

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 June 2004

Sri Lankan doctors on indefinite strike

Some 1,550 Assistant Medical Officers (AMO) and Registered Medical Officers (RMO) began indefinite strike action on June 7 to demand a scheduled salary increase. Their demand is in line with a Ministry of Health circular issued a few months ago designed to resolve salary anomalies among health workers. The AMOs and RMOs claim they have been dropped from the various categories listed on the circular.

The striking doctors held pickets with other health workers on June 9 and established a Satyagraha, or sit-in protest, outside the health ministry. The Health Service Trade Union Alliance (HSTUA) has endorsed the doctors' struggle.

Indian cigarette workers demonstrate for improved conditions

On June 9, thousands of Beedi (low-cost cigarettes) workers demonstrated in Tumkur, in the south Indian state of Karnataka, against the government's failure to provide better working conditions.

The mainly women workers, who were accompanied by their children, waved red flags and chanted anti-government slogans. They also presented a memorandum of their demands to a government revenue official.

Their grievances include a state government decision to impose widespread smoking bans in public areas. Union officials claim that the jobs of 80,000 Beedi workers are threatened by this decision. The workers are also demanding improved welfare provisions, including education for their children.

Indian transport workers demonstrate

Hundreds of transport workers from the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) demonstrated throughout the south Indian state this week. The Centre for Indian Trade Unions is calling for a pay increase for transport workers, pointing out that a revision of salaries has been due since September 2001.

Other demands include the restoration of a bonus and festival advance, performance incentives, education assistance and the implementation of promotions. Workers urged the government to lift bans on labour recruitment and fill 800 vacancies created by retirement and dismissals. They also demanded an end to punitive measures initiated against workers involved in earlier strikes.

Around 250 workers demonstrated outside the TNSTC headquarters in Madurai, with a dharna (sit-in protest) held in front of the general manager's office in Tirunelveli. Transport workers also held protests in Vannarpettai and Nagercoil.

Pakistani truck drivers block roads

Chanting truck drivers blocked the GT Road near Wazirabad in Gujranwala on June 7 to protest the alleged manhandling of one of their colleagues by district traffic police. According to workers, Nasir Ahmad was assaulted and dragged from his vehicle after he refused to make an illegal payment to the police.

The protesting drivers, who were joined by other workers, claim that extorting money from transport and ordinary drivers is a widespread and common practice.

Korean hospital union desperate for compromise

The National Health and Medical Industry Labor Union covering workers employed in 100 hospitals across South Korea are working to limit industrial action in order to broker a deal with the government. The local media reported that union officials were involved in a "last ditch effort" to find a compromise in negotiations with the government's Labor Relations Commission this week.

The workers want a five-day, 40-hour workweek, a 10.7 percent pay increase and permanency for "non-regular" or casual employees. Hospital authorities and the government claim introduction of a five-day workweek is not feasible. Hospital managers said they were prepared to retain a 40-hour week, but employees would have to work extra overtime on demand.

Attempts by the union to head off industrial action is in line with a Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) declaration this month that its affiliates would avoid widespread industrial conflict and limit all strike action in new wage and conditions bargaining.

KCTU secretary-general Lee Soo-ho said the peak union body would "do its best not to go on strike". Accordingly, the hospital workers union has agreed that any strike or protest action would only involve 10 percent of its members.

Indonesian hotel workers rally against job cuts

Over 230 Nikko Hotel employees in central Jakarta protested outside the Jakarta Manpower and Transmigration Agency office on June 4 in defence of jobs. The workers are fighting moves by the hotel to slash jobs in breach of an employment agreement made by new owner, Singapore-based PT Guthrie Logistic Private Limited.

PT Guthrie purchased a 75 percent stake in the company from PT Wisma Nusantara Internasional in December 2002 and guaranteed the employment of all staff for at least three years.

While the new management claims the dismissals were in response to financial losses over the past two years, the workers' union pointed out that the hotel's occupancy rate is over 70 percent, the highest of any in Jakarta. Profits last year amounted to more than 1.4 billion rupiah (\$US148,936).

Workers injured in building collapse

Construction workers in Medan, Indonesia, narrowly escaped death when a new section of a three-storey extension to the Hotel Sahiba collapsed on June 10. Six of the eight workers in the building were trapped on the ground floor and buried under tons of falling rubble.

One injured worker told the media he was in the building when it caved in around 10 a.m. Two other employees, Gimin and Misno, were admitted to hospital with fractured skulls.

According to a preliminary police investigation, the collapse was caused by shoddy construction methods. Five construction workers were killed outright when a similar building collapsed in North Jakarta last month.

Bank workers threaten strike over wage parity

Finance Sector Union members at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) have threatened industrial action over a new enterprise work

agreement. They are angry over management's refusal to increase staffing levels and introduce wage parity with other bank industry workers.

CBA employees want an 11 percent pay rise over two years. The bank has offered 4 percent over two years, 7.5 percent below the deal offered by the National Bank of Australia to its staff.

The CBA, like other Australian banks, has boosted profits through the elimination of thousands of jobs. Last year the bank slashed 600 jobs, on top of the 1,600 it axed in 2002, and announced a \$500 million cost-cutting review that could result in the destruction of another 3,000 jobs.

Construction company reneges on wage agreement

About 50 workers at the Brand Highway Interchange project in Geraldton, Western Australia, stopped work on March 10 in protest over Thiess management's failure to pay above-average hourly rates. Under an agreement with the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, dogmen and scaffolders were supposed to receive \$21.90 and labourers \$20.03 per hour.

Conditions are grossly inadequate, with only one chemical toilet for 35 workers and no drinking water on the site. A union spokesman said Thiess was "treating construction workers like second-class citizens". Workers are threatening further industrial action, including work bans.

Charity workers demand pay increases

Employees at Endeavour Foundation, a community-based charity organisation, who work in homes for the intellectually disabled, threatened to escalate industrial action this week. They are campaigning for improved wages and working conditions.

Work bans are already in place in 90 work centres throughout the state of Queensland. Employees are demanding a 6 percent pay increase, full payment of all hours worked and proper facilities for staff required to sleep over at their place of work.

A union spokeswoman told the media that Endeavour Foundation workers were prepared to maintain work bans and other "long-term avenues of industrial action" to secure a satisfactory agreement.

Workers strike over living conditions

Construction workers at the Wickham Point gas plant in the Northern Territory are maintaining strike action begun on June 8. The strike is over a 32-item log of claims, including improved on-site living facilities for interstate workers.

An Australian Workers Union spokesperson said the union would continue negotiations with Bechtel, the construction company, and meet with employees on June 11.

Industrial court backs away from imposing settlement

Concerned over the outbreak of further strike action, the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) rejected an application by the South Australian state Labor government this week to impose a settlement on 26,000 public servants involved in a six month-long pay dispute. Instead, the IRC ordered the government to continue negotiations with the Public Service Association.

The government's refusal to make any improvement on its pay offer over the past six months has led to bans on speed camera operations and other revenue-gathering operations, and a series of snap strikes across government departments and institutions.

The government pushed the dispute into arbitration after public sector workers rejected an 8 percent pay rise over two years for workers on less than \$43,000, and 7 percent for those on higher amounts. On June 9, IRC deputy president Peter Hampton ordered the parties to negotiate an enterprise agreement that could be put to a vote by workers "at the earliest opportunity".

New Zealand rail workers hold stopwork meetings

Rail staff in Auckland held two stopwork meetings on June 4 over work conditions associated with their transfer to a new rail operator. Rail workers leafleted passengers at Britomart railway station, pointing out that Tranz Rail had stopped them joining a multi-employer collective

agreement. The agreement currently covers 3,200 staff at Toll Holdings, the new Australian owner of Tranz Rail.

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union earlier promised to keep enough union members on duty during the meetings to ensure there was no disruption to train travel. A union spokesperson denied rumors that workers were preparing a wildcat strike and warned union members against taking any strike action before their present employment agreement expired. The NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU) accused Toll of undermining one of the country's key industrial agreements and of moving to change rosters unilaterally on Arahura, the Cook Strait rail ferry.

CTU President Ross Wilson has attempted to divert workers' anger by whipping up anti-Australian sentiments, declaring: "Australian industrial bully boy tactics are not welcome in New Zealand." Wilson's statement ignores the fact that New Zealand companies have been as aggressive as their Australian counterparts in attacking workers' rights, jobs and working conditions.

Bank call centre workers walk out

Workers at Westpac's three call centres in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch walked off the job on June 8 after rejecting the bank's collective work agreement offer that failed to address concerns over working conditions. The call centre workers are presently on a continually changing roster system but only get four weeks' notice of changes.

The workers are also required to work half an hour more each day than other bank employees. The financial sector union, Finsec, agreed to return to bargaining on the day following the strike, despite the lack of any improved offer.

NZ university wages disputes set to escalate

Staff at Otago University warned the institution's governing council this week that unless there was progress in their pay dispute they would escalate industrial action. The workers threaten to disrupt as many public functions as possible between now and the end of June, and to withhold exam marks. The written statement by the combined site unions followed a half-day strike last week during which 400 academic and support staff marched around the Dunedin campus.

Association of University Staff (AUS) branch president Shef Rogers said the university's strong performance in recent research funding rounds and the decision to increase overseas students fees by 20 percent meant it could afford to meet the staff's uniform 4 percent claim. In what it called the final offer, the university tabled a range of increases of between 3 percent and 7 per cent, but staff are opposed to the application of differential pay rises for various classes of academics.

Non-academic staff at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) will also continue industrial action in support of a 4 percent salary increase. Negotiations between the AUS and the university took place following strike action on May 31. A revised employer offer of 2.5 percent, plus a one-off payment of \$NZ350 to union members, was rejected during negotiations. An AUS spokesperson said the salary offer was lower than to any group of university staff in the current wage round.

Auckland casino workers strike

Sky City casino workers went on strike for four hours on June 4, protesting a company wage offer and other issues in negotiations for the renewal of a collective work agreement. The Service & Food Workers Union (SFWU) with nearly 900 members at Sky City has been negotiating for six days on the contract. Sky City has offered a 40 cents an hour increase to workers earning under \$NZ18.00 an hour and 2.2 percent to those on \$18.00 an hour.

The SFWU says the offer is unfair given Sky City's record profits, the recent 30 percent increase in directors' fees and the large dividends paid to shareholders.

Workers are demanding a decent pay rise for all workers and particularly the lower-paid, some of whom receive \$10.60 an hour.

Workers unanimously rejected Sky City's offer at union meetings this week with 97 percent in support of strike action.

PNG medical officers protest escalates

All 50 first-year resident medical officers (RMOs) walked off the job at the Port Moresby General Hospital in Papua New Guinea (PNG) on June 7 protesting the non-payment of salaries. The RMOs have not been paid since January this year. The strike has resulted in a sharp cut to services at the hospital, with only urgent and serious cases being treated.

Eighteen RMOs facing the same issue at Angau Memorial Hospital and Mount Hagel General Hospital took industrial action in support of their Port Moresby colleagues. It is now expected that all 121 RMOs throughout the country will join the strike action.

The walkout was triggered by the refusal of Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann during a meeting on June 7 to give RMO representatives a definite date for the payment of outstanding salaries. Mann merely promised that he would be "looking into the matter seriously".

Last year, first-year RMOs, including pharmacists, radiographers, laboratory technicians, dentists and health extension officers, had to wait six months before back salaries were paid.

Unpaid Fiji public employees refuse to work

Fiji Public Works Department (PWD) employees on Gau Island are refusing duties until they are paid for work they performed in Tubou, Lakeba where they assisted in preparations for the state funeral of former President, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara.

A spokesman for the group said they were told there was no money available for payment even though PWD workers in Suva had been paid.

The Acting Minister for Works and Energy said funds had been allocated to pay staff involved in the funeral and "wondered where the money has gone". There are no reports that the government is taking any action to resolve the issue.



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