

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 June 2003

Bank workers strike against government sell-off

Thousands of unionised workers at the Chohung Bank in South Korea began an indefinite strike on June 18 against government plans to privatise the state-owned bank. Some 5,800 Chohung employees from various parts of the country rallied in central Seoul to hear the strike declared. The action has severely affected operations at all of Chohung's 560 branches nationally.

About 300 workers at the bank computer network centre in Yeoksam-dong have also joined the strike but management is keeping the facility operational with 40 non-union employees working under police guard. If the network fails, all financial transactions through Chohung accounts, including withdrawals through other banks, would have to be suspended.

The government has declared the action illegal and threatened strike leaders. The minister of government policy coordination Lee Young-tak, said: "As for the leaders of the walkout, even if they do not commit acts of violence, we will take legal action against them for interference in the execution of duties." The Supreme Public Prosecutors Office has issued summonses against six leaders on charges of "interfering with business".

The threat of the strike had an impact on the bank, with deposits dropping sharply. According to the Financial Supervisory Service, customer deposits in Chohung Bank stood at 36.4 trillion won (\$US30.3 billion) on June 17, down 3.5 percent from June 11, when the union warned of the impending action. Deposits fell by 561.8 billion won on June 16 alone.

Garment worker gunned down in Cambodia

On June 13, Cambodian police killed a worker when they fired into a crowd of some 1,000 garment workers. The workers, employees of the Terratex Knitting and Garment Factory, were marching on the plant to demand better pay and conditions when police confronted them. An AFP reporter at the scene said the police fired hundreds of rounds from AK-47 assault rifles and used water cannon and baton charges to disperse the workers.

The next day marching workers carrying a picture of the dead man, Yim Ry, were also prevented from reaching the factory by police who fired shots over their heads. Riot police then attacked the marchers and arrested two employees.

Yim Ry's brother, who participated in the demonstration, pointed to a picture of the dead man saying he was marching "to tell people this was my brother". He said he had been searching for his brother's body for 24 hours but had been unable to locate it. Authorities could be hiding the body to prevent an independent autopsy. A government official claims that there was a stab wound

as well as a gunshot wound in the corpse, implying that someone other than the police could have killed Yim.

The government has alleged that the industrial unrest is being provoked by opposition parties in order to win support in the lead-up to elections on July 27 and to embarrass Prime Minister Hun Sen ahead of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) meeting next week in Cambodia. Garment workers, however, have held numerous strikes and protests over the past two years in an attempt to improve their poor working conditions and pay. The industry employs about 200,000 workers, mainly female, and is Cambodia's major export earner.

Tempo trail resumes in Central Jakarta

After being postponed twice, the Independent Journalists Alliance (AJI) lawsuit against the police began on June 16 in the Central Jakarta District Court. The AJI has charged the National Police chief and police heads in Jakarta, Central Jakarta and Menteng with neglect of duty.

On March 8, police allowed a gang of thugs to attack *Tempo* magazine offices, injuring a number of journalists. The police took journalists, including *Tempo*'s chief editor Bambang Harymurti, to the Central Jakarta Police station where they were assaulted. The union began legal action following demonstrations by journalists.

The attack on the *Tempo* offices was carried out by supporters of businessman Tomy Winata after the magazine ran an article alleging that he stood to benefit from a fire which destroyed the Tanah Abang market in Central Jakarta. According to *Tempo*, Winata submitted a 53 billion rupiah (\$US5.9 million) proposal to the Jakarta city administration to renovate the market just three months before the fire.

The court is also due to rule on separate charges of minor assault against two of the attackers.

Sri Lankan power workers strike over pay

More than 10,000 power workers from 25 unions, including most of the officers of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB), went on strike on June 16 to demand payment of a salary increase outstanding since 2000. They are also demanding back pay.

The unions claim that the pay demand, despite several rounds of talks during the last two-and-half years, and repeated pledges by management, has been ignored. Management promised the pay claim would be met by June 5, but again reneged.

While the CEB chairman has announced that the issue would be dealt with at a forthcoming cabinet meeting, unions have threatened an indefinite strike from July 9 if the salary increase is not paid.

Sri Lankan garment workers demand pay rise

About 450 garment workers in Sri Lanka's rural Bakamuna area, about 200 kilometres from Colombo, took strike action on June 11. The workers are demanding a 10 percent pay rise. They have rejected a five percent wage increase and threatened a hunger strike if their demand is not met.

Sri Lankan government doctors' strike continues

About 5,000 government medical doctors and dental surgeons throughout Sri Lanka have been on strike for more than a week. They are striking over salary anomalies and for the maintenance of a risk allowance paid to medical officers in the country's war-ravaged north and east provinces.

The doctors launched the indefinite strike at all general and teaching hospitals on June 10, extending it to district and base hospitals on June 11. They suspended industrial action on June 14-15 for a Buddhist religious festival but resumed the strike on June 16. Accident, emergency and children units have been exempted from the strike.

Minister of Health P. Dayaratne said that strikers' demands would be addressed and called for a return to work. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) says it has no confidence in the government assurances. A five-minister parliamentary subcommittee proposed a 44 percent salary increase for graduate medical officers months ago but the recommendation was not implemented. The GMOA has indicated that the strike will continue until its demands are met.

Pakistani newspaper employees demand pay increase

Journalists and newspaper employees demonstrated in Karachi on June 16 demanding implementation of a proposed wage increase. They marched from the Karachi Press Club to the Sindh Assembly where budget sessions were due to start.

After meeting with protestors, the Sindh chief minister and the Pakistan Peoples Party said they would move a resolution in the assembly in support of the wage demand.

Indian aluminum workers protest privatisation

Workers from the National Aluminum Company (NALCO) demonstrated on June 17 in Bhubaneswar, in the Indian state of Orissa against federal government plans to privatise the factory. The government temporarily shelved its plans earlier this year because of strong opposition by employees.

Australian metal workers' dispute continues

A dispute by about 40 workers at metal products manufacturer Morris McMahon in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe has entered its 14th week. Over 100 employees originally struck on March 10 demanding a 10 percent increase. The mainly women workers walked out after the company refused to increase a two percent pay offer and demanded staff accept cuts to working conditions.

While many employees have returned to work, the rest are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant. The company took out a court order to stop them standing in front of trucks entering and leaving the factory. The strikers now rely on community support to man the picket and block trucks.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union has not called out other metal shops in support of the McMahon workers or asked other unions to blackban the company and stop the delivery of materials or finished products leaving the factory.

Casino security staff strike over wage deal

Around 150 security staff at the Crown Casino entertainment complex in Melbourne went on strike for nine hours on June 15 to demand their employer, Chubb Security, re-negotiate a wage offer. The workers, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU), have rejected Chubb's 17 percent offer over three years. They want a 19 percent increase, improved annual leave and better public holiday pay. The guards are employed to police doors and entertainment venues at the casino.

New Zealand doctors sign collective agreement

The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) announced this week that a one-year collective agreement covering senior doctors had been signed with the South Canterbury District Health Board after "marathon negotiations". The agreement followed an unprecedented series of strikes at Timaru hospital earlier this year over pay and hours of work.

Details of the settlement have not yet been announced but an ASMS spokesman admitted that "many issues" remain unresolved. The union claims these will be resolved through an independent review of doctors' working conditions, set up as part of the contract deal, and during new national collective agreement negotiations currently underway.

New Zealand caregivers extend bans

Carers for people with intellectual disabilities have stepped up industrial action against their employer, care provider IHC. Since mid-May, members of the Service and Food Workers' Union (SWFU) have imposed a ban on paper work, including vehicle mileage and monthly health and safety sheets, reconciliation details for trust accounts, work reports and personal diaries. This week they refused to drive IHC vehicles on certain days.

The low-paid IHC workers want a 3 percent pay rise but have only been offered 1.5 percent. SWFU advocate John Ryall said the union recognised that IHC had "financial constraints" but union members were only seeking a pay increase to cover inflation. The IHC is currently in negotiations with the Ministry of Health over its funding levels. Ryall said industrial action was being carefully managed by the SWFU to ensure the "least possible inconvenience". Workers are under instructions not to impose bans that impact on their clients' health or safety.



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