

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 August 2003

South Korean unions call stoppages over working hours

On August 18, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions called staggered rolling strikes involving 42,000 workers. The peak union bodies are demanding improved conditions in scheduled legislation for a shorter working week. The unions claim that the bill, due to be debated in National Assembly this week, was drafted without any consultation with workers' organisations.

The employers want to reduce the number of paid annual holidays from 27 days to less than 22, in exchange for shortening the workweek from six to five days. While unions want the shorter week brought in this year, employers want it delayed until the beginning of 2005.

Truck drivers strike for improved conditions

Truck drivers, members of the Korean Cargo Workers Federation (KCWF), went on indefinite strike on August 20 to demand higher transportation fees and fair contracts from shipping companies. The walkout was the second by drivers this year, following one in May.

The strike cut cargo movement at the port of Pusan by half. The port is responsible for about 80 percent of South Korea's container freight handling. The government declared the strike illegal and said it would use police to disperse strikers blocking ports.

The KCWF strike came after negotiations for a 30 percent increase in cartage rates between representatives of independent bulk cement drivers and cement companies broke down on August 19.

Sri Lankan health workers protest over uniform ban

Family health workers in Sri Lanka picketed the Health Ministry in Colombo on August 14. Services were affected when the workers en masse called in sick.

The dispute began when the Colombo South Hospital director barred workers from wearing a new uniform. Management claims that workers had not sought authorisation for the design they had chosen before acquiring the uniforms.

Strike by university workers continues

National strike action by non-academic university workers in Sri Lanka is continuing. The strike, which was called by the University Joint Trade Union Committee, began on August 12 after a breakdown in negotiations between the unions and the Tertiary Education and Training Ministry and the University Grants Commission over a nine-point log of claims. The action forced an indefinite postponement of lectures and final examinations at all campuses.

The workers are seeking an end to salary anomalies, a pay increase, the introduction of a monthly allowance, and relief measures, such as concessionary loans. Non-academic staff have not had a wage increase since 1995, despite a government promise to review salaries every three years to compensate for cost of living increases.

The Inter-University Students Federation announced this week that it would take action to back the strikers if the authorities did not act quickly on workers' demands.

Sugar workers on hunger strike

Some 700 workers at the Palawatta Sugar Company, 200 kilometres from the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, staged a hunger strike on August 13 outside the factory's administration office. Their demands include a general salary increase and leave entitlements for casual workers. Management promised last June to meet the demands within 30 days, but nothing was done. The strike held up the milling of 3,000 tons of sugar cane. Workers have threatened further action.

Indian income tax workers oppose privatisation

About 5,000 workers from the Income Tax Department in the south Indian state of Kerala staged a 24-hour strike on August 19 and demonstrated outside a number of department offices. The workers are demanding the government end moves towards privatisation, downsizing and the outsourcing of the assessment of income tax returns.

The Kerala government recently announced that processing of returns would be handed over to the banks, drastically cutting the department's investigation wing. The Joint Council of Action of Income Tax Employees Federation and Income Tax Gazetted Officers Association organised the strike. They have threatened a "non-cooperation" campaign if their demands are not met before August 31.

Qantas workers walk out over casual labour

Qantas baggage handlers at Tullamarine airport in Melbourne walked off the job for two hours on August 19 to protest against the hiring of three casual workers. The company move is regarded as part of its drive to undermine permanent full-time jobs and impose greater workplace flexibility.

Management sought orders in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to prevent further strikes on the issue, declaring that the two-hour stoppage called by the Transport Workers Union was "clearly unlawful and totally unacceptable".

Qantas chairwoman Margaret Jackson, who was addressing the Australian Council of Trade Unions Congress 2003 at the time of the strike, refused to give an assurance the airline would not continue to use casual labor.

The stoppage came amid union claims that Qantas is training an alternative workforce in Los Angeles to replace union labour. Questioned by the media Qantas CEO Geoff Dixon said: "We reserve the right to ensure our customers are not disrupted by unauthorised union actions. To this end we have contingencies to maintain our operations."

Car component workers demand improved conditions

About 45 workers at car component company TI Automotive in

Dandenong, Victoria, went on strike on August 18 after negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement broke down. Employees are demanding secure working hours and improved conditions. TI Automotive is the sole supplier of fuel tubing to three of the four car manufacturing companies operating in Australia. It also has a plant in South Australia.

TI Automotive wants “flexible” work hours, which would effectively remove penalty and shift rates. It also aims to replace a number of full-time workers with casual and part-time labour. An Australian Workers Union spokesman said the changes would mean “employees will be called upon at short notice to work any shift, compromising both workers’ family lives and income”.

Toyota and Ford intervened in an Industrial Relations Commission hearing into the dispute. Toyota claimed it would lose \$15 million in sales each day the strike continued, while Ford maintained that it faced daily losses of \$217,000. The strike has since been called off but the outcome of the latest negotiations is not yet known.

New Zealand nurses reject pay offer

Late last week senior nurses in seven Lower North Island District Health Boards (DHBs) in New Zealand rejected a proposal to settle a multi-employer collective employment agreement. The boards involved include Hutt Valley, Capital and Coast, Whanganui, Hawkes Bay, Taranaki, MidCentral and Wairarapa.

The agreement pay offer provided increases of 2 percent and 3 percent over two years. It involved a new pay scale where new staff would be paid more than the current, experienced nurses in some areas. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) recommended that the DHBs be given “another opportunity” to come up with an offer to close the existing gap between pay rates for nurses at the seven boards and those paid to their colleagues in the rest of the North Island.

Meanwhile, negotiators for a multi-employer collective agreement covering nurses, midwives and health care assistants in five South Island DHBs went to mediation on August 21. The NZNO and DHB employers agreed to use mediation services after reaching a stalemate in negotiations.

Solomon Islands teachers go on strike

Almost 3,000 Solomon Islands public school teachers began an indefinite strike early this week over the government’s failure to address a log of claims submitted at the beginning of 2002.

Solomon Islands National Teachers Association general secretary Fred Taika said the claims included compensation payments and the upgrading of teacher certificate courses to degree or diploma level. He said the government had failed to implement a Memorandum of Understanding signed last year related to wage arrears payments.

The teachers are hoping the dispute can be settled before student exams commence next month. The government, however, is refusing to meet or negotiate with them.

Fiji union refuses to assist striking garment workers

On August 15, Fiji textile company Ghim-Li Fashion in Letuka sacked about 400 striking employees when they refused to return to work. The order was issued 24 hours after employees walked off the job.

Management opened the factory gates for just 15 minutes and ordered employees to start work or be replaced with labour brought in from China. The strikers refused and are presently conducting a hunger campaign.

Employees claim that the Singapore-owned company is paying well below the minimum wage. Although the majority signed up to the Fiji

Sugar and General Workers Union, it has refused to take up their case, with general secretary Felix Anthony claiming they joined too late. Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck has also refused to intervene.

Trade unionists charged over illegal strike

Fiji Public Service Association Secretary Rajeshwar Singh and two dental health workers have been summoned to appear in the Suva Magistrates Court on September 16. The two workers are senior dental technician Semisi Ketenalagi and dental instructor Siteri Waqa.

The three men are facing charges arising out of a dental staff strike in April 2002, which the government claims was illegal. The charges include wilfully breaking a contract of essential service and counseling others to do likewise. The three men face fines of \$500 or six months in prison if found guilty.

The strike in 2002 by dental staff, radiographers, laboratory technicians, physiotherapists, health inspectors, dieticians and medical assistants occurred after the Public Service Commission failed to pay a promised wage rise.

Cannery strike enters fourth week

Strike action by 600 cannery workers at the state-owned Pacific Fishing Company, which erupted over the company’s refusal to honour award agreements and Fiji National Provident Fund contributions, has entered its fourth week. Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck has declared the action illegal and police have been sent to harass and intimidate the workers.

The Fiji Trade Union Congress (FTUC) has failed to organise support for the strikers. FTUC Secretary Anthony Felix promised to arrange international support to block company exports when the strike began but nothing has materialised.

The Pacific Fishing Company Workers Union, which covers the strikers, has sent a petition to the chiefs of Ovalau calling on them to intervene in the dispute. The petition calls for reinstatement of workers, the payment of wage increments dating back to last year, removal of all scab labour and dismissal of the company’s chief executive officer.



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