Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 August 2002

Indonesian plantation workers strike

Over 25,000 workers employed by the state-owned palm oil company PT Perkebunan Nusantara II (PTPN II) in Indonesia went strike on Tuesday over wages, permanency and the mismanagement of the enterprise. Strikers are occupying the company's main office in Tanjungmorawa and have sent a contingent to demonstrate outside the North Sumatra provincial legislature building.

Union spokesman Indro Suhito said employees would continue industrial action until State Enterprises Minister Laksamana Sukardi agreed to replace the company's board of management. Workers allege that management is responsible for PTPN II's financial crisis, which includes a 324.2 billion rupiah ($US36.6 million) bank debt.

The strikers are also demanding the company pay off its 4.2 billion rupiah debt to PT Jamsostek, the state-owned insurance company that runs the employees' insurance scheme, comply with the province's minimum wage standard and make hundreds of casual workers permanent. While the monthly minimum wage is set at 464,000 rupiah per month, many workers are only paid 378,000 rupiah ($US42).

Carnage continues in China's mines

Rescue teams recovered the bodies of 10 workers killed by a gas explosion at the end of last week at the Lixin Coal Mine in Jixi, Heilongjiang province in northeast China. One worker remains missing, with little hope he will be found alive.

According to state media outlets, the mine was operating illegally and had been ordered closed for safety checks not long before the explosion occurred. The accident is only the latest in series of disasters in legal, illegal and state-owned coal mines across China, which have claimed 3,500 lives so far this year. One hundred and fifteen workers were killed at another Jixi mine in June.

Last Sunday eight miners were confirmed dead after two days of rescue efforts at a flooded coal mine in the central province of Henan.

Indian municipal workers strike over unpaid wages

About 100,000 municipal and 70,000 panchayat (village council) workers in Vijayawada, Andra Pradesh in south India struck on August 13 to demand authorities act on unpaid wages. Last month, municipal workers marched in Hyderabad, the Andra Pradesh state capital, over the same issue.

According to Municipal Employees Federation honorary president Donepudi Kasinath, thousands of workers employed in 60 percent of the state's 109 municipalities have not been paid for periods ranging between three and nine months.

According to existing agreements, municipal authorities should pay salaries in the first week of each month. This requirement has been increasingly ignored, however, following recent government guidelines directing civic bodies to reduce staff salaries to 30 percent of their budget.

Sri Lankan health service clerks begin wage campaign

About 1,200 clerks employed in Sri Lanka's government health service began a "sick leave" campaign on August 7 and demonstrated outside the Ministry of Health premises. The campaign, which centres on workers reporting in sick, is in support of an 11-item log of claims, including a minimum 9,000-rupee ($US90) monthly salary. Workers are threatening national strike action if the government fails to respond to their demands within 14 days.

Postal workers protest privatisation

On August 6, more than 200 postal and telecommunication workers affiliated to the United Trade Union Federation of the Postal Department demonstrated outside the main post office in Kandy. The action, one of a series staged by postal workers over the past month, was called to oppose government plans to privatise postal services.

In a separate dispute, workers from Sri Lankan Insurance in Galle, 112 kilometres south of Colombo, staged a protest outside the main bus terminal. The protestors collected signatures on a public petition opposing privatisation of the terminal.

Victorian nurses strike over wages

Maternal and child health nurses employed by the Macedon Ranges Health Services in rural Victoria voted this week to continue industrial action to gain wage parity with their counterparts employed in other councils and state government nurses.

The nurses are maintaining bans on administrative tasks imposed on July 31, after the health services management refused to negotiate a satisfactory resolution to the dispute.

The Australian Nurses Federation says the nurses are paid 10 percent less than their public sector colleagues. The gap is even wider because public sector nurses also receive a range of additional payments, including a qualification allowance.

At the same time, staff at 100 private aged-care centres across the state are maintaining work bans established a month ago over a new enterprise agreement. Their demands include wage parity with public sector aged-care employees, who are paid up to 11 percent

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more than the private sector workers.

Protest denounces building industry inquiry

About 5,000 unionists marched through central Melbourne on Monday to protest against the Howard government's royal commission into the building industry. The government commissioned the inquiry last August on the basis of unsubstantiated allegations of union corruption and violence.

Workers from seven unions chanted slogans condemning the inquiry as a "kangaroo court" as they marched down busy Collins Street. A large continent of police on horseback and on foot cordoned off the building where the inquiry was in session.

The royal commission, which has sat in Perth, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne over the past nine months, has received little backing from the major construction companies, which rely on the unions to enforce industrial peace on building projects. Despite interviewing scores of people, the inquiry has so far failed to produce any significant evidence to support the original allegations.

Cement workers locked out

Eighty workers employed by Brighton Cement Company in Birkenhead near Adelaide were locked out on Monday when they attempted to return to work after a three-week strike over a new enterprise agreement. The workers, members of the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, say their main disagreement with management is over job security, not wages.

Contract workers on the job decided to strike in support of the locked-out employees, leaving only 60 of the company's 220-strong workforce in the plant. The locked-out workers have mounted a 24-hour picket outside the plant's main entrance.

Salt workers vote on new offer

Forty employees at Cheetham Saltworks in Price, South Australia are currently voting on a new enterprise agreement wage offer. The workers struck for several hours on Monday causing disruptions at the plant. The Australian Workers Union has advised its members to accept the company's offer of 4 percent annual pay increases for two years. Union members originally demanded 5 percent annual increases for the same period.

New Zealand teachers to freeze new school qualification

Secondary teachers in New Zealand, already involved in a 16-month long campaign over wages and working conditions, are planning action that will bring them into conflict with the reelected Labour government.

A Post Primary Teachers Association's (PPTA) conference scheduled for next month is expected to endorse a recommendation that teachers refuse to implement levels 2 and 3 of the controversial National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) qualification for the next two years. If accepted, the ban will affect six and seven form students.

Introduction of the NCEA has been a central issue in the prolonged pay and working conditions dispute. Teachers believe the move to extend NCEA, which presently covers fifth-formers, will exacerbate already extensive administration workload problems.

Rest home staff campaign for pay increase

Workers at New Zealand's biggest rest home and retirement village chains, Metlife and Ryman Healthcare, are planning strike action in the next weeks over lack of progress in pay talks.

Caregivers and other workers at the Wairarapa Retirement Village in Masterton struck for 24 hours on August 15, after rejecting a 2 percent pay offer from Metlife. Staff employed by the company in Auckland are also preparing to take industrial action. Metlife workers previously accepted a two-year pay freeze but decided on industrial action when they discovered that the company was making a healthy profit.

Ryman Healthcare workers in Wellington are also planning action. Workers at the company's Malvina Major home have given 14 days' notice of industrial action, while employees at the Rita Angus and Shona McFarlane retirement villages have voted to strike during August.

Solomon Islands government employees escalate strike action

Solomon Islands airports closed on August 13, after civil servants in customs, immigration, quarantine and civil aviation struck over unpaid wages. The workers have not been paid for six weeks because of a government budgetary crisis.

The Solomon Islands Public Employees Union ended strike action the following day, after the government agreed to negotiate on the dispute. The strike had delayed the departure of Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza for the 16-nation Pacific Islands Forum summit in Fiji.

Other public sector workers have also taken action over unpaid wages. Nurses and paramedics have partially withdrawn their services, teachers have been on a work-to-rule for six weeks and court employees have taken strike action.

Some 200 Solomon Island students attending the University of South Pacific in Fiji have also been affected by the financial crisis and may be forced to end their studies and return home. A university spokesman said the Solomon Islands government owes the university more than $US3.3 million and cannot any longer afford to support the students.

The country's financial crisis follows more than two years of civil war and continuing ethnic conflict that has left key export industries closed or only partially operational.

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