

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 July 2004

Miners evade police cordon to protest in Beijing

Despite attempts by hundreds of police on July 18 to block a convoy of 28 trucks carrying 400 retrenched miners from reaching Beijing, 200 workers managed to slip through the cordon in Sanhe in China's Hebei province.

The miners, from the northeastern Chinese province of Heilongjiang, were travelling to the Beijing to protest the detention of 23 of their colleagues who threatened to commit suicide by jumping from a building near the Supreme Court. The 23 men, representing thousands of miners laid-off by the Henang City Mining Bureau between 1996 and 1998, threatened suicide after the court refused to hear their petition over dismissals and inadequate severance and missing funds.

The 200 miners, carrying banners saying "Give us back our human rights!" and "In search of a livelihood", protested outside the Complaints Office of the State Council in Beijing on July 21. About 3,000 miners laid off from the Henang City Mining Bureau blocked a major railway line between Jixi and Harbin on July 7-8 protesting the disappearance and misuse of funds earmarked for severance payments.

Battery workers protest over poisoning

Representatives of workers from Gold Peak Industries—the major stockholders of GP Batteries in Hong Kong and China—protested at the company's headquarters in Kwia Chung, Hong Kong this week. The demonstration also included representatives from the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, the Hong Kong Christian Industrial Committee and the bulletin Globalisation Monitor. It was called to expose cadmium poisoning of workers in the company's factories in the mainland province of Huizhou Guangdong.

Almost 100 demonstrators entered the company's headquarters despite attempts by security guards to stop them. Inside the building, some workers staged a satirical drama about the cadmium hazard and highlighting poor working conditions in the plants. It drew attention to the plight of one pregnant women constantly made to work excessive hours.

Employees are demanding that the company improve working conditions, including better ventilation, and remove health hazards. They also want employees blood-tested and the company to pay medical fees and compensation to those already exposed to cadmium.

Deputy general manager Brenda Lee Wong Yuk-wan recently admitted that since the beginning of this year, 400 out of 1,000 workers tested were suffering "higher than normal cadmium levels". Another 2,000 staff are yet to be screened.

Indonesian drivers' strike cripples public transport

More than 1,000 public transport owner-drivers went on strike on July 20 in the Indonesian city of Makassar, South Sulawesi, bringing public transport to a standstill. Some drivers refused to take passengers while others dropped passengers off before they reached their destination.

Strike coordinator Zubair said drivers were protesting against legal and illegal fees over and above a regular payment to the land transportation vehicle organisation (Organda). He accused the local authorities of "selling permits for their own gain". The Makassar communications

office last year issued a circular banning the collection of fees from local public transport drivers but the ruling has been blatantly ignored.

The drivers also held a rally at the Makassar Legislative Council seeking the support of council members for their demands.

University teachers and staff strike in Davao

On July 22, staff at the Ateneo de Davao University in the Philippines walked out over union busting, unjustified sackings, continuous harassment and other unfair labour practices by the university management. It is the first time in 17 years that teachers at the institution have been on strike.

Teachers held a rally outside the university's main gate and held placards that read, "We are on strike" and "Stop terminating teachers". Non-teaching staff from the Jacinto campus also took to the streets.

Union vice president Beth Navaroza said nine teachers were terminated because they joined the union. As part of its union-busting operation, university management created a new category of employees known as "Ignatian Associates" who are not allowed to join a union, and granted a salary increase of 6 percent to non-union members on July 16. Union members have not had a pay increase in the past three years.

Management is refusing to negotiate. It has hired substitute teachers and placed signs on the university fence announcing "classes and business as usual".

Indian cargo workers strike over outsourcing

Cargo handlers at the Visakhapatnam port in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on July 25. They are opposing the Visakhapatnam Port Trust (VPT) subcontracting cargo handling to a private company. The strike paralysed ships at two berths. At least seven vessels carrying coal, ammonium nitrate, manganese ore and shredded scrap and pet are waiting at anchor unable to unload their cargoes.

The multi-purpose terminal was developed by Vizag Seaport Private Limited, a joint venture company of Gammon India Limited and Portia Management Services of the UK, to handle break and bulk cargoes in the inner harbour. The striking workers are members of the Visakhapatnam Harbour and Port Workers Union, which is affiliated to the All India Trade Union Centre.

Indian aluminum workers fight privatisation

Thousands of workers at the Bharat Aluminum Company (BALCO) in Korba, Chattisgarh went on strike on July 22 against the sale of the remaining 49 percent share owned by the government. The Korba district administration deployed a stand-by police contingency to be used against the striking workers.

BALCO was one of the first public sector profit-making ventures subjected to privatisation by the former BJP-led NDA government in 2001, sparking a 61-day dispute by workers. It sold 51 percent of BALCO to the Sterlite group for an estimated Rs.5.51 billion rupees (approximately \$US110 million). The Congress-led UPA government now wants to sell the remainder to the same group.

The strikers are members of the Balco Bachao Samyukta Abhiyan Samiti, which includes several unions.

Pakistani power-loom workers demonstrate

Large numbers of power-loom textile workers from Faisalabad staged a demonstration and blocked traffic on several major city roads on July 27. They want higher salaries and other concessions, such as old age benefits. Slogans were chanted against the factory owners and the district government.

Police baton-charged the workers, injuring three and arresting nine others. Elderly workers were even attacked. The protests follow demonstrations on July 14 over the same issues by power-loom workers from the Jhang Road industrial area and from districts around Faisalabad.

Sri Lankan health workers strike over salary anomalies

Health workers in the Western, Uva, Wayamba and North Central Provinces of Sri Lanka went on strike for two days from July 26 over salary anomalies. The workers are planning an indefinite walkout in Sabaragamuwa and Central Provinces if local authorities fail to implement a gazetted salary revision for the health sector.

Health workers have been campaigning against the anomalies for almost three years with 30 national strikes over the issue since the end 2002.

Labor government to crackdown on paramedics

The Bracks Labor government in the Australian state of Victoria is cracking down on ambulance paramedics fighting for a pay increase and a redress of staff shortages. On July 27, Health Minister Bronwyn Pike took the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission seeking to end the official bargaining period for a new work agreement. If successful, work bans currently in place would be deemed illegal, opening up the Ambulance Employees Association and paramedics to fines.

The paramedics imposed work bans on July 26 in support of an 8 percent pay increase plus a \$96 per week skills allowance for advanced life support qualifications. They are refusing to bypass hospital emergency rooms that would normally refuse to take all but the most serious cases when they are overcrowded. The action has highlighted the general crisis in the state's hospital system caused by chronic under-funding and staff shortages.

The Labor government is offering the same 3 percent per year it recently foisted on other public sector workers. A spokesman for the Ambulance Employees Association claimed earlier this week that hundreds of new paramedics were needed if existing staff were to have regular meal and rest breaks. He said the union was willing to consider the government's pay offer if staff shortages were addressed.

Unions lift mine picket following management attack

Union officials called off a picket by workers at BHP Billiton's Yandi iron ore mine in Western Australia's (WA) Pilbara region this week. It had been in place for two days from July 25. The 170 workers, members of the Australian Workers Union and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, want the same pay and conditions offered to other workers employed under non-union individual contracts.

They are also campaigning for improved safety conditions on the site operated by contractor Henry Walker Eltin on behalf of BHP-Billiton Iron Ore. Yandi is next to BHP Billiton's Orebody 25 mine where a 20-year-old apprentice was killed on May 20. This was one of three deaths at BHP Billiton's Iron Ore operations in WA over the last two months.

More than 20 police and security guards have been deployed at the mine since the dispute began. On July 26, two managers attempted to drive cars through the picket and security guards clashed with workers. Despite these attacks, AWU officials decided to end the picket as "a gesture". A spokesman for the contractor said the company was happy to resume negotiations but would not budge from its previous position.

Australian bank workers strike

Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) branch staff began a series of nationwide four-hour rolling stoppages from July 30 over a new wages and conditions agreement. They are seeking wage parity with workers at other banks, such as the National Australia Bank, who are paid 7.5 percent

more. The CBA has refused to budge from a previous offer of 5.5 percent. The workers are also demanding staff increases.

The first rolling stoppages will be in New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. Other state branches will take industrial action during August.

New Zealand meat company convicted over safety

New Zealand meat-processing company Richmond Ltd has been convicted on occupational safety charges over two serious accidents at its Oringi meatworks.

Kirihora Chase was severely injured on February 25 when a mutton cloth around her neck caught in a conveyor belt she was cleaning. She later died of her injuries. Richmond was charged with failing to take all practicable steps to ensure her safety. The guard covering the chain drive on the belt had worn out, exposing the mechanism. The company's maintenance program was found to be inadequate because it failed to pick up the hazard.

The second incident involved Paula Turner whose left hand was crushed in a conveyor belt roller on a machine she was cleaning on March 3. She had switched off the conveyor belt but another worker accidentally restarted it.

The machines are controlled from a column of six isolating switches and two stop buttons. None of these were labeled for identification. The company had no minimum isolation procedure in place and workers were not issued personalised "hold tags" that could be placed on buttons and switches.

Richmond pleaded guilty to charges brought by the Department of Labour and will be sentenced on August 26. Each charge carries a maximum fine of \$250,000.

In a separate incident, a worker was crushed to death when a bale of paper fell on him at a factory in South Auckland. Ambulance officers were called to the Penrose recycling factory and found the man trapped beneath the 600kg bale of paper. Firefighters arrived and lifted the bail but the man was already dead. Occupational Safety and Health inspectors are investigating the incident.

Fiji cane drivers strike over income loss

Drivers servicing the Lautoka Mill, the largest sugar mill in Fiji, walked off the job on July 22. The drivers told the *Fiji Sun* that they were "fed-up" with equipment failure and other delays at the mill that slowed the unloading of sugar cane.

They also claim that they are given second priority behind Fiji Sugar Corporation-owned rail carts. The drivers are paid according to the amount of cane they deliver. Delays result in a loss of income and sometimes drivers are forced to wait for days outside the mill without access to food.

In a related issue, Fiji Trades Union Congress general secretary Felix Anthony revealed on July 19 that 400 workers would lose their jobs if recent proposals by the government to close the cane rail system were implemented. The plan would result in the gradual closure of the rail system and the transfer of total cane cartage to road transport.

Fiji aviation engineers oppose sackings

A total of 30 aviation engineers at Nausori Airport, members of the Fiji Aviation Workers Union, walked off the job on July 27. They were protesting Air Fiji Limited (AFL) management's refusal to act on a recommendation from the Civil Aviation Authority of Fiji to reinstate chief engineer Thomas Newton. They are also demanding the payment of a \$US14,100 redundancy package owed to engineer Joe Ah Yuk.

The airport has been left with just eight certificate student engineers and three non-striking engineers to service a fleet of 12 aircraft. The airline's commercial manager confirmed that the strike would affect domestic flights. Labour Minister Kenneth Zink declared the action illegal, even though the union complied with the required 28-day strike notice.

Mariana Islands teachers fear job losses

A large number of public school teachers in the US Pacific Territory of Mariana Islands fear they could lose their jobs if they fail to pass a new professional skills test recently introduced by the Board Of Education (BOE). The BOE claims that the exam (praxis test) is simply to “raise the teacher qualifications”.

Teachers’ representative Ambrose Bennett said there was “the possibility of a large number of teachers failing the initial test, creating the potential for massive termination” and pointed out the test was introduced without any consultation.

The PSS (Public School System) said there would be no limit on the number of times the test could be taken but the \$US90 cost for each test would have to be paid by the teachers.



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