

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 July 2004

Malaysian bus workers strike

Drivers and conductors from the Len Seng Omnibus Company began an indefinite strike on July 3, affecting services in Kuala Lumpur's outer suburbs of Setapak, Gombak and Hulu Kelang. Strikers prevented about 50 buses leaving the Jalan Air Jernih depot in Setapak. Management used contract drivers on July 5 in an attempt to minimise the effect of the strike but failed to avert major disruptions.

The 85 workers, many with 20- to 35-years service, have been in dispute with the company since May 7 when they refused to drive one-man-operated (OMO) buses. The dispute came to a head when management sacked five union members for refusing to drive the OMO buses and detained several striking drivers. They were accused of vandalism.

A union spokesman said that the workers were protesting against the company's unfair labour practices and its non-compliance with the collective agreement. They are demanding reinstatement of the sacked workers and payment of outstanding salaries and benefits.

Company manager Michael Tai ruled out any compromise and threatened, "We have many people wanting to drive our buses. If union members do not want to report for work, we will recruit others."

South Korean transport workers demand improved conditions

Seoul subway workers have voted to strike on July 21 in support of improved working conditions, including a five-day working week. The subway workers are also angry over changes to the mass-transit system introduced on July 1 that worsen working conditions. Their colleagues in Pusan, Incheon and Taegu have also threatened to walkout. A spokesman for the Seoul City traffic policy bureau responded by declaring that there was "no room for negotiations".

Bus drivers in Seoul are also in dispute over transit changes that increase working hours. Many work overtime without extra pay. This week, the drivers' union cancelled a planned walkout after management agreed to schedules.

Conditions for drivers will worsen with the implementation of 24-hour bus services between the central Seoul and outlying areas. Some employees will be required to drive over 290 kilometres per day in order to receive a basic salary.

Management has said that it will not hire extra staff, declaring that its priority was to cut bus and subway operating deficits. Bus and subway fares were increased by more than 100 won on July 1.

KorAm bank workers continue strike

A strike by KorAm Bank employees entered its 10th day on July 7. The workers are demanding job guarantees from Citigroup, which purchased the bank last April in the largest takeover in the Korean financial sector.

KorAm management has rejected these demands and this week the Seoul Central District Court issued warrants for the arrest of five labor leaders. Those named are Yang Byung-min, chairman of the Korea Finance Industry Union, the parent body of the KorAm union; Seo Min-ho, KorAm union chairman; Kwon Oh-geun and Chung Woon-su, deputy chairmen of KorAm's union; and Lee Jae-koo, KorAm union's chief organiser.

The police also obtained a seizure and search warrant to harass 2,400 employees who have been occupying KorAm's headquarters in central Seoul for the past 10 days. The union is moving to end the occupation.

The warrants, which were issued while the union was in negotiations with the management, are an attempt to pressure the union leadership to end the strike. Management issued a statement declaring that a settlement "looked brighter" after the warrants were issued.

Sri Lankan doctors strike for pay increase

Registered and Assistant Medical Officers (RMO and AMO) in Sri Lanka's western province walked off the job on July 6, affecting services at over 100 hospitals and central dispensaries. The workers want a scheduled pay increase to rectify salary anomalies. RMOs and AMOs in NorthWestern and Central Provinces are also planning to strike over the issue.

Their demands are in line with a Ministry of Health circular issued a few months ago promising to resolve salary anomalies among health workers. The AMOs and RMOs claim that they have been dropped from the various categories listed on the circular.

The doctors, supported by other health workers, picketed the health ministry on July 9 and have now established a satyagraha or sit-in protest outside the building.

Sri Lankan clerks demand pay hike

Sri Lankan public sector clerks picketed the Western Province governor's office on July 6 to demand a salary increase in line with a recent pay rise for health sector clerks. This would mean an increase of at least 2,500 rupees (\$US25).

While the protests have been confined to the Western Province, public sector clerks may take action nationwide if the government does not respond favorably.

Trainee bank workers campaign for permanency

Hundreds of graduate trainee workers at the Bank of Ceylon (BOC) began a sit-down hunger strike outside the Fort Railway Station in central Colombo on July 4. They are demanding permanent employment.

The workers have held a series of protests outside the BOC headquarters since June 24, sometimes for several days. Police have been mobilised to disperse the demonstrators.

The trainee employees were recruited to the bank in batches from March 1, 2003, and are paid a monthly salary of 5,500 rupees (\$US55).

Over a 100 trainee workers were given termination notices when the UPFA government came to power in April, even though the bank has 1,500 vacancies in staff assistant grades. Workers allege that government cronies are being employed to fill these jobs. The UPFA promised to recruit 30,000 graduates to the public sector, if it was elected.

Sacked workers demand reemployment

About 200 workers, including 50 females, sacked from the Peoples Estate Development Board (JEDB) and Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation (SLSPC) are continuing a hunger strike begun late last month. The protest is being held outside the JEDB office in Vauxhall Street, Central Colombo.

The workers—drivers, clerks, extension officers and other categories—allege that they are being politically victimised by the UPFA government. They were employed for between six months and two years.

Bangladeshi teachers protest

Bangladeshi teachers from 21 non-government primary schools in the capital Dhaka began an indefinite “work abstention” campaign on July 3. They are demanding the nationalisation of non-government primary schools.

The teachers held hunger strikes and threatened to shut down the primary schools early last month if their demands were not met. There are about 75,500 teachers in the country’s 19,428 non-government registered primary schools.

Electricity workers protest union victimisation

Hundreds of workers from the Hyderabad Electric Supply Company (Hesco) demonstrated in Khairpur, southeast Pakistan, on July 1. All sub-division offices were closed by the action.

The protestors demanded the reinstatement of Hesco Central Labour Union chairman Wali Mohammad Leghari. Hesco workers in Gambat, Ranipur and Setharja also demonstrated over the issue.

Government drivers demand insurance cover

Government drivers in Pondicherry, southern India, walked off the job on July 1 to demand all government cars be provided appropriate insurance cover.

Many vehicles are not insured and drivers are held responsible and face legal action if involved in accidents. The drivers held a sit-in protest at Pondicherry’s Bharathi Park. The strike action affected several government departments.

Childcare workers demand improved conditions

Childcare (Anganwadi) workers in Karnataka, south India, are continuing demonstrations to demand the withdrawal of a previous state government order placing them under Village Council (Gram Panchayat) control. The last demonstration was in Shimoga on July 5.

The workers also want the government to settle outstanding honorarium payments and to provide better buildings, facilities and furniture for childcare centres. The handover to the Village Councils will worsen working conditions and lead to greater job insecurity.

On July 5, workers marched from the municipal offices to the Deputy Commissioner’s office where they held a sit-in protest (dharna) and submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister, N. Dharam Singh and Deputy Chief Minister Siddaramaiah demanding they intervene immediately and resolve the dispute. The demonstration follows protests by thousands of childcare workers in several cities in the Karnataka State on June 29.

Anganwadi Workers Association district president said that childcare workers in Uttara Kannada were facing severe financial difficulties because the Department of Child and Women Welfare had not paid the honorarium payment for eight months.

Many childcare workers have also complained about ill treatment by “people’s representatives,” including Village Council members. Hot meals are supposed to be provided at the centres but workers are not given firewood for cooking.

Casino workers fight for pay increase

Hundreds of workers walked off the job for 24 hours at Tasmania’s West Point Casino in Hobart and the Country Club Casino in Launceston on July 3. Over 60 percent of the casino employees, including food and beverage workers, croupiers, housekeepers, store personnel and security staff, were involved.

The strike erupted after pay negotiations between management and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union broke down. Workers want a 6 percent pay increase but the management has only offered 4 percent.

Management attempted to intimidate the strikers by photographing them and claiming that non-striking workers would verbally abuse them and

trash their cars. Casual employees were also told that they would no longer be employed if they participated in the stoppage.

Workers strike over toxic fumes

A contractor at BHP’s Boodarie hot briquette iron plant at Port Headland in northwest Australia walked off the job after employees were exposed to toxic fumes and required medical treatment. The fumes caused vomiting, diarrhea and headaches.

The incident follows a fatal gas explosion that killed one worker and seriously injured three others at the same plant in May. Two of the blast survivors are still in the Royal Perth Hospital burns unit.

Another man died at a company mine near Mount Newman shortly after the Boodarie explosion and on May 2, a 26-year-old mechanic died after being struck by a piece of equipment at BHP Billiton’s Nelson Point Port Facility near Port Hedland.

New Zealand university pay dispute settled

General (non-academic) staff at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) voted to accept the administration’s new pay offer of 3 percent from 1 May 2004 last week. The agreement ends a six-week dispute that saw staff strike and threaten to shut down the university during the first week of second semester enrolments.

The original pay claim was for 4 percent, in line with academic staff. Management offered only 2.2 percent and then 2.5, after the industrial action. The “first-week shutdown” threat forced the offer up to 3 percent.

The Association of University Staff (AUS) admitted, however, that members remained unhappy about the disparity with academic staff.

New Zealand mental health nurses strike

About 350 mental health nurses and assistants from the Waikato, Lakes and Bay of Plenty District Health Boards (DHBs) began a six-day strike on July 2 for a pay rise. As part of the campaign, they picketed the Rotorua, Tauranga and Waikato hospitals.

Even after the Public Service Association (PSA) agreed to return to mediation talks this week, the workers voted to continue the strike. A PSA spokesman said that after eight months of negotiations for a multi-employer collective agreement the employers’ offer was unacceptable. Employees want improved annual leave, two pay rises of 3.4 percent and a \$NZ2,000 allowance in a 25-month deal. The boards have only offered about 3 percent a year.

According to the PSA, mental health employees are under constant pressure with bed numbers continuously at their maximum or over. The effects of drugs like methamphetamine on patients had also increased the number of assaults on staff and there were difficulties recruiting experienced staff and retaining them, the union said.

A DHB spokeswoman said that “both sides” had agreed that prolonged industrial action was “unlikely to resolve the issue” and that they were “committed to trying to find a way through the impasse”. While offering no increase in money, the DHBs said they would be prepared to consider “restructuring” their previous offer.

NZ casino picket over sacked union delegate

Dunedin Casino was picketed on July 3 by 80 workers protesting the dismissal of Service and Food Workers Union (SWFU) delegate, Andrew Bolesworth. The protest was boisterous, with participants holding signs accusing the management of being anti-union.

Many clients expressed their support for the picket by staying away from the casino. Other clients wore stickers given to them by the strikers as they entered the casino. Management turned one couple away because one of them had a union leaflet.

While management has not explained why the delegate was dismissed, workers say it was for acting on their behalf. The SWFU plans to challenge the dismissal through legal channels while promising to continue regular protests.

Another Fiji miner killed underground

Forty-four-year-old mechanic Suriva Reddy, was killed on July 4 while

working underground in the Emperor Gold Mine at Vatukouls, Fiji. He was crushed to death when a loader bucket fell down a shaft on him. While there have been several deaths at the mine in recent times Mine Workers Union of Fiji general secretary Satish Chandra merely called on the company to “improve the safety of miners”.

More than 500 people work at the mine daily in a dangerous environment that includes extremely wet conditions, high temperatures, inadequate ventilation and rock falls. There have also been a number of recent earth tremors in the region. The union claims the company has not put in place any safety procedures in the event of a major tremor hitting the mine.

Unpaid foreign workers repatriated from Nauru

The Pacific nation of Kiribati announced this week that it has been forced to pay \$US285,000 to repatriate unpaid Kiribati nationals from Nauru. The director of Labour, Nguta Awira, said the Nauru Phosphate Corporation had not paid 40 Kiribati workers for almost a year.

The workers were attracted to the Pacific Island of Nauru with promises of \$US70 a fortnight, plus repatriation expenses.

Unpaid PNG teachers quitting for better jobs

Headmasters in the East New Britain province of Papua New Guinea (PNG) are concerned that their teachers have not been paid for six months. Some teachers have quit to look for other work while those remaining are being supported by school funds. A number of teachers are being paid, but have not received their correct salaries.

Danuel Manure, chairman of the province’s headmaster group, blames the new salary system in Port Moresby, the Papua New Guinea capital, for the problem and called on the Education Department’s provincial salary officer to resolve the problem immediately.



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