

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

16 August 2003

At least 37 perish in mine explosion in China

A gas explosion in the Datong city coal mine in Shanxi province on August 11 has claimed the lives of at least 37 miners. According to state media reports early this week, emergency workers were continuing to pull out "a stream of corpses" from the mine.

While 43 miners were working underground when the explosion occurred, so far only has one survived the powerful blast. The others are still missing. The blast shook an adjacent pit, resulting in the injury and hospitalisation of 14 miners.

An initial investigation into the cause of the tragedy is underway and two safety supervisors on duty at the time have been detained for questioning. Authorities, concerned over publicity from a string fatal mine accidents in recent days, have suspended all mining in Datong city and ordered government officials to increase supervision of safety rules and regulations at all mines.

Eight miners were killed and 30 injured in a gas explosion at the Hegang mine in northeastern Heilongjiang province on August 8. Ten miners are still missing. Meanwhile, deaths from flooding at the Mushi coal mine near Zaozheng village in eastern Shandong province on July 26 rose to 18 this week. Another 17 miners are still missing and presumed dead.

Kia workers begin action for shorter working week

Workers at Kia Motors in South Korea staged a series of rolling work stoppages this week as part of a campaign to demand the introduction of a five-day workweek, with no loss of pay or working conditions. Employees stopped for eight hours on August 13 and 14.

If current negotiations on the claim break down, the union at Kia Motors has threatened to call indefinite strike action. The union announced that it would oppose management demands for additional or special work to meet existing production targets.

The campaign at Kia comes a week after the union at Hyundai Motors ended a protracted dispute for shorter hours and improved working conditions. The union agreed to accept a wage increase far below that originally demanded by Hyundai employees.

Indian tea plantation workers strike over closures

Around 300 tea plantations in North Bengal were closed by strike action on August 11. The strike was to demand an improvement in basic facilities and protest the closure of a number of plantations.

The lack of facilities, such as access to adequate medical services and decent housing, has caused the deaths of many tea workers. About 32 tea plantations in North Bengal have already

closed. The Joint Co-ordination Committee for Plantation Workers organised the strike.

Sri Lankan health workers strike for pay hike

Around 40,000 health workers in Sri Lanka's Western Province walked off the job on August 14 to demand a pay rise. A trade union federation comprising 50 unions organised the action.

Most of the province's hospitals and health institutions were totally paralysed, with most categories of health workers participating in the strike. Nurses defied appeals by various union leaders to not participate in the stoppage.

Medical officers have recently won a 40 percent pay increase after strike action. The Western Province health workers are demanding a similar increase.

Sri Lankan bus workers protest privatisation

Bus workers from the Sri Lanka Transport Board and various regional transport boards marched from Hyde Park to the prime minister's office in central Colombo on August 7. They rallied outside the office before presenting a petition containing 15 demands and opposing privatisation of state-owned bus services.

Marchers carried banners and chanted slogans such as, "Stop selling the public bus services", "Stop auctioning the SLTB" and "Reinstate retrenched workers". While a large number of police and military personnel were on standby, they were not used against the demonstration.

Sri Lankan university workers on indefinite strike

All Sri Lankan universities, including in those in the North and East, were brought to a standstill on August 12 by indefinite strike action by non-academic workers. Academic and examination procedures were paralysed.

The university workers struck for nine demands, including an end to salary anomalies, a pay increase, and the introduction of a monthly allowance and other relief measures, such as concessionary loans.

Inter University Trade Union Federation President Lionel Malwattage told the media that workers had waited for a positive response from the Tertiary Education Ministry, "but nobody seemed to take any action to sort out the problems".

Workers strike against contract labour

About 150 workers from BHP Billiton's Mount Whaleback iron ore operations at Newman, in the Pilbara region, Western Australia, went on strike on August 10. The industrial action continued until the late on August 13.

The employees, who are covered by five different unions, walked out after the company broke an agreement to only use "fly

in fly out” contractors on a short-term basis.

Workers are concerned that expanded use of “fly in fly out” personnel will destroy job prospects in Newman. The Mount Whaleback operation employs around 800 people. Two thirds of these are reported to be on individual, non-union workplace agreements.

Education staff to discuss action against job cuts

Victorian Education Department workers will attend a stopwork meeting on August 18. They will discuss what action to take to oppose the Labor state government's decision to restructure operations at the department's head office, which threatens up to 300 jobs.

Education Minister Lynne Kosky declared that she aimed to “stream line” her department following the findings of an internal review. The Community and Public Sector Union said action to oppose the cuts over the coming months may disrupt schools, VCE exams or general department operations.

Sugar workers strike over new wage deal

Workers at the Harwood, Broadwater and Condong sugar mills in northern New South Wales walked off the job on August 14, after a breakdown in talks over a new work agreement, including demands for improved wages and conditions.

Sugar workers want the company to raise its offer of a 10.5 percent pay rise spread over three years. The three unions involved are demanding the NSW Sugar Milling Co-operative also drop its demand for secret ballots to be held before any future industrial action.

NSW public sector workers oppose job cuts

Staff at the NSW Office of Industrial Relations (OIR) stopped work on August 14 and picketed the organisation's Sydney office. Two days earlier, union members voted for a campaign of ongoing industrial action.

The workers are opposing restructuring by the NSW State Labor government that will cut essential staff and reduce of the number of OIR branches from three to two. The government previously claimed that its plans to amalgamate the OIR with the new Department of Commerce would not cut jobs or services.

A Public Service Association bulletin on August 14 claimed that the government refused to provide details on the number of jobs affected. The union believes it could be at least 15.

Bus drivers stop work over new work agreement

About 90 Melbourne bus drivers from Moorabbin Transit in the city's southeast stopped work on August 12 for two hours and attended a meeting to discuss a campaign for a new work agreement, including a wage increase and improved working conditions.

Drivers rejected a \$30 payment by management to hold the meeting outside working hours to avoid bus service disruption. A Transport Workers Union spokesman said the meeting was staged outside the peak-hour period “to minimise inconvenience”.

Union calls off New Zealand waterfront strike

On August 11, the New Zealand Rail and Maritime Transport Union called off a planned 8-day strike by Wellington watersiders. General secretary Wayne Butson said the union had made “recent headway” with CentrePort and that as a “sign of good faith” the union decided to return to negotiations.

About 50 workers picketed the port during a one-day strike two weeks ago, forcing CentrePort to reschedule operations. The workers will be left without jobs after CentrePort establishes a new company to which all stevedoring work will be outsourced. No union members have been offered a job with the new company. Many who have worked on the wharf for 20 years received rejection letters saying they did not have the experience needed.

A CentrePort spokesman said the waterfront was an environment “where anyone can operate stevedores”. He claimed that with four stevedoring companies at the port, some rationalisation was inevitable if the port was to remain competitive.

New Zealand doctors vote to join national negotiations

Senior doctors employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) this week voted to join national collective agreement negotiations. National negotiations between the DHBs and the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) resumed on August 7 in Wellington. The vote in favour of joining the negotiations was 99 percent.

An ASMS spokesman said the key objective in the negotiations was “the desperate need for attractive and reasonable employment conditions” to facilitate the recruitment and retention of senior doctors in a highly competitive international labour market. The Canterbury doctors are attempting to bring their employment conditions up to those of doctors employed by other health boards.

Fiji government steps up attacks on cannery workers

Fiji police arrested six workers as a strike by more than 600 at the state-owned Pacific Fishing Company tuna cannery entered its second week. The striking workers, members of the Pacific Fishing Company Employees Union, claim the company failed to honour award agreements and to pay workers' Fiji National Provident Fund contributions. The strike had been declared illegal by the government.

Those arrested, including three union executives, were released after questioning, but police say charges may still be laid. The arrests occurred when the government sent a detachment of riot police to Levuka to reinforce police numbers already at the site.

The police claimed the build up was necessary because of threats to destroy company property and to attack management officials. The accusations proved to be groundless and no such attacks materialised. Trades Union Congress Acting General Secretary Rajeshwar Singh condemned the arrest and interrogation of the unionists.



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