Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 July 2004

Union ends bank workers' strike

A prolonged strike at the KorAm Bank in South Korea ended on July 12 after workers voted for an agreement recommended by the Korea Financial Industry Union. The strike, the longest in the history of country's financial sector, began on June 25, following the takeover of KorAm by the US banking company Citigroup. Workers believed that Citigroup would restructure the bank's operations to cut jobs and benefits.

While the union succeeded in getting the agreement ratified, a large minority of workers accused officials of "giving up too much". The union dropped its demand for an 8.6 percent pay increase and management agreed to improve the working conditions of tellers and secretaries, but only "gradually". The union admitted that lower-level employees had been "treated unfairly" in the agreement.

Management ruled out the immediate introduction of a pay and promotion system based on seniority and will retain the current performance-based system until at least the end of next year. The company's position on "job security guarantees" remains vague with management claiming it will not "lay off employees against their will".

As a sop, management offered a one-off bonus equal to four times an employee's monthly pay. The deal also includes the dropping of criminal charges against bank union officials for organising "illegal" strike activity.

The union rushed to settle the KorAm strike as preliminary results from a ballot of 80,000 financial sector workers on July 13 indicated overwhelming support for strike action over wages and conditions. They are demanding a 10.7 percent pay increase and improved employment terms for casual workers.

Petrochemical workers strike

About 3,000 workers at seven petrochemical companies in South Korea went on strike on July 14 after negotiations over a series of demands stalled. Companies affected include, LG-Caltex, LG Chemical and BASF Korea in Yeosu, South Jeolla province.

The workers, members of unions affiliated to the Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), are demanding that companies provide funds for regional development and give permanency to irregular (casual) workers. They also want an increase in the number of workers on each shift to reduce working hours. The company has refused staff increases that would improve safety by reducing workloads and lessening fatigue.

Chinese workers threaten suicide

About 20 workers petitioning in Beijing on July 12 threatened to commit suicide by jumping off a building in the city's southern Yongdingmen district. The workers, mainly miners from Heilonjiang in northeast China, climbed to the top of the building while watched by about 2,000 petitioners from various parts of the country. After four hours police persuaded the workers to come down and then detained them.

The miners are some of the many thousands of working people who travel to Beijing to petition central government agencies over hardship caused by the wholesale closure and sale of state-owned industries, mass unemployment and the destruction of pensions and other benefits.

While local government officials generally ignore the workers' plight, petitioners receive the same treatment in Beijing where they are either dismissed out of hand or fobbed off to various authorities. Commenting on the threatened suicides, a State Supreme Court petitions office official said, "the complaints of these people do not conform to the courts jurisdiction" and "they need to see the State Council".

Filipino bank employees continue protest

Philippine National Bank (PNB) employees in Central Luzon are maintaining protests they began on June 28 for a pay increase. The workers are reporting for duty wearing black shirts and wristbands to draw attention to their demands. They have not had a pay rise since 1994 and want more than Central Luzon's 224 pesos ($US4.02) minimum daily wage.

Town council workers fear loss of conditions

Town council (Town Panchayat,) workers in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated outside the Tallakulam Telegraph Office in Madurai on July 14. They were protesting over a state government order downgrading 566 town councils to the status of village councils.

Workers claim that the downgrading order promulgated on June 11 would adversely affect the conditions of around 14,000 people currently employed by town councils. At stake is a range of entitlements, including regular pay arrangements, pensions and job security.

University teachers demand pay increase

An indefinite boycott of part-time classes by university teachers in the south Indian state of Kerala entered its third week on July 14. The teachers are demanding an increase in the part-time hourly rate from 100 to 300 rupees ($US6). Part-time courses are held at several colleges across the state, including the Government College of Engineering in Thiruvananthapuram and Thissur, and the T.K.M. College of Engineering in Kollam.

The pay rate was last revised in 1997 but the state government promised teachers in March this year that there would be an increase by June. The government, however, reneged on the promise, provoking the current industrial action.

Power-loom workers defend victimized union official

Power-loom (hand-made textile) workers in Faisalabad, Pakistan, went on strike on July 14 demanding improved wages and conditions, and the immediate release of union official Asif Lodhi.

Lodhi was assaulted by management and detained by police at a protest meeting in Lakkar Mandi the previous day. Workers are considering legal action against the factory owners who publicly beat the union official.

On July 14, workers carrying banners gathered in various industrial areas and blocked traffic on several major roads into the city. They called for the provision of social security, old-age benefits, weekly holidays and a range of other conditions.

Indigenous health workers take action over pay

Health workers at Borella Ayurveda (indigenous) hospital in Colombo and other Ayurveda hospitals across Sri Lanka picketed their workplaces on June 13 demanding the correction of anomalies in their salary scales.

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They are members of All Ceylon Health Services Union (ACHSU).

Trainee bank workers fight for permanency

A campaign by the hundreds of Sri Lankan graduate trainee workers at the Bank of Ceylon (BOC) demanding permanent employment has now entered its fourth week. The campaign began on June 24, when workers began an indefinite protest outside BOC offices in Colombo. After being removed by the police on July 4, the protesters moved to Fort Railway Station in central Colombo.

The trainee workers began to be hired during March 2003 and expected full-time employment. Over 100 trainees received termination notices when the UPFA government came to power in April, despite the bank having over 1,500 vacancies in staff assistant grades. The UPFA promised to recruit 30,000 graduates to the public sector if elected, but workers suspect that many positions are being given to people favored by the government.

Garbage collectors strike in defense of union delegate

Garbage collectors in Brisbane, Queensland walked out on July 12 for 24 hours. They were protesting against the sacking of Transport Workers Union delegate Jason Miller the previous Friday.

SITA Environmental Solution, the garbage collection contractor for the Brisbane City Council, claims that it sacked Miller for copying what it termed was "confidential information". Miller has denied the allegations and says that he was unfairly dismissed.

Australian university staff protest

Academic and general staff at the University of Wollongong on New South Wales' South Coast began a series of work stoppages on July 14. They plan to hold protests at the university campus over a three-day period to demand pay increases and to raise community support for their campaign.

The university workers, members of the National Education Union (NEU), want a 15 percent pay rise over two years but university management is only offering 19 percent over three years.

BHP sacks contract maintenance workers

BHP Billiton sacked 200 maintenance contract workers and 50 semi-permanent staff at its Boodarie iron ore plant in northern Western Australia. The sackings follow a work stoppage by contract workers at the site the previous week after many were exposed to toxic fumes and dust.

Management said that maintenance work would cease because the company could not guarantee safety at the site even though production had been suspended when a worker died and three others were injured in an explosion in March.

Roadside maintenance workers defend conditions

Roadside maintenance workers employed by the Royal Automobile Club of Western Australia went on strike this week in protest against the excessive use of contract labour to cover weekend work. They claim the company has breached provisions in the enterprise agreement covering roadside mechanics. The agreement states that priority must be given to full-time staff when allocating extra weekend work. Workers claim that a lot of the overtime is first being offered to contractor workers.

New Zealand nurses begin pay talks

Negotiations for a national pay agreement for 20,000 nurses began in Wellington, New Zealand, this week. This is the first time in 13 years that nurses from the country's 21 district health boards are seeking coverage under a single agreement. Discussions are scheduled over the next two weeks.

The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) is pushing for pay equity with teachers and police, as well as fixed nurse-to-patient ratios. If successful, nurses will receive pay rises of more than 20 percent. Base rates for graduate nurses will increase from $32,000 to $40,000 and from $45,000 to $60,000 for senior nurses. The cost to the government will be an extra $300 million a year.

Health Minister Annette King has already dismissed the claim as excessive, and no allowance for pay increases has been made in the 2004 budget. Despite the government opposition, the NZNO has no plans for industrial action, claiming that the commencement of negotiations means the 18-month pay parity campaign is "on the home straight".

NZ casino dispute escalates

Industrial and legal action is escalating at Dunedin Casino after the failure of mediation talks over the sacking of a union delegate a week ago. The Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) is seeking the "interim" reinstatement of croupier Andrew Bolesworth. Bolesworth was sacked over what the company termed "serious misconduct". He had sent two emails to management and placed a statement on the staff notice board. The management claimed it found the emails "offensive".

A picket outside the casino last week attracted about 80 people. A petition is being circulated and further pickets are being scheduled. The casino has received over 800 international emails protesting the sacking.

An Otago and Southland Employers Association spokesman, representing casino management, claimed the picketing was "illegal" because it was outside the dispute-settling procedure. The SWFU has announced it will file proceedings next week with the Employment Relations Authority to obtain an interim reinstatement.

Air New Zealand flight attendants fight dismissal

Two former Air New Zealand flight attendants who were sacked after being accused of drinking while on duty appealed their dismissal this week. The workers deny drinking while on a flight to Tahiti in April last year, and have taken their case to the Employment Relations Authority (ERA).

A Flight Attendants and Related Services Association spokesperson said the union supported the attendants' case but Air NZ has refused to comment on the incident. The company has a "zero tolerance" policy to drug and alcohol consumption, which includes a ban on drinking 10 hours before duty.

The Employment Court ruled in April that the airline could conduct random alcohol and blood tests on employees in safety sensitive areas but the case in question is not expected to test the policy because the incident pre-dates the ruling.

A number of similar cases previously heard by the ERA have ruled in favour of workers' unfair dismissal claims. A Qantas Jetconnect hostess won back her job in September after the authority ruled that despite evidence that she had consumed alcohol within eight hours of flying, her treatment was not comparable with that of other staff who had been let off with a warning.

NZ electricity workers ban overtime

North Auckland electricity workers have banned overtime over their employer's refusal to settle a collective agreement. More than 50 maintenance, emergency and installation workers from the international company Siemens Energy Group this week imposed a one-month overtime ban.

An advocate for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said talks had dragged on for more than five months with the company trying to win extensive "claw-backs", including overturning conditions in earlier agreements governing working hours.

The company is also refusing to offer a decent pay rise, regardless of an international skills shortage. The workers, who currently work callouts on a voluntary basis and are paid overtime and allowances, say they are not prepared to work on compulsory standby at reduced rates.

PNG medical laboratory workers are over-worked

The Papua New Guinea Medical Laboratory Technical Staff Association (PNG-MLTSA) has called on the Health Department to immediately settle insurance, overtime and leave entitlement claims of 210 laboratory technicians working throughout the country. The Association claimed that 31 technicians have already become ill because of over-work and poor working conditions.

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A claim was lodged with the Health Secretary on July 9, who rejected it claiming it had not been properly drawn up and should be submitted to the Personnel Management and Health Department.

PNG resident medical officers walk off the job

Resident medical officers (RMOs) employed at the Port Moresby General Hospital in Papua New Guinea walked off the job for a second time on July 9 in protest over the non-payment of salaries. RMOs in other locations have also begun taking action after receiving a "walk off work" notice from their Port Moresby colleagues.

There are 121 RMOs nationwide with 50 stationed in the PNG capital. They are first-year university graduates comprising pharmacists, radiographers, laboratory technicians, dentists and health extension workers. The RMOs are angry over the Health Departments failure to pay salaries as promised after their first walk out on June 7.

Apart from a payment of 3,500 kina ($US1,094) spread over three months and ending on January 1, all 121 RMOs have been working without pay for seven months. A group representative Dr Tony Sonson told the *National* daily newspaper: "So far, the department has only allocated us file numbers and the written documents showing the approval of 1.9 million kina ($594,000) to pay us." He said the workers plan to remain off work until the money is paid into their accounts.

There has been no reported response from the Health Department.

PNG casual health workers protest over unpaid wages

Casual workers employed by PNG's Western Highlands Division of Health marched to the provincial government's headquarters in Kapal Haus on July 14 to protest the non-payment of their wages.

Spokesman for the casuals, Lip Legas, said many of them have not been paid for five months because they have been removed from the payroll. He said, "Some of us have been on the payroll system from nine to 29 years and we are confused about what is going on". The casuals consist of drivers, security guards, cleaners, technicians, nurses, artisan, electricians and engineers.

Engine exhaust fumes cause death of Fiji cannery worker

The union secretary representing workers at the state-run Pacific Fishing Company Limited (PAFCO) in Fiji has blamed prolonged exposure to exhaust fumes from gas-operated forklifts for the recent death of cold storage worker Maikeli Katoni.

Maikeli Katoni, who died of a heart attack, had complained to the union since December 2003 about suffering chest pains and breathing problems when working in the company's cold-storage rooms while gas operated forklifts were in operation. Other workers made similar complaints. On many occasions workers were forced to leave the storage rooms due to dizziness and suffering the loss of control of limbs. Some workers had been found on occasions in a semi-conscious state outside the storage room doors.

Peni Tauli, one of the affected workers, said that the normal practice when any employee experienced difficulty because of fumes was to send in another to replace them. However, he said that the fumes quickly affected relief workers. Despite the recent death and a report by the company's OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) facilitator that the problem with fumes was longstanding, the union has not banned the use of the gas-operated forklifts in enclosed areas.

The company failed to implement a recommendation by the Ministry of Labour's OHS officer, Ronald Raj, on July 6 that gas forklifts could only be used if modifications to improve ventilation in the storage rooms were implemented and gas detectors installed. Despite this, the government has not acted against the management and union secretary Tomasi Tokalauver has simply issued a statement condemning the company for its inaction.

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