Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 September 2003

Striking truck drivers block South Korean ports

Striking truck drivers in South Korea began blocking major highways and streets leading to major ports this week. They are demanding an increase in freight rates.

About 600 container truck owners used their vehicles to block off streets around the busy Sinseondae pier at Busan port. Some 188 drivers blocked off access to the Hannam, Seongsan and Gayang bridges, as well as the Uiwang container depot and the Pyeongtaek tollgate in the Seoul metropolitan area. Police have arrested around 380 drivers and towed away 470 trucks in Seoul, Busan and in Gyeonggi Province.

While the protests were underway, a spokesman for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions told a press conference that the union was not able to "control" the drivers and denied responsibility for the action.

Korean Nestlé workers reject company ultimatum

Swiss multinational Nestlé has threatened to close its plant in Cheongju unless workers end a campaign of strikes and sit-in protests. The industrial action began on July 7 in pursuit of a wage increase. On September 3, a company spokesman told the media that the head office "instructed us to consider legal steps for the closure of Nestlé's plant in South Korea". The branch office in Seoul was closed on August 25.

The 460 workers at the Cheongju plant are demanding an 11.7 percent pay increase and the right to participate in management decision-making in a number of areas. The company has ruled out the demand for participation and only offered a 5.25 percent rise. Workers rejected the company's ultimatum to end industrial action at rallies this week.

Nestlé has been operating in South Korea for more than 20 years. In 1998 the company's coffee manufacturing facility was the most competitive in Nestlé's global operations. Nestlé Korea controls 40 percent of South Korea's coffee market.

Strike at Korea's Daewoo called off

The union at GM Daewoo and Daewoo Incheon Motors in Bupyeong called off strike action scheduled for this week after accepting a 13 percent pay increase. Management also agreed to a one-off two million won (about $US850) bonus per worker to help the union sell the deal. Workers at the plants had been campaigning for a 24.3 percent rise.

Workers voted in August for a strike campaign if negotiations became deadlocked. GM Daewoo was launched in October last year after General Motors bought Daewoo Motors.

Cambodian hotel workers win payment of service fees

Hotel workers in Cambodia won compensation from a Singaporean-owned hotel for "service charges" collected from guests but not paid over to the employees each month. According to Cambodian labour law, service charges are supposed to be paid "in full" to workers.

The 440 present and former employees of the Phnom Penh's Hotel Cambodiana, were awarded $US50 each after they filed a complaint to the Arbitration Council. Complaints have been filed by the hotel unions about the lack of service money payment in other hotels around the country.

Hotels throughout Asia often levy a 10 percent "service charge" on customers' bills, ostensibly to formalise a tip for the employees. Many hotels, however, deduct staff-related costs such as uniforms, training and penalties for breakages. In Malaysia and Singapore, hotel workers receive about 80 percent of the service charge, while in Thailand the amount is often as little as 30-50 percent.

Sri Lankan oil palm workers strike for allowance

Some 100 oil palm fruit pickers on the Nakiyadeniya estate, 150 kilometres from Colombo, have been on strike since August 21 to demand a 150-rupee ($US1.50) increase in their daily wage. They are currently paid only 100 rupees per day.

The workers are employed to pick oil palm fruits, which are thorny and often cause injury. They are paid far less than those employed at the estate's oil palm factory, who receive 212 rupees per day. The strike stopped production at the oil palm factory.

Sri Lankan paper workers demonstrate against factory closure

Around 600 workers from the Ambilipitiya paper factory demonstrated on August 27 to oppose the proposed closure of the plant. They marched from the plant to the Ambilipitiya city centre where they protested for more than two hours. Six unions representing the workforce, from executives to production staff, organised the action. The Ambilipitiya paper factory began operations in 1977 and won the national productivity award in 1996.

Pakistani nurses stop work for improvements

About 600 nurses from the Civil Hospital in Karachi went on strike on August 28. They are demanding a uniform allowance, implementation of promotions withheld since 1993 and the provision of an additional allowance for nursing students.

The Medical Superintendent at Civic Hospital has acknowledged that the living conditions of the nurses were poor. Nurses Association president at the hospital said that senior health department officials were not listening to their complaints and warned action would escalate if the authorities did not address the problems.

South Australian teachers take industrial action

Members of the Australian Education Union are taking industrial action in South Australia over the forced transfer of five teachers from Craigmore High School in Adelaide last month.

So far, the union has approved statewide one-hour rolling stoppages after talks between the union and the Department of Education collapsed on September 2. A meeting of union delegates from all state schools will be held on September 8 to determine other forms of action. The AEU executive also approved funding for a Supreme Court challenge to the transfers.

The Department of Education transferred the teachers on August 15, after a review of Craigmore High found unacceptable levels of student absence, poor retention and low South Australian Certificate of Education results. The review was conducted at the request of the school principal and district superintendent.

The teachers were transferred in the midst of an industrial dispute over health and safety and while a ballot was being conducted for a stop-work meeting. The suspended teachers—Nick Cava, Duncan Kennington,

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Annette Chigros, Mike Jones and Dale Pope—are long-time union activists.

Workers walk out over compensation for workplace death

Around 350 building workers on seven construction sites in the Perth metropolitan area in Western Australia struck for 24 hours on September 2. The walkout was in response to a decision by Transfield Construction to appeal against a $50,000 fine for breaching the Occupational Safety and Health Act and contributing to the workplace death of Joe Guagliardo, who was killed in September 2000 during the construction of Acacia Prison.

The sites hit by the walkouts are operated by John Holland, which the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union says is part of the Transfield group.

Union lodges complaint over management assault on official

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) announced this week that it will lodge a complaint over the assault of one of its officials at the Rose Valley Cheese Factory in Armadale, Western Australia.

The assault took place when the official entered the plant after receiving information about a safety issue. The LMHU official found electrical cords lying in pools of water on the factory floor. Managerial staff manhandled the official and forcibly evicted him from the premises. Under the Industrial Relations Act, the union had the right to enter and inspect a site once it received a complaint from a member about occupational health and safety issues.

Catholic school teachers reject latest pay offer

Catholic schoolteachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) attended a mass meeting at the Canberra Labor Club on September 1 and rejected the interim salary offer made by their employers.

While the Catholic Education Office (CEO) offered the same total salary package paid to ACT public school teachers, it refused to match a seven percent increase in superannuation payments.

The meeting rejected as inadequate an offer in relation to casual teachers and noted that the CEO had still not considered any improvement in class sizes, in line with ACT government commitments in 2002 and 2003. The teachers endorsed a resolution condemning the failure of the CEO to adequately respond to the claims of the Independent Education Union for improved salaries and conditions and demanded an acceptable response by September 17.

New Zealand waterfront workers protest against Mainland

Waterfront workers and supporters picketed the gates of Southport in Bluff on August 27 to stop the Mainland stevedoring company from working the fishing trawler *Amatal Columbia*. The picket follows industrial action at Southport in July, when members of the Maritime Union (MUNZ) and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) staged joint pickets against Mainland Stevedores and demanded improved wages for Southport-employed casual workers.

The ongoing dispute has seen the unions, led by the NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU), pitting the local workforce against so-called "outsiders" employed by Mainland. The refusal to seek common cause between local waterside workers and those employed by hire firms such as Mainland has assisted the driving down of conditions and wages on the waterfront.

At the same time, a series of stoppages and pickets at ports throughout the South Island over the past four years has done nothing to hinder Mainland's operations. MUNZ General Secretary Trevor Hanson said a national conference of all union port branches would be held. It would place the *Amatal Columbia* on a "bad employers" blacklist and call for assistance from the CTU and the International Transport Workers' Federation.

New Zealand universities face major pay claims

New Zealand university unions are set to file a claim with employers for a national collective contract that increases salaries for academic staff by 10 percent per annum over the next three years. A claim will also be made for a 10 percent pay increase for general staff next year, followed by inflation-adjusted increases over the following two years. The general staff claim will be supplemented by a proposal to increase job evaluation alignments to the higher quartiles of the salary market.

The claims were endorsed over the last week by union membership meetings at the country's seven universities. The salary claim is based on gaining parity with the major Australian universities and addressing recruitment and retention problems predicted to hit universities internationally by the end of the decade. According to the Association of University Staff, New Zealand salaries already lag as much as 22 percent behind those in Australia. The Australian tertiary education unions have recently filed a 24 percent salary claim for the next three years.

Protests over sacking of New Zealand cartoonist

About 40 people picketed the *New Zealand Herald* head office in Auckland last week to protest the sacking of cartoonist Malcolm Evans. Evans, who was awarded "Cartoonist of the Year" at the national Media Awards in June, was told his work was no longer required after he refused to accept a directive from the *Herald*'s editor-in-chief to stop submitting cartoons critical of Israel.

Evans, who worked at the *Herald* for seven years, told National Radio that once the cartoons were published and hostile reaction came in, the paper "shrank from association with them". Auckland rabbi Jeremy Lawrence was a leading complainant, claimed the cartoons were "offensive" to the Jewish community and lacked "balance" in their portrayal of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Evans refused to stop submitting the cartoons, declaring that he respected the editor's right to reject cartoons, but not to dictate their content. An internal dispute had been going on for a year over Evans work, with the editor claiming an "absolute right" to determine cartoon content.

Nauru phosphate workers strike

On August 29, workers at the state-owned Nauru Phosphate Corporation (NPC), the country's largest employer, refused to unload a ship carrying diesel fuel for the country's electricity generators. The ship was forced to turn around and head to other islands. The workers walked of the job on an indefinite strike, claiming that they were owed nearly six months pay and demanding the sacking of the re-appointed NPC Chairman Vincent Detenamo.

Opposition leader, David Adeang of the Nauru First Party, told the ABC's Radio Australia this week that his party had organised the strike. He warned that there could be strike action by public servants and said: "We are getting strong rumblings from public servants to organise the same".

Fiji cannery workers still on strike after six weeks

A six-week-long strike by 600 employees of the state-owned Pacific Fishing Company (PAFCO) has been raised in the Fiji parliament. Opposition Labor Party leader Senator, Felix Anthony read out a long of issues confronting workers.

These included low wages, terms and conditions of employment, unexplained and unauthorised deductions of wages, employment of workers as permanent casuals for prolonged periods, sexual harassment, the denial of sick leave entitlements, suspension of workers without notice and non-compliance with Arbitration Awards.

The Senate was also told of a female employee who, after working a 43-hour week, was left with $4.92 ($US2.59) to take home after deductions for child care, lunch and bus fare from her $39.92 pay.

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