

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 June 2004

Indonesian teachers strike over assault on principal

Strike action by more than 7,000 teachers in the Muna regency of Southeast Sulawesi entered its 10th day on June 16. The teachers, who are protesting the beating of junior high school principal La Ode Tiala by a high-ranking police officer, rallied outside the Muna legislative council over two days from June 8 to demand the assailant be charged and punished. Some students joined the protest.

Chief Brigadier Alim Salman carried out the assault after teachers disciplined his son, a student at the school. Salman came to the school on June 2 and shouted abuse at teachers for several minutes before leaving. He returned two days later and slapped a security guard before assaulting La Ode Tiala. He threatened to shoot the principal and other teachers, and throw hand grenades at the school.

While Salman has been detained at the Southeast Sulawesi police headquarters for questioning, teachers have refused to call off their action. Salman has denied assaulting the principal but admitted slapping the security guard in the face because "he tried to resist me".

Police attack workers' protests in China

More than 5,000 workers from a Shenzhen-based Hong Kong company clashed with hundreds of police on June 5 during a protest over the non-payment of wages. Workers blocked traffic and hurled sticks and stones at the police. At least three workers and one child were injured and a number of vehicles were damaged.

The company, which has six subsidiaries employing 10,000 workers, manufactures Christmas trees. Increasing orders from America and Europe since March has seen the company contract out production to a former manager who refused to pay overtime or penalties for working public holidays. If employees did not work overtime, they were not paid at all. Workers' complaints to local government officials about the abuses have been ignored.

The incident in Shenzhen, one of China's special economic zones, is just one of a number of police attacks on workers' protests over the past few weeks. On May 17, 500 paramilitary police busted up a demonstration by about 1,000 workers from a Dongguang-based Taiwanese company that produces sport shoes for US corporations. The workers, who were protesting the sweatshop conditions in the company's plants, blocked a rail line for two days.

On the same day, police were sent to stop a march by 6,000 workers in Shenzhen before they reached the entry point into Hong Kong. The workers were protesting a reduction of overtime work that severely cut earnings.

Fireworks explosion kills 16 workers

An explosion at a Pingxiang fireworks factory in China's Jiangxi province killed 16 female workers and injured three others last week. The huge blast left an 80-square metre crater and scattered gunpowder over a wide area. The majority of factory workers were poverty-stricken villagers.

While the cause of the explosion has not yet been established, the industry is notorious for illegal and unsafe working conditions. Three

years ago, the government announced that it would regulate the industry after 42 people, many of them children, died in a fireworks explosion in a Jiangxi province village.

Korean taxi drivers and metal workers strike

Taxi drivers and metal workers in South Korea went on strike this week to demand wage increases and better working conditions.

The 4,600 drivers, members of the Korean Federation of Taxi Workers, want a minimum wage, a strengthened role for taxis as public transportation and the nullification of a taxi fare increase plan.

Members of the Korean Metal Workers Federation walked the job for four hours in the lead-up to a general strike on June 29 for increased wages and other demands. According to the union, 83 percent of its members voted for the strike.

Both unions are affiliated to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second largest peak union body. The strikes are part of a KCTU campaign for a five-day workweek, the abolition of discrimination against part-time and day labourers, and a monthly minimum wage of 766,000 won (\$US663). Hospital workers, including nurses and paramedics who are part of the KCTU campaign, have been on strike for over a week.

Sri Lankan workers demand action on election promises

Hundreds of private and public sector workers from Free Trade Zone (FTZ) garment factories, industrial zones, railways and cooperatives demonstrated outside the busy Fort Railway Station in Central Colombo on the evening of June 15.

The demonstrators shouted slogans demanding that the UPFA (United Peoples Freedom Party) government honor a series of promises it made during its election campaign, including the introduction of a decent compensation scheme for laid-off workers. Among the protesters were 146 employees retrenched from the Bata shoe company and hundreds of garment workers who have lost their jobs.

The demonstrators called on the government to introduce a promised increase in the basic wage and job creation measures. A trade union spokesman said the rally sought to generate support for a general strike against the privatisation of state assets, the rising cost of living and for an improved compensation scheme.

Meanwhile, in the war-ravaged north of the country a strike by non-academic staff at the University of Jaffna against privatisation and official corruption entered its fourth day on June 17. The Inter-university Trade Union Federation called the strike.

Hunger strikers demand reinstatement

A "fast-unto-death" campaign by around 200 retrenched workers, including 50 women, from the Peoples Estate Development Board (JEDB) and Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation (SLSPC) entered its 10th day on June 14. The workers are demanding that the new UPFA government reinstate them. Two of the hunger strikers have already fallen ill and have had been hospitalised.

The hunger strike is taking place outside the JEDB office in central Colombo. The protestors include drivers, clerks, extension officers and

other employees who have worked in the organisations from six months to two years. The campaign is being organised by the newly formed Union of the Retrenched and Victimised Workers of JEDB and SLSPC.

Indian strikers surround corporation head office

Striking contract city workers in Gulbarga, in the south Indian state of Karnataka, surrounded the Gulbarga City Corporation (GCC) office for six hours on June 14. The 476 workers have been on hunger strike for more than 150 days to demand salary increases in accordance with a Supreme Court mandate giving equal pay for contract workers doing the same work as permanents.

While the 300 permanent workers at the corporation are paid 6,000 rupees (\$US120) per month, contract workers are getting only 1,800 rupees. The strikers are also demanding payment of 10-month salary arrears. On June 15, permanent employees at GCC boycotted work in support of contract workers.

The State Labour Commissioner has directed the GCC to pay contract labourers according to the provisions of the Contract Labourers Abolition and Regulation Act but the corporation has defied the order, claiming that it is restricted by budgetary constraints.

Four die in Pakistan factory explosion

An explosion on June 13 at a small fireworks factory in a residential area in Faisalabad, eastern Pakistan, killed four workers and injured three others. The blast destroyed the workshop and shattered windows in nearby houses. Police are still investigating the cause of the explosion.

Explosions are common at firework factories in Pakistan and are mainly caused by poor safety procedures, including the unsafe storage of explosive materials. Faisalabad is about 270 kilometres (165 miles) south of the capital, Islamabad.

Ambulance workers fight for pay increase

On June 11, ambulance staff in Victoria imposed work bans after negotiations between the state Labor government and Ambulance Employees Australia (AEA) for a new work agreement broke down. While ambulance crews will continue to respond to all emergency calls, bans are in place on all non-emergency transport services, the collection of patient billing information and on unpaid work.

The workers want a 24 percent rise over three years and a \$95 weekly allowance for paramedics who hold advanced life support qualifications. The government has offered 2.25 percent annually plus yearly productivity bonuses.

While a spokesman for Health Minister Bronwyn Pike claimed that the ambulance workers' demand was "over the top," the AEA pointed out that the government's offer "did not address the serious inequity of ambulance workers' pay compared to other emergency workers".

Family service workers demand reduced workloads

About 70 workers from Family and Children's Services in Australia's Northern Territory went on strike on June 16 over increasing workloads. Those involved are members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

A CPSU spokesman said the union is concerned that the Department of Health refuses to address the ongoing problem of excessive workloads and warned that bans and work limitations would be put into place unless the issue was dealt with.

Teachers to meet over pay issue

Public school teachers in New South Wales will stop work on June 25 to vote on further industrial action in a dispute over pay. The NSW Teachers Federation is demanding an increase on the 12 percent pay rise recently awarded to teachers, to bring them into line with the 15 to 19.5 percent granted to Catholic school teachers in promotion positions.

A federation spokesperson called on the NSW Labor government to "fully fund the salaries increases with additional monies from Treasury". There was a "serious threat to the future of quality public education in this state". Teachers were preparing for a long campaign that would involve

industrial action, including rolling strikes.

New Zealand mental health workers strike

Christchurch-based mental health workers employed by private health provider Richmond Fellowship went on strike for two days on June 12 and held a rally in Cathedral Square. The strike came after mediation facilitated by the Department of Labour over a collective work agreement failed. It was the first ever strike by workers at Richmond Fellowship.

A union spokesman said the mediation failed because Richmond was not prepared to move from its previous negotiating position. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Service and Food Workers Union (SFwu) have been trying to negotiate an agreement for improved pay and working conditions since before Christmas.

The unions accuse Richmond of paying poverty-line wages that force staff to work long hours. The mental health workers are paid as little as \$11 an hour and get no shift leave or weekend allowances. The union spokesman said it was "a scandal that Richmond Fellowship, an employer that promotes itself as doing good works, treats its workers so badly".

Industrial action continues at NZ universities

Non-academic staff at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) widened industrial action this week over a collective employment agreement. Library staff stopped work for two hours on June 15, following a two-day ban on phone calls and emails by general office workers from June 10. The action follows an earlier stoppage in protest at a pay offer of 2.2 percent. The workers have threatened more industrial action, including non-cooperation, a partial withdrawal of labour and lightening strikes unless the dispute is resolved.

Workers are claiming a 4 percent salary increase in line with a recent increase for academics but the university's latest offer is for only 2.5 percent with a one-off payment of \$350. A representative of the Association of University Staff (AUS) said the latest offer was still the lowest to general staff by any university in the country.

In a separate pay dispute, a meeting between unions and management was held at the University of Otago on June 18 in an effort to avert further industrial action. Academic staff at the university are continuing to stage public protests and are refusing to submit exam marks until a settlement is reached in the contract negotiations.

The university has offered a 3 percent salary increase for general staff and academic staff below the rank of lecturer, and to restructure salary scales for those above. The staff are opposed to differential salary increases. Responding earlier this week to a request by the unions for further discussions, the university's human resources director said there was no point in another meeting unless the unions had a new proposal "which delivers a settlement that maintains the elements of the current offer".

Fijian court rejects compensation for gold mine workers

The hopes of 370 former workers of Australian-owned Emperor Mines in Vatukoula, Fiji of getting compensation from the company who sacked them in 1991 were dashed on June 11. High Court Justice John Connors ruled inadmissible a 1995 government-commissioned report into the strike and dismissals, which supported the workers' claim for reinstatement and compensation.

More than 700 workers went on strike in 1991 over inadequate pay, poor health and safety standards, and pollution. While some returned to work, those who remained on strike were sacked. Since being dismissed, the workers continued to protest at the mine on a regular basis and launched legal action against the company's decision.

The *Sunday Age*, an Australian newspaper that obtained a copy of the report, said it revealed a "disturbing catalogue of social and environmental neglect and a history of coercive management" that was largely responsible for the strike. Along with compensation to the sacked workers, the report recommends a "thorough review of Fiji's mining legislation".

Some PNG teachers still waiting for pay after six months

As many as 238 teachers in the West Sepik province in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are still waiting to be put on the payroll six months after the school year started.

This week union branch representatives said they had been have been trying to resolve the issue on a regional basis but have now called on the PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA) head office and membership services division to get involved in the issue.

PNGTA West Sepik branch president Philip Nasi said the salary problem was an ongoing issue and pointed to other problems, including teachers being under-paid and not receiving hardship, boarding and teacher-in-charge allowances.



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