

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 August 2003

South Korean transport strike ended by government threats

Some 30,000 truck drivers at South Korea's major ports began returning to work on August 26 in response to government threats of legal action and financial penalties. The drivers, members of the Korean Cargo Workers Federation (KCWF), went on indefinite strike on August 20 to demand higher transportation fees and better working conditions. The walkout was the second by the drivers this year, following one in May.

Five days into the strike, the South Korean government announced the action had cost exporters \$US338 million in delayed shipments and issued arrest warrants for 16 leading union officials. It also threatened to slash fuel subsidies paid to drivers.

While the majority of drivers began returning to work, hundreds more have remained on strike to protect the indicted union officials from arrest. Large numbers of workers are manning a 24-hour picket outside the Seoul headquarters of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions—where the officials are believed to be hiding out—to prevent police entering the building.

Indonesian coal miners strike

Over 2,000 workers for PT Kaltim Prima Coal (KPC), in Indonesia's East Kalimantan province, struck on August 29.

Kaltim Prima Coal operates one of the largest coal mines in the world and is jointly-owned by the Australian-based mining giant Rio Tinto and BP, the British-based energy giant. The transnationals want to sell a 100 percent stake to the Indonesian investment company, Bumi Resources. The workforce has struck to demand that whatever the outcome, 15 percent of company shares be allocated to the employees as a bonus.

Sri Lankan health workers fight for salary hike

Some 80,000 workers across Sri Lanka, from minor staff to assistant medical practitioners, went on sick leave on August 26 as part of a campaign for a pay increase. They are demanding a similar pay hike to the 43 percent recently won by medical officers.

The government condemned the workers and cancelled all leave in the health sector just prior to the industrial action. A union federation comprising 53 health sector unions has threatened to launch an indefinite strike from September 15 if the pay demand is not met.

Sri Lankan glass workers fight lay offs

Hundreds of glass workers staged a four-hour picket outside the Ceylon Glass Company (CGC) office on August 20, protesting against a contract system and voluntary retirement scheme being proposed by the management. Other workers joined the picket.

Workers at the company's plant in the Ratmalana industrial area, 15 kilometres south of Colombo, have been on strike since July 18. They have been protesting outside the plant daily. The factory is the only one of its kind in Sri Lanka, manufacturing and supplying bottles to local industries. CGC was established in Sri Lanka by the Indian company Gujarat Glass (Perumal Group of Companies).

The factory was recently modernised. With the installation of newer technology, CGC has been attempting to find ways to lay-off or retire workers who were trained to use the old machinery. They will be replaced

with low-paid contract workers.

The planned staff cuts are severe. The chemical mixing section, which used to employ 50 people on four different shifts, will now be run by four contract workers. The workers who are laid off will only receive minimal compensation.

Sri Lankan mineral workers fight factory closure

About 100 workers from Ceylon Quartz plant in Dekatana, Katulanda, 40 kilometres from Colombo, are continuing a protest campaign in front of the factory they began on August 20 in opposition to the plant's closure.

The management closed the plant on July 30 after workers began industrial action for a 25 percent salary increase and the introduction of a production and annual bonus. They are also demanding the company recognise their union.

Sri Lankan tea estate workers on strike

About 250 workers at the Madulwatta tea estate launched an indefinite strike on August 22 against increasing workloads and harsh conditions. The estate is owned by Namunukula Plantations and is situated in Badulla district, 200 kilometres from Colombo, in the country's Central province. Workers at five other Namunukula estates are threatening to join the strike.

Namunukula management has made women undertake work that is normally done by male employees, such as digging canals and lifting 20 kilogram bags of manure. The workers have also been sent to work on other estates when no work is available at Madulwatta. The alternate estates are about eight kilometres away but the company does not provide transport. Management has threatened to punish workers who protested.

In a separate dispute, 250 workers at the Mountjeens tea estate in Watawala, Central province, have been on strike since August 8 to protest over delays in salary payments and to demand improved working conditions. Health services on the tea estate have been deteriorating and there are no doctors or nurses. There is no ambulance or any other vehicle available on the estate to take sick or injured workers to hospital. About one third of the estate is not being maintained and this has led to an increase in poisonous snakes. The estate was rented out to the private company last September and workers are demanding the government take it over.

Pakistani municipal health workers strike for overtime pay

About 900 cleaning and garbage workers in Lyari Town, Karachi, went on strike on August 22 in protest over delays in salary payments and the non-payment of outstanding overtime. The stoppage has resulted in garbage accumulating on the main thoroughfares and streets of Lyari.

Australian Broadcasting Commission staff strike over suspension

Several hundred staff employed at the state-owned Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) walked off the job on August 28 in Sydney and Melbourne to protest the suspension of broadcaster Stephen Crittenden from the *Religion Report*, a Radio National feature.

Management suspended Crittenden six weeks ago because he did not seek management approval for an article he wrote for the *Sydney Morning*

Herald. Some staff believe that the suspension is due to Crittenden's role in reporting rape allegations against the former Governor-General Peter Hollingworth. Others fear it is part of a systematic attempt to curb outside activities by ABC staff and ensure that only senior management speak. ABC employees have vowed to take further action if Crittenden is not reinstated.

Workers harassed at Mt Isa Mines

Service workers at Mt Isa Mines (MIM) in Queensland walked off the job for 24 hours on August 21 in protest over unfair treatment. The strike action, which involved members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, was in response to workers' claims that the company management had maltreated two workers.

In early August, an argument broke out between an acting supervisor and a worker. The acting supervisor made violent threats and the worker lodged a "Fair Treatment" claim with MIM. After an internal investigation the acting supervisor was counseled but the worker was issued with a "show cause" notice as to why he should not be sacked. Another employee who witnessed the altercation and spoke out against the supervisor was also issued with a final written warning. After returning to work on August 22, MIM management suspended the two workers and the AMWU delegate and issued written warnings to 27 service area workers.

MIM employees were due to hold a mass stopwork meeting on August 26 over the standdowns and in protest against the company's aggressive management methods.

Workers left on Bass Strait oil rigs

Around 30 construction workers have been stranded on Esso oil rigs in Bass Strait after enterprise bargaining talks broke down between the workers and contractors. They were scheduled to come ashore on August 21.

Employees claim that they are not on strike and have continued to work despite being held hostage by the company. Despite repeated requests from the Australian Workers Union (AWU), Esso has refused to fly the construction workers ashore.

The dispute centres on company attempts to change the work roster from seven days on, seven days off the rig, to 14 days on, 14 days off. The union claims that the company is trying to save money on transport by extending working times.

New Zealand health workers to strike

Workers in public health, health promotion and mental health services in New Zealand's upper South Island are preparing to take industrial action over low pay rates. It will start with an initial two days' strike in early September by registered nurses at Alexandra Psycho-Geriatric Hospital in Nelson.

A Public Service Association spokesman said workers were left with no choice but to take industrial action to get "fair and reasonable salary terms and conditions". Workers are not prepared to accept the low Nelson Marlborough District Health Board (DHB) salary rates, and industrial action is likely to spread as collective employment agreements expire.

Public Health and Mental Health Services nurses and related staff are receiving considerably less than health workers employed by other DHBs. Nelson/Marlborough nurses are paid between \$5,000 and \$8,000 per annum less in basic salary than their counterparts on the West Coast. Psychologists are receiving from \$15,000 to \$20,000 per annum less at Nelson Marlborough DHB than elsewhere.

National bargaining initiated at New Zealand universities

A formal notice has been sent to all vice-chancellors this week initiating bargaining for national collective employment agreements covering academic and general staff in the university sector. The initiation comes after ballots, conducted last month, gave support for a move from site-based to national bargaining. Meetings of union members at the seven universities have been conducted this week to endorse claims.

According to the Association of University Staff (AUS), the national salary claim, to be announced next week, "will be set at a level to address the increasing salary differential between New Zealand and Australian universities, and disparities within the local market". Recent research revealed that New Zealand academic remuneration packages fall behind Australia by as much as 28 percent. Other claims to be made by AUS in negotiation centre on workloads and "workplace democracy".

Strike vote in New Zealand rest home chain

Staff at the North Island's largest rest home chain voted to strike next month. Caregivers, nurses and support staff employed at Presbyterian Support Central (PSC) homes and hospitals that cater for over 800 residents in 10 urban and rural centres last week rejected a 2.25 percent pay offer.

A Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) advocate said that workers were angered by a PSC admission that it has received a 6 percent (\$1.6 million) increase in government funding this year, but refused to pass this on to care givers and support staff. The pay offer amounts to just over 1 percent of the increased funding.

The SWFU has accused the PSC of intending to use most of the additional funding to deliver a "return on investment" to its board. However, the two unions involved, the SWFU and the NZ Nurses Organisation, quickly scaled down their claims. When negotiations began in March, members authorised a claim for 5 percent, which the unions then reduced to 3.5 percent.

Solomon Islands teachers' strike called off

The Solomon Islands Teachers Association has called 3,000 of its striking members back to work after Prime Minister Allen Kemaleza promised to set up a taskforce to examine the teachers' grievances. The taskforce will look at compensation payments related to the ethnic tensions, and the upgrading of teacher certificate courses to degree or diploma level.

Sacked Fijian textile workers get their jobs back

All 200 striking workers who walked off their jobs at the Fiji textile manufacturing company Ghim-Li Fashions have been offered their jobs back after a deal was struck between the company and Fiji Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck.

The workers will be reinstated under the same terms and conditions as before the strike. Fiji Trade Union Council (FTUC) General Secretary Felix Anthony said, however, that the minister has misled the sacked employees because company management is putting them on three months probation.

Employees walked off the job on August 15 in protest over working conditions and claimed that the Singapore-owned company was paying well below the minimum wage.



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