

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 July 2003

Korean unions call off rail strike

On July 1, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions declared an end to a four-day strike by rail workers in South Korea. The KCTU made the announcement at a hastily convened press conference.

Thousands of members of the Korean National Railroad Trade Union had walked off the job on June 28 in protest at the passage of legislation allowing privatisation of the country's state-run rail system.

The government responded by declaring the strike illegal and threatening that all those who participated in the walkout would be punished. Korean National Rail immediately stood down 121 union delegates as a step towards their dismissal. The crackdown came after Roh addressed an international business seminar at the plush Shila Hotel where he promised that the government "would not tolerate illegal actions", that is workers taking industrial action.

Despite the intimidation, thousands defied the government and remained on strike. A KCTU spokesman said the union body had ended the strike because it "could not inconvenience the public any longer" and because the National Assembly had already passed the privatisation laws.

Despite the union back down, the government still intends to punish those who went on strike. "Reprimands will depend on the degree of participation in the walkout," a government spokesman said. He made it clear that those who had instigated the strike would face harsh consequences.

Tamil Nadu government orders arrest of union leaders

About 1.2 million government workers in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu launched an indefinite strike on July 2, demanding the restoration of pensions, bonuses and leave payments cut in 1998. The government curtailed the pensions of workers who had not completed 33 years service.

In a bid to stop the strike, which included teachers, the Tamil Nadu government arrested over 350 union leaders and threatened striking workers with dismissal. The action was taken under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) enacted in Tamil Nadu last September. Strike leaders face up to three years and 5,000-rupee fines if they are convicted. Arrests began one day before the strike even commenced.

Sri Lankan hospital workers strike for improvements

Around 5,000 auxiliary workers in Colombo hospitals went on strike on July 3 over a range of demands. These included a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) pay increase, a 7,000-rupee uniform allowance, a 1,000-rupee accident allowance and recommencement of a training program. Employees are also seeking permanency for contract and substitute workers, a halt to the privatisation of hospitals and outsourcing of janitorial services.

The strike was launched on July 1 at Colombo's National Hospital and extended to the Eye Hospital, Dental Institute and De Soysa Maternity hospital on July 2 and then to all hospitals in the Colombo district. About 3,000 striking workers launched a sit-in hunger protest on July 2, outside the Health Ministry.

Police squads were deployed inside the hospitals and T. H. Somaratna, All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU) branch president at National Hospital was arrested. He was later released on bail. About 100 police

from several police stations were deployed to harass hunger strikers in front of the ministry.

The Health Ministry has invoked essential services legislation and threatened to sack all strikers, including contract and substitute workers. The union said this was illegal and is preparing a petition to be filed in the Court of Appeal.

Municipal workers in Sri Lanka demand reinstatement

Urban municipality workers in Moratuwa, 25 kilometres south of Colombo, demonstrated for two hours outside the Moratuwa Council office on June 26 to demand reinstatement of seven of their co-workers.

The workers were suspended on June 25 on the charges that they had broken two windows during a protest over delayed salary payments. Angry workers had rallied at the municipality finance section when management postponed a salary payment due on June 24 until the next day. Even a short delay in the payment of wages can cause hardship for the low-paid workers and their families.

Sri Lankan railway drivers refuse to work stand-by

Sri Lankan railway drivers implemented work bans from June 27 to protest the non-payment of overtime owed to their assistants. According to the secretary of the drivers union, the bans will stay in force until authorities resolve the issue. Rail management has been forced to cancel about 15 scheduled trains so far.

Indian bank workers strike for work improvements

Bank workers belonging to a joint forum of the Cooperative Banks Staff Association and the Cooperative Banks Employees' Union in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh struck on June 30. The workers, who are employed in district and cooperative banks across the state, are demanding an extensive log of claims, including a revision of wages, introduction of a pension scheme, extension of the retirement age from 58 years to 60 years and reemployment of staff made redundant from various bank branches.

A union spokesman said a wage revision had been pending for the last four years despite the fact that a committee constituted by the Registrar Cooperative Societies (RCS) had agreed to and recommended a wage revision in principle. The state government has promised a pension scheme for the last 10 years.

Union ends protracted dispute at metal plant

The long running strike at the Morris McMahon metal plant in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe ended on July 1 after the remaining 41 workers accepted a deal brokered by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). The strike lasted for 16 weeks.

The settlement is far from the victory claimed by the AMWU. It provides for a five- percent wage increase per annum for three years and establishes a 19-day working month. The wage component is down on the 10 percent increase originally sought by the extremely low paid workers.

The 19-day month proposed to the company by the union effectively eliminates the 4-day week prized by the mainly women workers. By working 10-hour days they had been entitled to a long weekend every week allowing greater time with their family and reduced child-minding costs.

Over 100 workers were originally on strike but many, demoralised and facing increasing hardships, returned to work as the dispute dragged on. From the outset, the union isolated the strike, refusing to organise any supporting industrial action by its members in other industries. Nor did it seek to stop an uninterrupted flow of materials delivered to the plant.

The major victory for the AMWU was that McMahon eventually reversed its original position of refusing to recognise the union. As soon as it was invited into negotiations, the AMWU called for an end to the limited community pickets outside the plant. In the early stages of the dispute the union bowed to an Industrial Relations Commission order directing McMahon workers on the picket to stand clear of trucks entering and leaving the plant.

Rail component workers demand no forced redundancies

About 80 workers at the EDI Rail factory in Bathurst went on strike on June 27 demanding management guarantees that there would be no forced redundancies and arrangements made to secure their accrued entitlements if the plant closes. EDI manufactures key components of the Millennium Train, a new model commissioned by the NSW Labor government and whose operation has been plagued by a myriad of mechanical faults and a blowout in construction costs.

The Australian Workers' Union state secretary said redundancy became a major issue in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement after the Millennium Train problems became public. The union estimates that if the state government drops the Stage 3 Millennium Train contract, at least 45 workers at EDI will lose their jobs. The 80 workers are protesting outside the EDI plant and will remain there until the dispute is resolved.

Catholic school teachers strike over new pay deal

Teachers from Catholic schools in New South Wales took industrial action on July 2 over a new wages and conditions agreement. The teachers have rejected a three- percent pay increase offer by the Director of Catholic Schools.

They are demanding a 25-percent pay hike over three years, plus increases in superannuation and improvements in remuneration for heads of departments. They also want measures introduced to deal with increased workload problems.

Bus drivers stop work to discuss new work agreement

Bus drivers from Melbourne Bus Link in Victoria walked off the job on the afternoon of July 2 to discuss a campaign for better working conditions.

The Transport Workers Union, which covers the drivers, is currently in negotiations with the bus company over a new workplace agreement. The drivers want a pay rise and an improvement in working hours. While the stoppage disrupted services during the afternoon, the drivers agreed to return for the peak-hour period.

Teachers march for reduction in class sizes

On July 1, more than 200 teachers marched through Brisbane to protest the State Labor government's refusal to discuss a reduction in class sizes. The union claims reductions are needed in over 2,500 classes with a total of 50,000 students.

Queensland teachers have been involved a campaign since the beginning of the year for a new enterprise work agreement, including an eight-percent wage rise and smaller class sizes. The campaign has involved rolling work stoppages and daylong strikes.

The Queensland Teacher Union took the dispute into the Industrial Relations Commission, which responded by imposing a no-strike order. The small turnout for the Brisbane march is a result of the demoralisation caused by the union's action.

Radiation therapists to resign over staff shortages

About 40 radiation therapists in Queensland hospitals threatened to resign this week over staff shortages, poor retention rates and rising workloads in Queensland Health. The action would halve radiation treatment at three major hospitals in the state's capital Brisbane.

Radiation therapists are angry that the Queensland Labor Government brought down its state budget in June with only \$13.2 million allocated for oncology and just \$1 million dedicated to a recruitment and retention package for therapists.

According to a union spokesman, the government has ignored staffing problems and the wage concerns of therapists over the past three years resulting in 30 to 35 resignations in the last 18 months. If discussions scheduled in the Industrial Relations Commission fail to resolve the staffing issues resignations will go ahead.

Union will not fight plant closure

One hundred and sixty workers at Austoft in Bundaberg, Queensland, attended a stop work meeting on June 30 called by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). Two weeks ago management told workers that the factory would close at an indefinite date in the future.

Austoft, the only company that manufactures sugarcane harvesters in Australia, has decided to relocate to Brazil to take advantage of cheap labour. Not only will the closure cause great hardship to the 160 workers and their families, it will also have a sharp impact on the regional township of Bundaberg.

The AMWU has no strategy to oppose the closure and the stop work meeting was called only to demand the management provide the union with a termination date.

Car component company ends lockout

More than 550 car component workers who were locked out by Bendix in the Victorian town of Ballarat returned to work on July 1, after voting not to re-impose work bans. The workers put the bans in place on June 24 after negotiations for a new work agreement broke down. The company responded with a lockout and threats it would relocate production to Thailand.

The workers are seeking an 18 percent pay rise over three years and a shorter working week. The FMP Group that owns Bendix offered a 12.6 percent rise and ruled out any reduction in hours.

The AMWU recommended lifting the bans to continue negotiations overseen by Industrial Relations Commissioner Dianne Foggo, who will travel to Ballarat. The management has already indicated that if negotiations stall again and the union calls industrial action workers will be locked out again and the wage offer withdrawn. A union spokesman said he was "cautiously optimistic" about the outcome of negotiations but then admitted that, "if past trends are any suggestion, it's not looking too positive".

Pay talks in New Zealand health services break down

New Zealand health professionals were to hold stop-work meetings on July 4, following the breakdown of negotiations between the Southland District Health Board (SDHB), the Public Service Association and New Zealand Nurses Organisation.

The negotiations, which lasted just two days, were for the renewal of the Professional, Technical and Related Collective Agreement that covers physiotherapists, occupational therapists, anaesthetic and medical technicians and social workers.

The SDHB has refused to move beyond a two- percent total cost package. The health professionals are seeking a minimum three percent pay increase for one year, with six percent for the following two years. Other demands are for an additional week of annual leave and improvements in the salary structure of certain occupational groups. A spokesman said the unions would recommend industrial action if the SDHB does not improve its offer.

Suicide blamed on workplace stress

The New Zealand government agency charged with regulating workplace safety has been implicated in the stress-related suicide of one of its own senior inspectors. A coroner said that while there was considerable personal concern about Ronald Ward, the Occupational

Safety and Health Service (OSH) failed to recognise fully and deal adequately with a “terribly stressful situation” faced by the inspector during another round of OSH restructuring.

The coroner found after an extended inquest that 50-year-old Ward, OSH’s former national agricultural co-coordinator, died after shooting himself at his home in Whangarei in November, 2001. Ward, married with an adult son, had been through several restructuring exercises and felt he had been demoted after his position was abolished.

New Zealand health workers vote for industrial action

Allied health workers at Otago District Health Board voted this week to take industrial action to push for a better offer in a collective work agreement. The workers include technicians, social workers, dental, mental health and public health nurses, as well speech, occupation and physiotherapists.

The workers voted to work to rule, ban all overtime and not attend certain meetings or fill out forms and documentation. A spokesman for the Public Service Association said the action was being taken because the settlement proposed by the health board, “does not meet the needs of members”. The bans will be implemented from July 10 and continue for an indefinite period. No details of the board’s settlement offer, or of the union’s counter-proposal, have been released.



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