

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 July 2004

## South Korean police seize protesting teachers

On June 29, police arrested 25 leading members of the Korean Teachers and Educational Workers Union (KTWU) and charged them with breaking assembly laws. Union president Won Young-man was among those arrested.

The unionists were seized in Seoul after a sit-down demonstration at the rear gate of the complex housing the South Korean Ministry of Education and Human Resources Development. The protest was over inadequate staffing in schools and for standardisation of the number of classes assigned to teachers. The teachers have staged a series of protests over the issue since June 23.

Those arrested are being held in five police stations. The KTWU called a press conference in the wake of the arrests and declared that the union would organise rallies to demand the release of its members. The crackdown may be related to government concerns over the teachers campaigning in schools against the deployment of Korean troops to Iraq.

## Car workers strike for pay increase

About 40,000 workers at Hyundai Motors in South Korea went on strike for two days on June 30 in support of a pay increase. The strike came after negotiations with the company broke down. The Hyundai Motor union wants a 10.48 percent pay rise and a bonus calculated on 30 percent of company profits.

The latest strike follows six-hour work stoppages by Hyundai workers on June 25 and 28 and was timed to coincide with stoppages by thousands of workers at smaller automakers, textile plants, department stores and other workplaces.

The action is part of a campaign by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) for pay increases, a five-day working week and the abolition of discrimination against part-time and day labourers. Last week, hospital unions affiliated to the KCTU called off a strike and settled for 5 percent pay rises and promises of a five-day week at some hospitals, where the workers would get only a 2 percent increase.

The KCTU made clear from the outset that it would limit strike action during its summer campaign and achieve quick settlements as part of its drive to “mend” industrial relations with employers and the government.

## Cambodian union representative assaulted

The Free Trade Union of Workers of the Kingdom of Cambodia (FTU) has called on the government to investigate a vicious assault on factory union delegate Lay Sopheap by two unknown assailants on June 24.

Two uniformed men followed the 30-year-old female delegate to her home and attacked her. They left her bound with a towel stuffed into her mouth. She was found the next day by co-workers who became concerned when she failed to report to work. The police have already ruled out robbery as a motive for the attack.

The assault followed Lay Sopheap’s attempts to organise a protest over working conditions at the Luen Thai Factory on June 23 and is most probably connected to a series of attacks on other FTU representatives in recent times.

One of Lay Sopheap’s assailants accused her of being a “Chea Vichea

person”. Vichea, a key leader of the FTU, was gunned down on a Phnom Penh street in January. Another FTU representative Ros Sovannareth was shot dead on a busy street in May.

## Indonesian timber workers strike continues

About 3,000 striking workers at PT Kalimantan Plywood Industry (KPI) and PT Santi Murni Plywood in East Kalimantan, Indonesia, warned this week they would boycott the July 5 presidential elections. The workers, who have been on strike for three weeks demanding the payment of wages for April and May, are demanding the government intervene in the ongoing dispute. The Hong Kong-based Shine Hill Limited owns the companies.

On June 23, nine of the workers began a hunger strike outside the East Kalimantan governor’s office in Samarinda. The strikers also seized two of the firm’s executives on June 22 and continue to hold them in a company office.

A company spokesperson claimed that the salaries have not been paid because both plants had failed to achieve their sales targets. The management has offered to pay half of what is owed and to negotiate a timeframe for payment of the balance. The workers are demanding they be paid in full immediately.

## Sri Lankan shoe workers occupy factory

More than 500 workers at the Bata shoe factory in Ratmalana, 15 kilometres from Colombo, have been occupying the plant since June 22. They are demanding reinstatement of the factory union branch president S. Hettiarachchi, who was suspended after being accused by the production manager of misusing Employers Provident Fund (EPF) money. The production manager is also president of the EPF at Bata.

The suspension is an attempt to intimidate Bata employees who have been in conflict with the company since May over plans to retrench 145 workers and implement a contract labour system.

The occupation has prevented the release of shoe stocks to sales outlets causing an estimated daily loss to the company of 2 million rupees (\$US20,000). In retaliation, the management has refused to pay outstanding wages and called on the police to break up the occupation.

Bata is demanding the country’s Labour Commissioner intervene and has written to government leaders and the Canadian and British embassies warning that “foreign investments are at stake”.

## Factory workers strike over suspensions

A strike by 120 workers at the Korean-owned Susun Lanka factory in Piliyandala, about 18 kilometres from Colombo, entered its 10th day on June 30. The strike began on June 21 against the suspension of 14 employees, including the union branch president at the factory. Workers have been picketing the factory despite the presence of a contingent of a police deployed to intimidate them.

The suspensions occurred after workers imposed an overtime ban in early June to oppose the company’s attempts to enforce retrenchments. Management is planning to introduce new technology and shed half the workforce. Susun Lanka manufactures electric light bulbs for export markets.

### **University workers in Jaffna strike over privatisation**

Non-academic staff at the University of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka have been on strike for two weeks in protest against privatisation plans and alleged corrupt practices by the university authority. The strike by members of the Inter University Trade Union Federation (IUTUF) began on June 14.

The IUTUF has written to the University Grants Commission chairman threatening a national strike over the issues.

### **Sri Lankan bank workers oppose terminations**

Around 200 graduate trainee workers at the Bank of Ceylon (BOC) have begun a sit-down campaign outside the bank's headquarters in Colombo demanding permanency. The trainee workers were recruited to the bank in batches from March 1, 2003 and are paid a monthly salary of about \$US55 by the BOC and the government.

After the UPFA government came in to power in April, 127 trainee workers received termination letters, even though the bank has 1,500 vacancies in staff assistant grades. Workers allege that government cronies are being recruited to fill the vacancies. Before the election, the UPFA promised to employ 30,000 graduates in government jobs.

### **Indian childcare workers demonstrate against transfer**

Nearly 1,000 childcare (anganwadi) workers in the Dakshina Kannada district in the southern Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated on June 29. They were protesting the transfer of administrative control of childcare centres from the Department of Women & Child Care to Village Councils (Gram Panchayat).

Childcare workers claim that Village Council authorities do not understand the problems faced by the mostly women workers. Ravikala, president of the local childcare workers' union, claimed that the transfer "would lead to the suppression of anganwadi workers under panchayat control".

A large number of workers demonstrated outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Udipi on the same day. There are 1,772 childcare centres in the district employing around 3,000 workers.

### **Transport workers demonstrate for pay and benefits**

State Transport Corporation (STC) workers in the Madurai division in Tamil Nadu staged a demonstration on June 29. They are demanding a salary revision and the restoration of all benefits being withheld by the government.

The workers handed a memorandum to the division authorities signed by over 3,800 employees. The latest protest follows demonstrations by STC workers at rural depots in the city of Tiruchi on June 19 over the same issues.

### **Indian taxi drivers strike against police assault**

Auto-rickshaw (three-wheeler taxi) drivers went on strike on June 29 in Shimoga, Karnataka. They were protesting an assault on an auto rickshaw driver by police sub-inspector Krishnamoorthy. The drivers held a demonstration demanding suspension of the officer and presented a memorandum to the Superintendent of Police calling for measures to curb police violence against auto-rickshaw operators. They have threatened to resume the strike from July 5 if action is not taken against Krishnamoorthy.

### **Four killed in Pakistan cement factory fire**

On June 27, four workers were killed and 40 more injured, five of them critically, in a fire at a cement factory in the Hattar Industrial Estate in Taxila city, Pakistan.

According to reports, the fire was triggered by a blast in a furnace that quickly engulfed the factory, which employs 50 workers. Fire engines worked for five hours to extinguish the blaze.

Two of the workers, Mohammad Rafeeq and Ghulam Abbas, suffered burns to their entire bodies and were pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital in Wah Cantonment. Another two men, Shakeel and Mohammad Arif, died later. According to doctors, five of the critically injured workers suffered 80 percent burns to their bodies while another 35 workers have

30 to 50 percent burns. A company official said the blast might have been caused by an electrical fault.

### **Bus maintenance workers strike over wages and jobs**

About 300 State Transit Authority (STA) bus maintenance workers in Sydney and Newcastle walked off the job for three hours on June 30, over a STA proposal that wage rises be tied to increased productivity and job losses. In Newcastle, north of Sydney, workers picketed the bus depot.

The workers want a 12 percent pay increase over two years but the government is offering just 6 percent. State Transport Minister Michael Costa, a former New South Wales (NSW) Trades and Labor Council secretary, slandered the maintenance workers, claiming they were paid 30 percent more than their private sector counterparts but "operated at two-thirds the productivity".

Further rolling stoppages are planned but a spokesperson for the three unions covering the maintenance workers said these would be called off if the STA agreed to further negotiations.

### **Nurses strike over staffing and conditions**

Up to 600 nursing staff at Camden, Campbelltown and Liverpool hospitals in south-western Sydney walked off the job for four hours on June 30 over staff shortages and the lack of hospital beds. They are demanding that 49 vacant nursing positions be filled.

The nurses, members of the Nurses Association, held a protest rally at one local shopping centre and handed out leaflets explaining their case. Nurses and hospital staff are under enormous stress due to the NSW Labor government's under-resourcing of the hospital system.

### **Bank workers strike over wage parity**

Workers at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) struck for 24 hours nationally on July 2. They are seeking wage parity with other bank workers. The Finance Sector Union claims CBA staff are paid 7.5 percent less than National Australia Bank workers.

Meetings were held at 55 locations across the country to discuss further industrial action. The CBA has 20,000 employees.

### **New Zealand university staff vote on pay offer**

More than 600 academic and general staff at Otago University have voted to send a management pay offer to ratification meetings. During the pay campaign, academic staff went on strike and were proposing to withhold first semester exam marks. The university threatened to lock out all staff involved.

A negotiator for the Association of University Staff (AUS) described the proposed settlement as "a draw". The offer for ratification contains a 3.5 percent increase for academic staff, from lecturer and above, backdated to May 1. General staff and academic staff below lecturer will get 3.5 percent from June 1.

The management's initial offer was 2 percent plus a one-off payment of \$320, while the union's claim was for 4 percent. Earlier management offers that included bigger differentials for senior academic staff remain an issue for "further debate".

The Otago staff were forced into protracted negotiations to achieve the same settlement that staff at Canterbury University were offered from the start. The current pay round began last October with university sector unions proposing the country's seven universities negotiate national agreements. The proposal was quickly dropped in the face of employer opposition and the unions entered talks on a site-by-site basis.

### **New Zealand nurses campaign for pay rise**

A delegation of 60 nurses from five district health boards (DHBs) this week handed copies of a public petition to MPs outside the New Zealand parliament. The petition, signed by 125,000 people, is in support of nurses' pay demands in negotiations starting on July 13. It calls on the Labour government to fund DHBs to meet the claim.

The pay claim is divided into two parts, a normal pay round and a "pay equity" claim estimated to be worth an extra \$300 million. The equity claim is based on pay comparisons with police, teachers and other health

professionals. A NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) spokesperson said nurses were paid between \$7,000 a year and \$15,000 a year “less than they are worth”.

Health Minister Annette King responded by claiming that nurses were going for a big “pay jolt,” not pay equity. Last month, Associate Health and Labour Minister Ruth Dyson said the government was adopting recommendations of a taskforce established to study pay and employment equity in the public service and public health and education sectors. She said no money was allocated in the budget for such claims.

NZNO spokeswoman Laila Harre, a former Alliance MP and cabinet minister, claimed nurses were in a strong position to succeed and she expected the claim to be settled this year. While nurses were prepared to back the claim with industrial action, Harre said the union hoped it “would not come to that”.



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