Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 August 2004

LG Caltex threatens to sack Korean strikers

Management at LG Caltex at Yeosu, the second largest oil refinery in South Korea, threatened this week to dismiss striking workers and replace them with new labour. A company official announced that the workers had until 5 p.m., on August 6 to return to work. "We will count the number of unionists who fail to come back to work by our deadline Friday. After that, we will decide on the number of new recruits and issue a recruiting announcement next week," he said.

About 1,000 LG Caltex workers walked off the job on July 19, demanding a 10.7 percent pay increase and a shorter working week with no loss of pay. They are also campaigning for improved wages and working conditions for irregular (casual) workers.

Since the strike began, the workers have come under increasing pressure from the government of President Roh Moo-hyun. The walkout was declared illegal after workers defied an order from the government's mediation body, the National Labor Relations Commission, to return to work. Warrants were issued for the arrest of five union leaders and police have been stationed at the refinery. Despite the repression, approximately 800 employees remain on strike.

The LG group and Caltex Corp, a unit of ChevronTexaco, own LG Caltex, which supplies a quarter of South Korea's gas stations and 30 percent of all fuel used in the country. Strikers are planning to hold protests outside the US embassy in Seoul.

While the dispute is part of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) summer campaign for improved wages and conditions, the peak union body has not yet called for industrial action by its affiliates to back the LG Caltex strikers.

Retrenched military workers petition Beijing

Authorities in Beijing have forcibly returned to Baotou, Inner Mongolia about 70 workers who had been in the capital since late July petitioning over mass retrenchments and inadequate severance payments. Police at Baotou railway station stopped another 30 workers as they attempted to board a train to join their colleagues in the capital.

The petitioners were representing 2,000 retrenched from the Inner Mongolia North Heavy Industries Group Corp Ltd, China's largest military-industrial complex. The company has been downsizing its workforce since 1997 and employees claim they were intimidated into accepting redundancy packages that under-compensated them for years of service.

The laid-off workers held a series of protests beginning in May this year, including mass demonstrations outside the factory gate that are continuing, despite harassment by police and the company's security personnel. The workers also sent delegations to the Baotou municipal government, as well as to the regional government in the capital Hohhot. When local officials refused to assist them, they decided to send representatives to petition the authorities in Beijing.

The workers from Baotou are among the many hundreds from the provinces that can be found in Beijing camped outside courts and government buildings petitioning against a range of abuses, including lay-offs, evictions, the non-payment of wages or severance pay and pensions. Many are turned back before reaching the capital, while those who make it to Beijing are often arrested or beaten up by police.

Industrial accidents in China claim 19 lives

Two separate industrial accidents in China have claimed the lives of 19 workers. The first was on July 28 at the Wenzhou Huihuang Leather Products in the province of Zhejiang, where 16 workers were killed and 12 injured when a fire swept through the factory. The workers were trapped on upper floors after raw and inflammable materials stored on the ground floor caught fire. There were 40 employees in the factory at the time of the blaze.

The second accident occurred on August 1 at the Jiede Textile Co Ltd in Shenzhen's Longgang district in Guangdong province. Three workers died after they were poisoned by toxic gas from a sewage pond. Two of the men died after being overcome by fumes as they attempted to rescue a workmate who had slipped and fell into waist-deep pond.

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 accidents every day.

Indian health workers demonstrate for charter of demands

Health workers from the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) hospital in the southern Indian territory of Pondicherry, together with the JIMPER Institute employees held a demonstration at the hospital on August 4. They are campaigning for a 15-point charter of demands.

The demands include the filling of all staff vacancies, the extension of the patient care allowance to all staff and a uniform wage structure for all staff performing similar work. The workers are also demanding that the hospital cease awarding work contracts to private companies and outsourcing in-house work.

Indian tea workers demand higher wages and bonuses

Workers at about 70 tea gardens (estates) in the Northern Darjeeling hills of India went on strike for 48 hours on August 4. They are demanding an immediate revision of wages and salaries and higher bonus rates for this year. Workers from tea gardens in Kurseong subdivision also joined the strike. The areas produce world famous teas.

One tea garden worker told the media: "We supported the strike as we have not been getting any of the facilities for a long time". The workers, members of the Himalayan Planters Workers Union, threatened further industrial action if management did not meet their demands.

Sri Lankan health workers fight political victimisation

Eight contract health workers at the Ampara General Hospital in Eastern Sri Lanka launched a fast-unto-death campaign on the roof of the hospital on July 30 while 126 contract workers continued a sit-in strike inside the building. They are protesting the Health Ministry's decision to fire 1,200 contract health workers. The services of 19 contract workers at the hospital have already been dispensed with.

According to the National Health Service Union, the discontinued workers had completed six months of service and some have educational

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qualifications far exceeding the normal requirements. The union has accused the government of political victimisation because the targeted workers were recruited by the previous regime. Other workers are threatening to begin a fast, along with their families.

Sri Lankan apparel workers fight for a salary increase

A strike by 850 workers at an apparel factory in Thorakolayaya in southern rural Sri Lanka, entered its third week on July 30. The strike was sparked by the sudden transfer of two activists from the "committee for the protection of the factory" that had been campaigning for a 20 percent wage increase.

Employees have not had a pay increase for two years. The management agreed to increase salaries by 10 percent but then reneged and transferred the activists. The strike will continue until the transfers are withdrawn.

Pakistani power workers demonstrate against repression

Pakistani workers from the Hyderabad Electric Supply Corporation (Hesco) marched from the labour hall in Gari Khata to the press club in Hyderabad on July 28. They were protesting against price hikes, unemployment and the government's anti-labour legislation—the Presidential Ordinance 2000 and the Industrial Relations Ordinance 2002 (IRO-'02).

Leader of the Pakistan Wapda Hydro-Electric Central Labour Union, Abdul Latif Nizamani told the gathering that many people facing high prices and unemployment have committed suicide. He pointed out that Hesco had terminated the services of a large number of employees under the Presidential Ordinance 2000 and that trade union activities had been all but banned under the IRO-'02.

On the same day, workers from the Water and Power Development Authority in Larkana Wapda marched through main roads with banners and placards. Speakers addressed the gathering outside the local press club of Larkana saying the IRO-'02 was aimed at curtailing trade union activities. Workers also demanded the provision of social security, old age benefits, welfare and other rights.

Workers at both the Hyderabad and Larkana demonstrations voted to organise a series of national protests if their demands are not fulfilled.

Union calls off industrial action by paramedics

The union covering ambulance paramedics in the Australian state of Victoria agreed to lift industrial bans after the state Labor government threatened to take the dispute to the Federal Court. The paramedics had defied an order from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission on July 30 to lift all bans. While workers lifted a number of bans, 27 remained in place.

The back down by the Ambulance Employees Association came after the state government agreed not to seek an injunction against the union in the Federal Court that could have resulted in heavy fines and the seizure of union assets.

The paramedics were campaigning for an 8 percent wage increase plus a $A96 per week skills allowance for officers with advanced life support qualifications. They were also demanding staff increases. The government offered only a 3 percent pay increase and is now saying it will "consider" the additional skills allowance.

Sydney casino workers strike for wage increase

About 1,500 staff at Sydney's Star City Casino will walk off the job for 24 hours today over a wages and conditions agreement. They are seeking a 10 percent wage increase over two years but the casino management offered 8.5 percent and has refused to increase its offer.

The workers, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), endorsed the stoppage at a meeting on July 31. Tab Ltd Group, the casino's operator, had a turnover of $A540 million this financial year.

Meanwhile, on August 5 the LHMU said it would recommend that its members at two casinos in Tasmania accept the company's latest pay offer of a 9 percent pay increase over 16 months. The original claim was for 10 percent over two years. The union described the limited pay increase as a "fair deal and a fair outcome".

Public school cleaners oppose job cuts

Public school cleaners in New South Wales (NSW) staged rolling 24-hour strikes on August 3 and August 4 against the state Labor government's plan to contract out cleaning to private companies. The workers claim that the plan, due to be implemented in 2005, puts nearly 7,000 jobs at risk.

The strike affected almost 160 schools in Sydney's western suburbs. Cleaners handed out leaflets to parents dropping off children at schools to explain the campaign and to seek support.

Steel workers strike over superannuation payments

Up to 1,000 workers employed at Bluescope Steel operations in four Australian states stopped work for 24 hours on August 4 over superannuation payments and redundancy provisions. Affected were Bluescope Steel Service Centres and Bluescope Lysaght sites in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and South Australia.

According to the Australian Workers Union, Bluescope is calculating its compulsory superannuation contributions on workers' base incomes rather than total earnings, and is refusing to include redundancy provisions in a new enterprise agreement.

A union spokesman said Bluescope was "hiding behind an outdated legal technicality to avoid paying workers their full super entitlements". The company made a net profit of $452 million in 2002-2003 and is expecting to make a $550 million profit this year.

New Zealand teachers hold pay talk meetings

Primary and intermediate schoolteachers and principals across New Zealand attended meetings this week to discuss the lack of progress in pay talks. There have been seven days of talks since the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) presented its package of claims to the Education Ministry on June 10. The union threatened a national strike unless it receives an improved contract offer.

Although the ministry tabled an offer on pay, it rejected other claims, including ensuring teachers with additional teaching qualifications or additional non-teaching qualifications were paid the same rate. Teachers are also claiming additional non-contact time for marking and administration. Surveys show the average working week for a teacher is more than 50 hours.

Meanwhile, the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), covering secondary teachers, claims that its pay talks are making "good progress". Both union and government negotiators are anxious to avoid a repeat of the last pay round that resulted in a bitter 16-month dispute and wildcat strikes by teachers supported by student walkouts. The strikes erupted after union members rejected a series of deals agreed by the PPTA executive.

Injured New Zealand sawmill worker wins payout

New Zealand timber company Claymark Sawmills was ordered by the Tauranga District Court this week to pay $NZ65,000 to a worker who lost a leg in an accident at the mill last September. Marc Fenton's leg was caught up in a log machine when he climbed on to it to remove a roll cage. A safety cover on the machine had been removed for maintenance earlier that week and not replaced. His leg had to be amputated in a series of four operations because of ongoing infections.

The company was fined only $5,000, after pleading guilty to one charge of failing to take all practicable steps to ensure workers' safety. The charge carries a maximum fine of $250,000. While the reparation payout was the biggest in the country's legal history, Fenton said it hardly amounted to two years' income and could never compensate for his injury.

Fenton's was not the first injury at the mill this year. In March, a 16-year-old employee needed 50 stitches in his thigh after being caught in a saw-milling machine. He had been working at the mill for less than a

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fortnight.

Mass strike brings New Caledonia to a standstill

New Caledonia was thrown into chaos on August 1 when thousands of employees across the country went on strike in support of port workers fighting in defence of their jobs. During the strike, called by the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE), workers mounted a three-day blockade of ports, the airport, and radio and television stations.

By August 3, the French colony was nearing paralysis as strikers cut off access to the main fuel depot, preventing supplies reaching service stations. About 600 port workers barricaded the port in the capital Noumea and police were used to gain access to containers containing medical supplies.

The strike erupted after police, acting on a Justice Department warrant, broke up a picket by USTKE members at the Noumea wharf. Union spokesman Pierre Chauvat said the dock dispute was called over stevedoring company Sofrana Unilines poaching business from rival company Manutrans. The union claims that the practice put 45 jobs at Manutrans at risk.

Sofrana Unilines is owned by the country's new Economic Affairs Minister Didier Leroux, who claimed the strike was "politically motivated" and that the union was being manipulated by the country's former leader Jacques Lafleur. The strike was called off on August 4 after the government agreed to undefined union demands.

Vanuatu aviation workers threaten to strike

Vanuatu National Workers Union (VNWU) national secretary Ephraim Kalsakau said this week that employees at Vanair would take industrial action when a 30-day strike notice expires on August 6. Vanair flies small aircraft to 29 airports across Vanuatu.

The strike threat is over the company's plans to restructure its operations, introducing changes that the union claims will affect workers' conditions.

PNG government delays minimum pay rise

An agreement made last November between the Employers Federation of Papua New Guinea and the PNG Trade Union Congress (PNGTUC) to raise the minimum weekly wage in the private sector from 24.68 kina to 37.20 kina ($US11.62) is still to be implemented.

PNGTUC general secretary John Paska said in a press release on August 2 that although the Department of Labour had witnessed the signing of the agreement it had done "practically nothing" to have it ratified by the National Executive Council (state administrators) and "made common law".

In 1992, the government slashed the minimum wage from 120 kina to 49 kina, opening the way for it to be gradually decreased from its current level. A half-hearted attempt by the PNGTUC in August 2000 to have the minimum raised to 60 kina was dropped when the National Executive Council agreed to raise it to 30 kina. But even this agreement was not implemented.

Those mostly affected by the low-wage regime are employed in backbreaking jobs generating export earnings in primary industries, such as fishing, copra, cocoa, oil palm and sugar. Despite the government's refusal to act, the PNGTUC is not planning industrial action by its affiliates.

Another death at Fiji's Vatukaoula Gold Mine

On August 3, 29-year-old assistant miner Waisale Sigawale was killed on the 17th level of the Vatukaoula Gold Mine, owned by Emperor Gold Mines. He was crushed to death when a one-tonne section of the mine shaft fell on him. This is the second underground fatality at the Fijian mine in a month.

Last month, 44-year-old Suria Narayan Reddy died at the 19th level of the same shaft when a loader bucket fell on top of him. The Mines Inspectorate and police reports on Reddy's death have not yet been released to the public.

Despite the gravity of the tragedies, neither Fijian Trade Union Congress general secretary Felix Anthony nor Mine Workers Union of Fiji general secretary Satish Chandra has demanded that mining operations cease until the deaths have been fully investigated and the mine is made safe.

So far, Anthony has restricted any action to impotent appeals to the government to intervene and to make amendments to the Mining Act, claiming if this does not happen, "no one will be able to stop these kinds of tragedies from taking place". He told the *Fiji Sun*: "I simply can't understand how many more lives we will have to lose before this government wakes up."

No end in sight for Air Fiji strike

Negotiations between Air Fiji Limited (AFL) and the Fiji Aviation Workers Association over the company's sacking of 27 engineers remain deadlocked. The engineers have been sacked for participating in what the airline and Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck called an "illegal" strike.

The engineers walked off the job on July 27, after AFL sacked the airline's chief engineer Thomas Newton refused to pay a redundancy package owed to engineer Joe Ah Juk. Engineers have maintained a picket outside the airport since then.

The company has further inflamed the dispute by advertising for recruits to fill the positions of the sacked workers. A New Zealand engineer refused to take up a position at AFL after learning that his Fijian counterparts were on strike.

The union has called on the Ministry of Labour to investigate what it claims is a lockout by the airline. Zinck is seeking a legal opinion from the Solicitor-General on the issue before holding further negotiations with the company. Domestic flights out of Nausori Airport have been severely affected, with only four aircraft out of a fleet of twelve operational.

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