

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 June 2003

Indian tanker drivers continue indefinite strike

An indefinite strike by Indian tanker drivers and cleaners on June 2 has continued for more than 10 days, with the tanker lorry owners' association staying away from talks called by the Labour Department. The workers, employed to transport LPG gas from oil refineries, want a pay increase and bonus, introduction of a provident fund, gratuity, better leave provisions and improved compensation for accident or death while on duty.

The strike has stopped the movement of LPG from the refineries and bottling plants of the major oil companies in Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Pondicherry and Goa. The police have attacked striking workers several times. Following a compromise settlement, the strike was called off in the state of Kerala.

Sri Lankan government doctors on strike

Thousands of government medical doctors and dental surgeons throughout Sri Lanka are on strike over salary anomalies and for the maintenance of a risk allowance paid to medical officers working in the country's war-ravaged North and East provinces. Doctors launched the indefinite strike on June 10 at all general and teaching hospitals and the strike was extended to district and base hospitals from June 11.

Doctors had been threatening to go on strike over the previous three months and launched a token strike on April 3. A Government Medical Officers Association spokesman said it had held repeated discussions with the Health Ministry, as well as the five-minister parliamentary subcommittee appointed to resolve the issue, without success. "The authorities seem to be practicing a delaying tactic with our demands," he said.

Health Minister P. Dayaratne said he has agreed to the pay hike but treasury officials were unable to release the money in the absence of the Finance Minister.

Indian agricultural workers demand relief

More than 100,000 male and female agricultural workers rallied in 29 districts across the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu on June 9 demanding payment of more relief to farmers affected by drought. More than 8,000 people were taken into custody during picketing outside government offices.

Korean bank workers threaten strike over privatisation

Unionised workers at the Chohung Bank (CHB) in South Korea have threatened indefinite strike action on June 25 to

block government plans to privatise the enterprise. Bank workers' delegates made the announcement at a press conference on June 10. They warned they would shut down CHB's intra-electronic system, paralysing a large section of the commercial banking network.

A union spokesman said the government's sell-off package was part of an enormous restructuring plan that would result in job losses. The state-owned Korean Deposit Insurance Corporation owns 80 percent of CHB and plans to sell its share to the privately owned Shinhan Financial Group.

An official at the Ministry of Finance and the Economy said that, regardless of the strike threat, the sale would go ahead.

The bank workers are members of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the Korean Financial Industry Union (KFIU). The FKTU is planning a strike on June 30, calling for the immediate implementation of the five-day workweek and the repeal of the law concerning special economic zones.

Malaysian bank workers protest

Bank employees, members of the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE), protested this week against the second largest bank in Malaysia, Burmiputra Commerce Bank (BCB). They distributed pamphlets and balloons to the public at two busy shopping complexes in Kuala Lumpur. The balloons had the slogan "BCB cheating workers" printed on them.

The workers are protesting over a number of issues, including excessive and illegal outsourcing of work, inadequate religious leave and the bank's decision to stop long-service awards to non-executive staff. An official of NUBE, which has 4,500 members at BCB, accused several BCB directors of corruption. The accused directors were named in the pamphlets being distributed.

Public sector jobs slashed in Indonesia

A government spokesman announced last week that over 15,000 workers would be laid off from Indonesia's 10 strategic state industries this year, cutting the overall workforce by 31.9 percent, from 47,000 to 32,000.

The industries targeted include the Nusantara Aircraft Industry, shipbuilder PT PAL, railway carriage maker PT INKA, steel product manufacturers PT Bharata Indonesia and PT Boma Bisma Indra, and steel producer PT Krakatau.

The Nusantara Aircraft Industry, the largest of the 10

industries, plans to slash 6,000 from its 16,000-strong workforce by enforcing “early retirements”.

Australian electricians continue strike for shorter week

Contract electricians at the Smorgon plant in Laverton, Victoria, are continuing their strike for a 36-hour week. The workers, who are employed by labour hire firm Adecco, have been out for over three months. The shorter working week is in line with conditions of electricians at every other electrical contractor throughout the state.

The 25 electricians decided to strike on February 25, after Smorgon continually used contractors and “flying squads” to undermine work bans that were imposed when Adecco refused to include a 36-hour week in a new enterprise work agreement. Electrical Trade Union (ETU) shop steward Ron Goodfellow said electricians in the construction industry had gained a 36-hour week in 1999, “and we naturally thought it would flow on in the service and labour hire industries”. He said another employer on site was going to sign a 36-hour week agreement for his 45 staff but reneged when Smorgon threatened to dispense with the company’s services.

The strikers have been ordered by the Industrial Relations Commission to cease blocking the entrance to the plant, making picketing ineffective.

The ETU has not called for other unions to pull out their members even though the company has strikebreakers on site and is paying them double time. The company is also using untrained apprentices to do electrical work that requires a high level of expertise, raising concerns over health and safety.

Shop assistants may strike over penalty rates

Shop assistants in South Australia may take strike action to protect Sunday penalty rates. Legislation was passed last week in the South Australian parliament to extend shopping hours on weeknights from July and on Sundays in October.

In a deal between the state Labor government and the Liberal opposition, the Industrial Relations Commission will review all retail industry awards, and the Retail Traders Association is expected to seek a reduction in penalty rates.

Deal ends New Zealand nurses’ dispute

A week after the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) cancelled planned strike action over pay, North Island nurses have narrowly voted to accept a mediated settlement to a contract dispute. The new agreement will cover more than 4,000 nurses at 19 hospitals across five district health boards—Lakes, Bay of Plenty, Waikato, Northland and Tairāwhiti.

The nurses had earlier voted by a 94 percent majority to begin a round of strikes on June 4 unless they achieved parity with Auckland nurses, whose pay rates are 10 to 13 percent higher. The boards originally offered increases of between 7 and 9.7 percent. The union took the new contract offer to nurses last week after five days of mediation. The deal was approved by 69 percent of nurses. Full details of the settlement are yet to be released.

The union and employers had been negotiating the collective agreement for 12 months. A NZNO spokesman claimed that achieving a multi-employer agreement was “historic” and a “step in the right direction,” but admitted that many pay-related issues were “unresolved”.

New Zealand doctors vote for national collective agreement

Senior doctors employed by the South Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) voted last week to join negotiations for a national collective agreement. A spokesman for the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists said the vote was significantly influenced by recent strikes at Timaru hospital and poor employment conditions for senior doctors in South Canterbury. National negotiations commenced in late April. Senior doctors in 17 out of the 21 regional DHBs have voted with majorities of between 75-100 percent to participate in the national negotiations, with four ballots yet to be held.

Solomon Islands health clinics to close if nurses not paid

Honiara City Council Chairman for Health and Medical Services, Alfrence Fatai, announced this week he will be forced to close all the city’s health clinics if the Ministry of Health fails to pay nursing staff salary arrears. The arrears will amount to nearly \$US58,800 by June 28.

The nurses have issued a strike notice to the council that will take effect from June 28. They are demanding payment of all the salary arrears and have made it known that part payment will not stop strike action. They have not been paid for two months. The Solomon Islands government is virtually bankrupt and relies on outside assistance to pay public service wages.



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