

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 June 2003

Indonesian oil workers demand contract extensions

About 1,000 contract workers from the ExxonMobil Arun gasfield in the war-torn province of Aceh rallied outside the company's main office on June 25 calling for an extension of their work contracts which are due to expire at the end of this month.

Martial law was declared in Aceh on May 19 and the province has been the scene of brutal military operations by Jakarta to crush the separatist Free Aceh Movement (GAM). The workers are employed by four separate companies providing services to ExxonMobil and the union wants work contracts to be extended at least until the end of the current military operations.

Alternate forms of employment are scarce because the conflict has seriously disrupted life in the province. Regardless, the company announced it would be calling for just two new tenders employing only 1,200 workers, down from the current 3,000. ExxonMobil closed its Arun operations for four months in 2000 because of security concerns.

Korean bank union calls off strike

The union representing Chohung Bank workers in South Korea called off strike action by its members on June 22. Most of Chohung's 8,000 employees walked out on June 18 to oppose the government's plan to sell its majority share in the bank to the Shinhan Financial Group.

The union claims to have extracted a series of concessions from Shinhan, including promises to retain Chohung workers after the takeover. Under the deal, Chohung will not be integrated for three years. The deal, however, is far from being the partial victory claimed by the Chohung Bank Union. Not only does it end all opposition to the sale of the bank, it creates the conditions for large-scale layoffs as the company reorganises its operations over the next three years.

The head of the Ministry of Finance and Economy rejected claims that it had "caved in" to the union and said the agreement "was not that different from what Shinhan offered when it made a bid for Chohung late last year".

The deal will serve as a template for the government as it moves to disinvest itself of all its banking interests over the

next four years. Chohung is the third major bank to be privatised, following the sale of Korea First Bank in 1999 and Seoulbank last year. Chohung was one of several South Korean banks nationalised following 1997 financial crisis.

Manufacturing workers strike in South Korea

About 100,000 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) from 100 companies across South Korea staged protest strikes on June 25 against the government's privatisation plans.

Thousands of workers at Hyundai Motor, Kia Motors and Ssangyong Motor joined the walkouts. Day and night shift workers at Hyundai, the nation's largest carmaker, went on strike after imposing overtime bans the previous weekend. Kia Motors workers went out for six hours while Ssangyong employees struck for four hours.

Workers in about 140 plants organised by the Federation of Korean Metal Workers Trade Unions also staged a four-hour warning strike on the same day, ahead of a national stoppage by its members next week. The federation covers workers in Doosan Heavy Industries and other major machinery makers.

The Korea Employers Federation said the KCTU strikes were illegal and called on its member companies to take "civil and criminal action" against workers involved in further industrial action.

Indian autoworkers strike for pay increase

Autoworkers at the Motor Industries Company Ltd (MICO) plant in Bangalore, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, went on strike on June 23 to demand a new agreement, including a wage increase, for the period to 2004. Management has ruled out an increase and demanded employees agree to increase productivity. The plant has been in operation since 1951 with 25 percent of its production exported to 47 different countries. The MICO Employees Association called the strike.

Indian dam workers protest non-payment of salaries

Workers at the Ranjit Sagar Dam (RSD) in Sahapur Kandi protested on June 20 to demand payment of outstanding May salaries. The dam is in Pathankot, in the Indian state of Punjab.

Following the protest, workers held a rally which was joined by employees from the nearby Thein Dam. The protest was organised by the Joint Action Committee of Dam Workers Unions. RSD workers say they will blockade access roads and hold protests outside the chief engineer's office until they are paid.

Sri Lankan rail clerical workers stage protest

Hundreds of Sri Lankan Railway clerical workers demonstrated in Colombo on June 18. They are demanding that rail authorities re-integrate the clerical services division into the railway's Office Management Services. The clerks were under management services from 1950 to 1980, together with stationmasters and other grades. Since being split off, they have not received salary increases awarded to the remaining grades.

Employees began wearing black armbands to work from June 19 as a form of protest and will continue rallies every Wednesday. They are also planning a work-to-rule and sick-note campaign and have threatened indefinite strike action.

Australian food workers resume industrial action

More than 500 production and maintenance workers at the McCain Foods factory in Ballarat, Victoria, voted on June 24 to resume industrial action in the two-month dispute after rejecting a company offer on wages and conditions. The workers want improved working conditions in a new enterprise agreement.

McCain locked out the workforce for 48 hours early last week in response to the imposition of work bans. The June 24 meeting agreed to re-impose these bans.

Victorian car component workers locked out

Around 600 workers employed at Bendix automotive brake manufacturers in Ballarat were locked out on June 24, after placing work bans for new enterprise agreement. Employees have established a 24-hour picket outside the factory and around 400 attended a mass meeting at the Ballarat Trades Hall this week to discuss their campaign.

Management has sent letters to all workers threatening to close the factory and relocate to Thailand, claiming that wages there are a tenth of what they are in Australia.

Union ends picketing at Morris McMahon

Morris McMahon management in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe has agreed to negotiate with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). The AMWU immediately called off picketing to allow negotiations to go ahead.

The metal goods manufacturer refused to recognise the union during the industrial action, which began in March when over 100 workers walked out over pay and conditions. The union refused to call support strike action at other metal plants and many strikers returned to work, leaving about 41 mainly female employees to maintain a 24-hour picket at the

plant.

The company wants to abolish present work arrangements and is determined to sack three workers active in the strike. Employees currently work a four-day week of 10-hour days and have refused to move to a five-day week unless the company compensates them for the cost of extra childcare.

Bus drivers stop work over pay and conditions

Southlink bus drivers in Adelaide, South Australia, disrupted services to the city's southern suburbs for about six hours on June 26 to attend a stop-work meeting over their campaign for improved pay and conditions. Drivers employed by bus operator Serco stopped work the next day over similar issues.

Construction worker killed

A 33-year-old construction worker plunged 20 metres to his death at the Queensland government's Northern Busway project on June 24. The man was screening concrete in a bus lane when he stepped back into a one-metre diameter hole. The hole had been prepared for a concrete pier and was filled with steel reinforcing. Police said the hole had been left uncovered.

The dead man was not involved in pier construction but had been working nearby. Accident and Investigation Squad detectives and Workplace Health and Safety officers are currently investigating the incident.

New Zealand nurses threaten to quit union

A group of senior New Zealand nurses employed by Northland Health are threatening to resign from the NZ Nurses' Organisation (NZNO) saying they were forced to accept a collective contract they had voted against. Early this month, nurses at five North Island health boards approved a pay offer after the NZNO called off planned strikes that had been endorsed by 94 percent of nurses at regional stop-work meetings.

The NZNO members working for Lakes, Bay of Plenty, Tairāwhiti, Waikato and Northland District Health Boards previously rejected initial pay rises of between 7 and 9.7 percent. While 67 percent of nurses voted to accept a new pay offer—bringing them in line with pay rates of Auckland nurses—Northland NZNO members rejected it by a two-thirds margin. Some Northland members are demanding a no-confidence vote in the union. The nurses say that the new contract will do nothing to resolve staffing problems Northland Health.



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