

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 August 2003

Autoworkers continue industrial action in South Korea

The government of President Roh Moo-hyun in South Korea announced this week it would invoke its emergency arbitration rights to end the pay dispute at Hyundai Motor, the country's largest carmaker. The company claims to have lost nearly \$600 million in exports since workers began a series of rolling work stoppages on June 20. Workers are seeking an 11 percent pay rise and have rejected the 9.4 percent offer made by the company last week.

Choi Kyoung-Soo, a senior official at the Office of Government Policy Co-ordination, said, "the labour disputes must not be allowed to continue any longer". Under emergency arbitration procedures, the authorities can demand the union remain in negotiations for up to 30 days. During this time no strikes are allowed. If the government makes good its threat, it will be the first time in a decade that the emergency arbitration powers have been used.

In the meantime, the government has demanded Hyundai Motor and the unions meet and solve the dispute "at the earliest possible date". Further negotiations are due on August 4. Hyundai is part owned by DaimlerChrysler, which has a 10 percent shareholding.

Scores killed in Chinese fireworks factory blast

A powerful explosion ripped through a fireworks factory in Hebei province in northern China on July 28. The blast killed 29 people and injured 141 others. The explosion destroyed the plant's main workroom and damaged buildings 100 metres away, as well as cars and motorbikes.

The cause was a heat-induced ignition of gunpowder caused by hot weather, which set off a chain reaction through the plant. One man, Quian Yun, who lives five kilometres away from the explosion, said, "I thought it was an earthquake". A farmer said: "I heard three or four explosions in a row and saw black smoke rising in the distance."

Striking Filipino ship workers force 19 vessels into port

Over 900 employees of Sulpicio Lines began a nationwide strike on July 29, forcing 19 vessels to cease operations. Seven vessels still at sea are reported to be under the control of the striking workers and will cease operating when they reach their respective ports. The shipping company is the second largest in the Philippines and operates 15 passenger and 11 cargo vessels. The movement of cargo and passengers through 10 major ports has been restricted by the strike.

The strikers, consisting of non-union members and members of the Unyon ng Mandaragat sa Silpicio Lines-Alliance for Nationalist Genuine Labour Organisation Kilusang Mayo Uno, are striking over pay and conditions. They claim they are forced to work up to 20 hours per day for 200 pesos (\$US3.70) and are not paid the daily overtime entitlement of one peso. They are also protesting the company's union busting tactics. The company transfers union members or dismisses them to undermine union activity.

Despite government orders that the strikers return to work and attempts by a rival union—the Associated Labor Unions-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines—to break up a picket in Cebu City, the workers have stood their ground.

The National Labor Relations Commission has ordered the striking workers into compulsory arbitration.

Philippine bank employees threaten national strike

Employees at the National Bank in Bacolod City in the Philippines are campaigning for the reinstatement of 17 sacked employees and recognition of their union, the National Bank Employees Alliance. The bank management is ignoring a ruling by the Department of Labor and Employment declaring the union legitimate and is refusing to negotiate a new Collective Bargaining Agreement. The company is also refusing to reinstate the retrenched employees.

The union has filed a case before the National Labor Regulation Commission against the bank management for union busting, illegal dismissal and unfair labour practices. It is filing a notice of strike with the National Conciliation Mediation Board.

Sri Lankan railway workers fight privatisation

Railway workers in Sri Lanka have begun industrial action against government moves to privatise the state-run industry. On July 24, hundreds of workers at the Ratmalana rail workshop, 10 kilometres from Colombo, downed tools. On July 30, about 5,000 rail workers picketed the railway head office in the capital.

Union leaders called off a nationwide strike scheduled for July 31 after discussions with the transport minister. Other public sector employees, such as health workers, were preparing to support the strike.

Rail workers believe that a gazette notice transferring Sri Lanka Railway Department functions to the newly established Sri Lanka Railway Authority on July 23 is a step towards privatising the rail system. An act allowing the transfer was passed by the previous UNP regime in 1993 but could not be implemented because of widespread opposition among workers.

The government plans to hand over railway management to the Indian state-owned company Rites within the next three months. It will also increase train fares by 75 percent and abolish a concession ticket for government employees. Train services in non-profitable routes will be ended.

Sri Lankan garment factory workers fight factory closure

On July 29, factory workers in Kaldemulla, some 20 kilometres south of Colombo, picketed the Fashionware Garments plant. The 175 employees are demanding reinstatement after being locked out by the management on the same day. The company has declared bankruptcy.

The factory owner had demanded that the workers submit resignation letters. When they refused, he offered to pay two months' salary as compensation if they would comply. Workers have filed a petition with the Labour Commissioner protesting the plant closure.

The factory was established in early 1980s with more than 550 workers to produce garments such as jackets, shorts and shirts for export to Europe.

Irrigation workers protest department closure

Irrigation Department workers in Sri Lanka picketed the department headquarters in Colombo on July 25. They are demanding the government

withdraw plans to abolish the department as part of a restructuring program. The protesting employees carried placards and chanted anti-government slogans.

Pakistani water and sewerage workers demand improved conditions

Water and sewerage workers in Balochistan province demonstrated outside the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) main office in Quetta on July 29 to press for several demands. These include, a “utility allowance”, in line with that paid in other departments, and an agreement that the jobs of retired WASA employees will be given to relatives.

Indian dock workers clash with police

Contract labourers at Kolkata Port in India stopped petroleum coke being unloaded from an Indonesian ship for over 24 hours on July 29. The workers were protesting against their replacement by new mechanical equipment.

Police clashed with workers after they had stopped loaders and other equipment being positioned near the ship. Unloading began late in the evening, after the equipment was eventually brought onto the dock, but contract labourers then blocked trucks loaded with cargo from the ship. They are demanding compensation for the loss of work.

Lockout at rail-rolling stock manufacturer continues in Queensland

A picket by locked-out workers at railway carriage manufacturer Bradken in Ipswich, Queensland, is continuing. Night shift workers were locked out on July 17. The day and evening shift had already been locked out after going on strike for 24 hours in support of a new workplace agreement and a pay increase.

Management offered annual wage increases of between 2.5 to 3 percent over three years but workers have rejected this as inadequate. They are demanding an annual increase of 6 percent for three years and improvements in redundancy pay. They also want a 36-hour working week and a scheme to protect accrued entitlements in the case of closure.

After being locked out, the 200 men set up a picket line. The company offered individual contracts and about 15 workers have agreed to sign.

Hospitals in South Australia to be hit by work bans

Three thousand hospital workers from cleaning, catering and maintenance departments decided this week to impose work bans in public hospitals throughout South Australia.

The workers are attempting to force the State Labor government to negotiate a new enterprise work agreement. To date the government has refused to discuss the issues and a union spokesman said it is “treating thousands of workers in the state hospitals with contempt”.

Last week salaried medical officers in state hospitals lifted their work bans after negotiations began.

Johnston Tiles workers fined over “run through” in Melbourne

On July 30, 16 workers were convicted of unlawful assembly and endangering the public peace over incidents during industrial action at Johnston Tiles on June 15, 2001.

The dispute arose when Johnston Tiles sacked permanent workers and hired casuals from the labour-hire company Skilled Engineering. The hired workers crossed an Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) picket line and the strikers retaliated by participating in a “run through” at the offices of both companies. The relatively minor incident was blown up by the media, which claimed the protest had caused thousands of dollars worth of damage.

Despite the fact that it was a first offence for most of the men, they all received fines ranging from \$1,000 to \$3,000 and were placed on good behaviour bonds.

From the beginning, the AMWU national leadership refused to assist the workers or to fund their legal defense. Instead, it used the incident to launch a witch-hunt against the union’s Victorian leadership and to oust the elected secretary Craig Johnston. Johnston, the leader of the Workers First faction in the union, is contesting charges brought against him over the “run through” and will stand trial next year.

Victorian dental nurses strike over pay and conditions

Dental nurses in Melbourne struck on July 29 to demand better wages and working conditions. The strike caused the cancellation of all non-emergency work at the Royal Dental Hospital. The nurses rallied outside a newly opened hospital during the official opening ceremonies conducted by the Victorian health minister.

A spokesperson for the Australian Services Union said that further industrial action was planned for the coming weeks.

Melbourne bus drivers strike to defend delegate

About 160 Ventura bus drivers at Oakleigh and Knoxfield depots in Melbourne went on strike on July 25 in support of a sacked union delegate. The strike disrupted services on six bus routes.

Over 70 drivers at Oakleigh initially refused to return to work, despite a directive from the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) on July 26 and instructions from the Transport Workers Union.

Drivers’ spokesman Frank Darcy said the strikers would return to work if Ventura reinstated the union delegate. “We are not extremists, we just want to right this wrong,” he said. They ended the strike on the evening of July 28 after the IRC decided to speed up an unfair dismissal hearing for the sacked worker.

Teachers vote for strike action in New South Wales

Statewide stop-work meetings by public school teachers in New South Wales on July 29 rejected the state Labor government’s offer of a six percent wage rise.

The teachers voted to strike for 24 hours on September 17 if the government continued to refuse to grant a 25 percent wage increase and improved working conditions. Public school teachers in Victoria, Western Australia and the ACT, who are fighting for similar claims, are threatening to strike on the same day.

Sydney zoo workers defend junior clerk

Taronga Park Zoo workers in Sydney were due to strike on August 1 over the sacking of a junior clerk. The worker was dismissed when he raised concerns about possible impropriety by the senior management.

There is widespread concern among Taronga Zoo workers at the continued deterioration of employee relations. The Public Service Association wants to negotiate a settlement to the issue, which is complicated by the fact that the employee is on probation and cannot seek reinstatement through the Industrial Relations Commission.

NSW public sector workers protest funding cuts

Employees at the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board (ADB) will take industrial action on August 1. The workers are members of the Public Service Association.

The dispute is over massive funding cuts to the ADB. This year’s budget has been reduced by \$750,000, or 23 percent. A further 30 percent reduction is expected next year. The cuts will undermine the ADB’s ability to administer anti-discrimination legislation in the state.

Waterside workers picket New Zealand port

Waterside workers in Wellington picketed CentrePort this week over attempts by the port company to attack employment conditions. CentrePort wants to sell its stevedoring subsidiary, Central Stevedoring. The sale will mean there will be no guarantee of work for the 60 percent of port workers on casual contracts.

A spokesman for the Rail and Maritime Transport Union said that although the union originally disagreed with the casualisation of wharf labour it “came to accept it”. He said that CentrePort management was now attempting to change the hours of workers on casual contracts.

CentrePort claims the changes are necessary because an increasing amount of trade through the port is coming from Asian businesses, which insist on providing their own on-ship stevedoring labour.

Most truck drivers supported the picket and turned their vehicles away from the port. Police were investigating one incident in which a driver accelerated his truck through the picket.



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