister".

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