

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 July 2003

Indonesian aircraft workers protest layoffs

Thousands of workers from the state-owned PT Dirgantara Indonesia (DI) protested in Bandung this week in opposition to company layoffs. The workers staged rallies around the plant compound and outside the provincial legislative council. PT DI management closed the plant on July 11 and ordered its 9,670 workers to leave. Elite air force personnel are guarding the plant.

Company president Edwin Sudarmo claimed the action did not constitute a "closing down, layoff, or lockout" but was a six-month suspension. According to Edwin, the decision was taken because the company had serious financial problems.

Workers sent 100 delegates to a meeting called by the Minister of Manpower and Transmigration Jacob Nuwa Wea to discuss the layoffs but Edwin and State Minister for State Enterprises Laksamana Sukardi did not attend. They gave no reason for their absence.

PT DI Workers Union chairman Arif Minardi condemned the layoffs, declaring them to be "illegal" because the company president did not consult with the board of directors over the decision.

South Korean autoworkers continue strike action

More than 38,000 employees at Hyundai Motor, South Korea's largest carmaker walked off their jobs for 24 hours on July 18 to demand shorter working hours and a wage increase. The strike forced the closure of Hyundai's three plants. United States-German automaker DaimlerChrysler AG owns 10 percent of Hyundai Motor, which employs about 50,000 people.

Hyundai car workers are demanding an 11 percent pay increase of 125,000 won (\$106.40) a month and a 40-hour five-day working week. The union also wants to participate in company investment decisions.

The 24-hour strike came just three days after Hyundai union officials announced that they were calling off rolling stoppages at the plants. The union had planned to finalise negotiations before the company's summer break, due to begin on July 27.

Union members have threatened further strike action next week, working only four hours a day. The company normally runs two eight-hour shifts plus two hours of overtime for each shift.

Cement drivers strike for conditions

Strike action by Bulk Cement Trailer Union members brought the cement transportation in South Korea's Jaechon, North Chuncheon, Yeongwol and Gangwon provinces to a standstill this week.

The drivers stopped work on July 14, affecting all five major cement companies in these regions and blocking delivery of 20,000 tons of cement a day. The strike was called after a break down in negotiations with the transport companies for improved freight rates.

Drivers strike over tax increase

Truck and tanker drivers in the Indian state of Kerala began indefinite strike on July 14 against a 50 percent increase in the annual vehicle tax. The strike has seriously affected food markets and the movement of petroleum goods throughout the state. Ambulances, milk and newspaper delivery trucks have been exempted from the industrial action.

Bus drivers return but shift issue unresolved

Bus drivers employed by South Coast Transit Company in Western Australia returned to work on July 12 after a five-day strike. The drivers operate routes in the southern suburbs of Perth, the state capital.

Drivers were demanding regular 7.6-hour shifts, instead of split shifts that ranged from 4 to 10 hours long. They claim it is unsafe to work long and irregular shifts and were seeking "family-friendly" hours. The company insists the shifts are necessary to cater for the demanded service.

Drivers returned to work without the shift issue being resolved after the Transport Workers Union said it would continue negotiations with the company.

Actors strike for improved conditions

Around 500 actors in Melbourne and Sydney went on strike on July 17 after negotiations with the Screen Producers Association of Australia and the actors' union broke down. Actors from popular Australian television series such as *Blue Heelers*, *Neighbours*, *MDA* and *Stingers* held meetings to discuss further industrial action.

They want improved wages and working conditions, including standby rates, increased guarantees on the duration of option contracts for subsequent TV series and the lifting of the cap on royalties and residuals.

According to actor Peter Phelps, current royalty payments are stopped once a 30-minute show earns \$95,000 or a one-hour show makes \$190,000 from overseas sales. "We get (paid) three repeats of a program and minimally if there's a fourth," he said.

They are also demanding wage increases to compensate for down time. About 95 percent of actors currently earn just \$394 per day when employed.

Hospital workers continue campaign for pay rise

Hundreds of Western Australian hospital workers, including nurses, technicians, orderlies, cleaners and catering staff, walked off the job to attend stop-work meetings and hold pickets over the last week. Anesthetics nurses and staff responsible for sterilisation services also participated. The meetings determined that rolling stoppages would be called to secure a new enterprise agreement.

Hospital workers are demanding a 10 percent wage increase from the private employer Mayne Health. The stoppages hit services at Joondalup, Attadale, Glengarry and Mount Hospitals.

Construction workers strike to support cleaners

Construction workers on the \$1.6 billion Woodside project in Western Australia voted this week to remain on strike until at least July 19. The 1,500 workers at the North West Shelf site on the Burrup Peninsula walked off the job on July 14 after management brought in alternate labour to clean on-site toilets. The regular cleaners are on strike.

The 120 general services contract workers, whose jobs involve toilet cleaning, were on strike over dangerous traffic conditions caused by hundreds of workers entering and leaving the area at the same time. A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the workers were opposed to the employer "bringing scab labour onto the site".

Woodside has since agreed to allow about a third of the site's employees to finish work 15 minutes earlier to alleviate traffic in the car park. The project employs around 2,200 people.

Train workers vote to continue strike action

Workers at the EDI rail plant in Bathurst, west of Sydney, voted on July 16 to remain on strike after rejecting the latest offer from the company for a new agreement. They have been on strike for three weeks.

The company offer was substantially less than that given to workers at EDI's other plant in Newcastle who were strike on July 10 over a new work agreement. The Newcastle agreement contained a wage increase.

Bathurst workers are demanding a guarantee of no forced redundancies, no loss of entitlements and an increase in wages. The plant's 90 employees are continuing a protest outside the factory.

Doctors discuss campaign for improved conditions

South Australian public hospital doctors held stop-work meetings on July 17 to discuss the progress of pay talks with the Department of Human Resources. The dispute over pay and conditions has been ongoing since 2002.

The doctors are considering work-to-rule bans and cuts to elective surgery if their demands are not met. A spokesman for the South Australian Salaried Medical Officers Association said that if the state government did not offer competitive salaries, better conditions and high-standard training programs the state's public hospitals would lose doctors.

Drivers strike to defend union delegate

Gretna Transit bus drivers in Melbourne staged a snap strike on July 16. The walkout by 170 drivers cut services in the city's east at about 4.30 p.m., close to peak hour. They were protesting against the stand down of a union delegate two days earlier. The drivers, who are members of the Transport Workers Union members, voted to strike indefinitely. While the industrial action will affect about 15,000 passengers, school buses will continue to run.

Workers picket New Zealand port for pay increase

Work at Bluff port came to a standstill during 48-hour strike action and picketing by employees and supporters on July 17. The strike, which is the first at the port in more than a decade, involved Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) employees. The RMTU has 19 members at Bluff but union members from other South Island ports traveled to Bluff to join the protest. Other union members at Bluff are observing the picket lines.

An RMTU spokesman said over half of its members at Bluff were employed by the Southport company under a casual contract which expired at the end of March 2002. The workers are paid \$9.92 an hour and have not had a pay rise for 11 years. The company has refused to give a commitment to improve the rate.

While pay and conditions at Bluff are the lowest for any New Zealand port, the RMTU is only asking for a wage rise equaling the CPI. The union says no progress was achieved through mediation and talks had broken down.

Injunction sought against airline drug and alcohol testing

Six aviation industry unions lodged papers with the Employment Court in Auckland this week opposing a drug and alcohol-testing regime proposed by Air New Zealand. The airline says it will not test any of its 9,000 employees before putting them through an education course.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), the union heading the application, has called for a permanent injunction on the testing. The case will involve significant legal interpretations of the Privacy Act and Bill of Rights Act as well as newly amended workplace safety legislation. The court has invited the Council of Trade Unions to participate in the case alongside Business New Zealand.

New Zealand university staff vote for national agreement

New Zealand university academic and general staff overwhelming voted to support national collective employment agreements for the 2003 pay

round. The ballot, conducted on a university-by-university basis, endorsed a recommendation by the Association of University Staff (AUS) to move from enterprise-based bargaining at each university to a national collective agreement for academic staff and a single agreement for all general staff. Bargaining will begin in mid-August.

An AUS spokesman said the strong vote showed that university staff believed that the government "had a responsibility to significantly increase funding into the sector."

PNG teachers protest over underpaid salaries

The Papua New Guinea Teachers Association (PNGTA) southern region has launched a campaign to ensure teachers are paid in accordance with a wage agreement signed between the union and the Teaching Services Commission in 2002.

A PNGTA representative said that thousands of teachers had not been paid increases under a deal agreed in 2002 or increases ratified in a 2003 Memorandum Of Understanding (MOU). He said the union would recommend that teachers take industrial action in they were not paid. The PNGTA has 3,600 members in the southern region.

PNG doctors demand incentive entitlement payments

Specialist doctors and medical officers in the Southern Highlands are demanding the provincial government honour its commitment and pay them incentive packages agreed to in a 2001 Memorandum of Understanding. The MOU was made between the provincial government and the Mendi hospital on behalf of the doctors.

The packages are designed to attract medical staff to the district at a time when increasing lawlessness and crime is making it difficult to attract new recruits. The payments, worth between 10,000 and 20,000 kina (\$US2,250 and \$5,000) have never been paid.

Stranded Fiji sailors waiting for pay

Some of the 18 Fiji sailors who crewed the Pacific Emerald are still waiting for their pay. The ship's owner, Faymon Shipping, ran into financial difficulties last year and was forced into liquidation. It stopped all wage payments, leaving the seafarers stranded in Bangladesh between June and October 2002. The stranded sailors were forced to live on rice and water.

The sailors are seeking the assistance of the Fiji's Minister for Labour Kenneth Zinck to secure their pay.



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