

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 July 2004

Police block miners convey on way to Beijing

A convey of 28 lorries carrying more than 400 laid-off miners from the northeastern Chinese province of Heilongjiang was stopped and turned back by hundreds of police in Hebei province on July 18. The miners were travelling to the Beijing to protest the detention of 23 of their colleagues who had threatened to commit suicide by jumping from a building near the Supreme Court a week earlier.

The 23 workers, representing hundreds of miners laid off by the Henan City Mining Bureau between 1996 and 1998, climbed to the top of the five-storey building after the court refused to consider their petition over dismissals and inadequate severance payments. Police negotiated for five hours to bring them down and then immediately arrested them. The 23 were detained at the Fengtai District detention centre but officials there deny any knowledge of them.

While the government allocated about \$US10,000 for severance pay and other benefits to the Heilongjiang miners, only about a quarter of the money has been paid. It is alleged that most of the fund has kept and misused by mining bureau officials.

Thousands of workers are to be found in the capital camped outside courts and government buildings petitioning about abuses by local authorities, including lay-offs, evictions and the non-payment of wages, severance pay and pensions. The petitioners are often arrested or beaten by police. Many are sent to labour camps after being detained. According to a Radio Free Asia report in June, there have been 2,760 verifiable detentions of petitioners across China.

Gas explosion kills 12 miners in China

On July 20, 12 coal miners were killed in a gas blast in a Shuozhou City mine, in northern China. Officials are still investigating the cause of the explosion. China's State Administration of Work Safety claims that mine deaths are down 12 percent on this time last year. Nevertheless, 3,700 miners perished in floods, cave-ins and gas explosion in the first half of this year.

In a separate safety incident, 400 people were hospitalised after being affected by chlorine hydride fumes from the China National Petroleum Group plant in Kaifeng City in China's Henan province. The toxic fumes, released after an explosion in one of the plant's condensers, could have been fatal and least 56 of the victims remain in hospital.

Chemical spills and leakages are common in China's chemical and petroleum plants due to a lack of safety procedures and outdated equipment. In a single week in April, 22 people were killed in the industry. According to official figures, 7,311 people died in factory and mine accidents in the first six months of 2004. On average, 40 workers are killed in industrial incidents every day.

Hong Kong lifeguards strike over pay cut

About 800 of the Hong Kong's 1,580 lifeguards went on strike on July 18 and joined a six-hour sit-down protest in popular Repulse Bay. The protest closed two public swimming pools in Shamshuipo and Yuen Long and affected services at 19 other pools, despite the Hong Kong Life Saving Society mobilising 300 volunteer lifeguards and members of the

Auxiliary Medical Services.

The lifeguards are employed by the government's Leisure and Cultural Services Department to patrol pools and beaches. Their monthly salary was cut from \$HK11,820 (about \$US1,515) to \$11,115 in 2001, and then to \$8,300 in 2003. The Hong Kong and Kowloon Lifeguards Union has threatened further action if the government does not address the pay issue.

The lifeguards' action is the first time in three years that government employees have gone on strike in Hong Kong. In February 2001, hundreds of Lands Department offices went out for half a day against the privatisation of the Survey and Mapping Office.

Korean government declares refinery strike illegal

Workers at the LG Caltex Oil Corp in Yeosu, South Korea went on strike on July 19, demanding a 10.5 percent pay increase and a reduction in the working week from 44 hours to 40 without loss of pay. Production at the plant, which is located 455 kilometres south of Seoul and is the second largest refinery in the country, came to a standstill when striking operators occupied key control rooms in the facility.

While industrial action by the 1,000 unionised workers at the plant is continuing, the operators ended their occupation after the government declared the strike illegal. The company has recruited about 430 people to work alongside non-union employees and restart operations. About 43 percent of the refinery's 2,550 workers are unionised.

The government has warned that if the strike continues the union could face tough penalties.

Subway workers strike for more staff

Thousands of subway workers in Seoul, Daegu, Busan and Incheon in South Korea went on strike on July 21 over conditions relating to the introduction of a five-day working week due to begin early this month. The walkout came after negotiations with the Seoul Metropolitan Government and other local authorities broke down.

The workers are demanding authorities hire about 7,100 extra staff to ensure there is no increase in workloads or loss of conditions. Management wants negotiations on staff increases to be put off until the new arrangements are implemented. Seoul and other local authorities mobilised non-union workers in a bid to maintain services during the strike.

Auto workers strike for pay increase

About 2,700 unionised workers at GM Daewoo Auto & Technology Co, South Korea's third-largest automaker, went on strike for one day on July 21. The strike came after negotiations between the GM Daewoo union and management over pay increases and job security guarantees broke down.

The union wants a 16.6 percent or 185,844-won (\$US160) increase but the company has refused to increase an offer of 115,000 won. The one-day strike follows a series of work stoppages that began on July 9.

Filipino shipping company ordered to reinstate workers

On July 7 the Philippines Supreme Court ordered Trans-Asia Shipping Lines to rehire 21 workers it sacked in June 1999 for participating in a strike that paralysed port operations around the country. The strikers were protesting over pay and working conditions. Although employees had said

they were willing to return to work and begin negotiations, the company locked them out, declaring the strike illegal.

Trans-Asia Shipping Lines has ignored a ruling from the National Labor Relations Commission, upheld by the Supreme Court, ordering the company to reinstate the workers.

Philippines wage board rejects increase in minimum pay

The Central Visayas regional wage board this week rejected petitions for a 50 peso (US90 cents) daily wage increase filed by the Associated Labour Unions and the Alliance of Progressive Labour. Only one of the two labour representatives on the board voted for the increase while the other abstained, declaring the increase excessive.

Employer representatives approved miniscule increases of between 5 and 20 pesos. Central Cebu City workers will receive 20 pesos; Cebu provincial town employees will get 15; and workers in outlying areas just 5 to 10 pesos.

A minimum daily wage for Western Mindanao has also been set. Non-agricultural workers will be paid 180 pesos, plantation workers 155 pesos, and non-plantation workers 135 pesos.

Aluminum workers strike against privatisation

Workers at the Bharat Aluminum Company (Balco) in Korba, India went on strike for 24 hours on July 22 in opposition to the new United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government's move to privatise the plant. Management attempts to hold back workers on night shift to counter the affects of the strike failed and production on both shifts came to a halt.

The unions want a joint parliamentary committee inquiry into the Congress-led government's plan to sell its 51 percent share in the aluminum production plant and for it to be returned to full state-ownership.

Sweepers protest for pay rise

Contract street sweepers in the southern Indian State of Andhra Pradesh held a sit-down protest in Hyderabad on July 20, demanding pay rises and other benefits. The mainly female employees presented a list of their demands to the National Women Commission's chairperson.

They want sweepers' pay increased to 3,500 rupees (\$US70) and supervisors to 4,500 rupees and are also calling for two uniforms, footwear, radium safety clothing for night work and protective facemasks, together with a 100-rupee laundry allowance, the provision of housing and a provident fund.

Workers oppose government drive to sell airports

Workers at 123 Indian airports protested outside their workplaces on July 19 against the new government's plan to privatise major terminals, such as Mumbai and Delhi. The protest was organised by the Airports Authority Employees Union (AAEU).

To facilitate the sell-off the government has cut foreign equity requirements from 74 to 49 percent. The Airport Authority of India (AAI) has doubled its profits over the past five years, with Delhi and Mumbai airports accounting for 70 percent of these returns.

Sri Lankan workers reestablish campaign for reinstatement

On July 19, around 200 sacked workers, including 50 women, from the Peoples State Development Board (JEDB) and Sri Lanka State Plantations Corporation (SLSPC) reestablished a hunger strike outside the JEDB office in central Colombo to demand reinstatement.

The workers abandoned an earlier 26-day protest after the government promised to reemploy the sacked employees. However, only 45 out of about 170 workers were reinstated and the government demanded that the remainder drop legal action against their dismissal.

The sacked workers, who include drivers, clerks and staff officers with six months to two years service, allege that were victimised by the United Peoples Front Alliance government.

Electrical workers demand better pay and working conditions

Workers at electrical equipment manufacturer Yasodara Holders in Sri Lanka began a fasting protest outside the plant on July 19. They want a

pay increase to lift salaries to 8,000 rupees (\$US80) and improved working conditions. The plant is in Kelaniya on the outskirts of Colombo.

Their salaries are paid on a piece-rate basis and while around 100 workers at the plant have between 6 to 10 years of service, none have been confirmed in the job. There are no facilities at the plant for workers to sit, eat or rest and manufacturing chemicals affect employees' health. At least four workers are currently undergoing medical treatment for illnesses caused by chemicals and one worker recently died of an industry-related disease. The company contributed just 2,000 rupees (\$US20) toward funeral costs and refused to acknowledge responsibility for the man's death.

Health workers protest over salary anomalies

Health workers at the Borella Ayurvedic (indigenous) Hospital in Colombo and other Ayurvedic hospitals in the country picketed the Indigenous Medicine Ministry on July 20. They are demanding authorities correct anomalies in their salary scales before August. The workers, who are members of All Ceylon Health Services Union, protested outside their workplaces over the same issue a week ago.

In a separate dispute, 13 auxiliary workers at the Peradeniya Teaching hospital on the outskirts of Kandy began a hunger strike on July 21 on the hospital's roof. They are demanding the return of a union leader who was forcibly transferred to another hospital about 40 kilometres away.

Nurses threaten industrial action

St George Public Hospital emergency department nurses plan industrial action over staff shortages and increased workloads at the south Sydney hospital. They want increased staff numbers to cater for 40 beds and this week resolved to place work restrictions if patient numbers exceed 20.

Union officials are due to meet with New South Wales Health Department to discuss the issues.

Smelter workers threaten strike over work contract

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union this week threatened industrial action if negotiations for a workplace agreement at the Zinifex zinc smelter in Tasmania are not brought to a satisfactory conclusion. The negotiations with the company have dragged on for 13 months.

Workers unanimously rejected an earlier draft agreement after management withdrew a clause relating to security of employment. According to the union, the company wants the unfettered right to determine the number of permanent and casual employees.

A union spokesman said there would be report-back meetings on the negotiations in the first and second week of August but warned that workers' patience "was wearing thin". Employees took industrial action in January, involving work-to-rule and rolling four-hour stoppages, after management attempted to include performance-based pay in the new work agreement.

New Zealand call-centre operators ratify contract

Workers at New Zealand's Westpac Bank call centres in Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch voted to ratify a new collective agreement this week. Finsec, the financial sector union, recommended the agreement to its members.

The ratified agreement, which was accepted by a 60 percent majority, reduces hours from 40 to 37.5 a week, but over a five-year period, and phases in fixed shifts. Workers at centres walked off the job on two separate occasions this year to protest working conditions at the bank.

Bay of Plenty nurses reject pay offer

While mental health nurses at New Zealand's Waikato and Lakes district health boards (DHBs) voted to accept a new pay offer, their colleagues in the Bay of Plenty rejected it. The Public Service Association (PSA) went into mediation following a six-day strike by nurses at the three DHBs after protracted negotiations for a multi-employer collective agreement broke down.

PSA representatives said union members in the Bay of Plenty would

meet “to consider their options”. The nurses want recognition for recruitment and stress problems in the profession.

NZ casino reinstates sacked union delegate

The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) this week dropped planned industrial and legal action against Dunedin Casino after management reinstated union delegate Andrew Bolesworth. Bolesworth was sacked three weeks ago after he sent two emails to management and placed a statement on the staff notice board. The management claimed it found the emails offensive.

The SFWU last week announced plans to file legal proceedings with the Employment Relations Authority. A picket outside the casino earlier this month attracted about 80 people and resulted in a loss of patronage. The casino also received over 800 international emails protesting the sacking.

NZ aged-care workers pay dispute taken to mediation

Unions representing workers in 11 aged-care hospitals and rest homes owned by Presbyterian Support in New Zealand’s South Island have agreed to mediation in a pay dispute.

Negotiations broke down last week after the employer withdrew an allowance offer for Saturday work. A representative for the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and the Service and Food Workers Union said the Saturday allowance, along with additional small payments for night duty, was a priority.

The new offer, which contains a small pay increase, was inferior to those already rejected by workers. A spokesperson for Presbyterian Support claimed the organisation was “strained financially” under the current government’s funding regime.

New Zealand primary teachers threaten strike

New Zealand primary school teachers have warned they may strike after talks with the Education Ministry over their pay claim made no progress during the recent school holidays. The union, the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), said the issue could lead to a national strike.

The NZEI is seeking a 6 percent pay rise and better conditions for 25,000 teachers and 2,000 principals. A key item in the claim is for time out from the classroom to cope with increased workloads associated with planning and pupil assessment. They are also demanding full recognition of primary teachers’ qualifications. While secondary teachers get limited relief from teaching work for other duties and extra pay for qualifications, primary teachers do not enjoy the same conditions.

A NZEI spokesperson said the ministry was refusing to engage in negotiations “in a meaningful way”. Teachers will receive written advice from the union on the negotiations this week and will attend a round of meetings in a fortnight.

Fijian court orders company to rehire workers

The Fiji Court of Appeal ordered Coral Sun Fiji Limited this week to reinstate 41 sacked workers. The court ruled that the tour company, which locked out 41 employees on November 18 last year, was “plainly in breach of the law”.

The workers struck in November, after the company defied a Compulsory Recognition Order issued by the Ministry of Labour, Industrial relations and Productivity. The order required the company to recognise the Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union for the purposes of collective bargaining and negotiate with it on terms and conditions for union members. The company defied further orders issued in December and sacked the workers.

Meanwhile, in another case, the Ministry of Labour has acted on a complaint from employees of General Machinery Hire that seven of their workmates were sacked for refusing to resign from the union. The ministry ordered the company to recognise the Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union as the workers’ representatives and said it will inspect the company books over the sackings.

Union workers denied full-time employment

Some 300 of the 400 timber workers employed by the Valebasoga

Tropic Board in Fiji have complained to the Building Construction and Timber Workers Union that the company is denying them full employment because they are union members. The workers are employed on a casual basis and have been repeatedly refused full-time employment.

The workers complained that if they could not secure full-time work they would be unable to pay union dues. The issue was raised at the union’s Annual General Meeting on July 18 but the only action taken by the meeting was to pass a resolution to waive payment of dues for the casual workers.



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