

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 August 2004

Union calls off strike at LG-Caltex

The union at LG-Caltex Oil Corp in South Korea called off a strike by about 800 oil refinery workers on August 9, just one hour before a company deadline, despite not having resolved any of the issues in the dispute. The company demanded an end to the strike, threatening workers who refused with “stern punishment,” including dismissals.

The union’s backdown has opened up strikers to victimisation. About 200 workers were locked out when they attempted to return to work and management announced it would “review and select” which employees it would accept back.

The company also refused to withdraw civil law suits against 60 workers initiated during the 18-day strike that began on July 19. Workers were seeking a 10.7 percent pay increase, a shorter working week and improved conditions for irregular (casual) workers. Arrest warrants remain in force for five union leaders who were charged after the government of President Roh Moo-hyun declared the strike illegal.

Despite the ongoing victimisation of workers, union head Kim Jeong-bon declared: “In the future, we hope our managers will try to be more understanding about the harsh working conditions and act in the interests of the workers, who form the foundation of this prosperous company.”

The strike by the LG-Caltex workers was part of the Korean Confederation of Unions’ summer campaign for improved wages and working conditions, but the peak union body did not call for its affiliates to take action to back the refinery strikers, despite government repression and the charges against union leaders and strikers.

LG-Caltex is a 50-50 joint venture between GS Holdings and ChevronTexaco Corp, and accounts for about one quarter of the country’s oil refining capacity, producing 650,000 barrels of oil daily.

Migrant workers in Hong Kong protest hiring decree

On August 10, the Association of Indonesian Migrant Workers, together with other migrant worker groups, protested outside the Indonesian Consulate General’s office in Hong Kong. They were demanding that the Indonesian government withdraw Transmigration Decree 104-A, which allows the involvement of private brokers to recruit workers for employment overseas. They want the arrangement replaced with a system of direct hiring overseen by a government agency.

Members of the Asian Migrants Coordinating Body, Asia Pacific Mission for Migrants, Bethune House Migrant Women’s Refuge and the Mission for Filipino Migrant Workers also took part in the protest. The protestors were mainly female workers.

The Indonesian Consulate General had earlier agreed to meet a delegation from the protest but withdrew the offer at the last moment without providing a reason. Another demonstration on the same issue is planned for August 15.

Indonesian workers demand withdrawal of manpower law

About 1,500 workers protested at the East Java governor’s office on August 7, demanding that the government and legislators revoke Manpower Law No.13/2003. The Indonesian Workers Union Congress organised the protest.

Protest coordinator Agus Haryanto said the law made it easier for employers to outsource work to increase casual labour and cut back the permanent workforce. It also allowed them to sack contract workers without notice.

Factory workers sacked without notice

Sixty workers at a speaker manufacturing plant in Malaysia’s Bakar Arang Industrial Estate were unaware that they had been dismissed until they reported to work on August 2 and found the factory gates locked. Company officials at the gate informed them the factory had ceased operations the day before and that workers with more than five years service would get severance pay equal to just one and a half month’s wages, while those with less would receive only one month.

A spokesman for the Labour Department said the company had broken the law because it should have given 30 days notice of the closure.

Filipino worker dies evading immigration officers

A 25-year old Filipino, identified only as Ben, drowned on August 1 while fleeing from Malaysian immigration officers who raided a construction site in the city of Kota Kinabalu in Sabah province. He was one of a group of workers who were without valid work permits and had run into a swamp to hide when the officers arrived on the site. According to reports, Ben had intended to return home to the Philippines as soon as he was paid his outstanding July wages.

Indian health workers campaign against handover to village councils

Junior health assistants in the southern Indian state of Karnataka protested in cities across the state on August 11 against the government’s order placing them under the control of village councils (Gram Panchayats).

Hundreds of assistants held marches and sit-down protests outside district health offices in the cities of Mangalore, Udupi, Mysore and Chamarajanagar, while in Bellary the district unit of the State Government Employees Association supported the protest.

There are around 18,000 junior health assistants, mostly women, implementing national health programs for the rural people across Karnataka. The workers claim that placing them under the control of village councils will restrict their ability to carry out these duties because of problems associated with distance and working hours. Also, only medical practitioners or senior health officials are qualified to assess their work performance and village councils do not have the personnel.

Retired Pakistani municipal workers fight for pension dues

Retired municipal workers carrying placards and banners demonstrated outside the Hyderabad press club on August 10, demanding the payment of pension dues. They allege that 1,650 retired workers have not received payments for the past four months and that their families are facing starvation. Retired worker Yaqoob Shah died recently because he could not afford to buy medicine.

Leaders of the Hyderabad Municipal Workers Union addressed the protest and warned that in-service employees would impose a work boycott if the retirees were not paid.

Pakistani electricity workers fight privatisation

Karachi Electricity Supply Corporation (KESC) workers held a demonstration at the Press Club in Karachi on August 6, protesting against the privatisation of the corporation. Union leaders alleged that the utility was being privatised on the orders of the international financial institutions. They said the government was using financial losses caused by mismanagement as a pretext.

Sri Lankan university assistants demand promotions

Education Assistants at the Open University of Sri Lanka launched an indefinite strike on August 6, demanding the implementation of all due promotions. The strike is affecting classes at 22 centres, including the main campus in Nawala on the outskirts of Colombo. About 35,000 students attend the universities.

According to the assistants' union, 85 of its members have been refused promotions that they have been entitled to for the past 15 years.

Petroleum workers picket company headquarters

On August 11, workers at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) in Sri Lanka picketed the company's head office in Kollonnawa, on the outskirts of Colombo. They were protesting against plans to privatise the corporation under the pretext of restructuring the firm's operations.

A spokesman for the Petroleum Joint Union Federation said that even though the UPFA government pledged to abandon the privatisation process started by the previous UNF government, there were secret moves to proceed. These include transferring one third of the corporation to the Indian Oil Corporation.

WA power workers defy return to work order

On August 10, 120 contract maintenance workers at the Muja and Kwinana power stations in Western Australia's southwest voted to maintain strike action in defiance of a return to work direction by the Industrial Relations Commission.

The employees, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), are in a dispute with subcontractor United KG/Siemens over a new enterprise work agreement and have been on strike for over a month. The strike has cut 20 percent of Western Power's generating capacity.

Despite the hostility of the Western Australian state Labor government toward workers during a series of recent industrial disputes, including strikes by state public servants, AMWU state secretary Jock Ferguson called on the government to "step in to resolve the dispute".

Smelter unions threaten strike over work contract

Unions covering 700 workers at the Zinifex smelter in Hobart, Tasmania this week threatened industrial action after negotiations over a new enterprise work agreement broke down. The workers are seeking fixed manning levels and the right to be consulted on any proposed changes to work practices.

Negotiations on the new agreement began in April 2002 but were suspended after the former owner Pasminco was placed in the hands of an administrator. A spokesman for the unions involved, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Workers Union, said the negotiations were the most difficult in 20 years and the company was "bloody minded and uncooperative" on staffing levels. Workers will meet next week to discuss the dispute.

Call centre workers strike for improved wages and conditions

Call centre staff employed by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) in Tasmania, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland struck on August 9. The strike, which affected the company's operations for four hours, erupted after negotiations over a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement between the company and the Finance Services Union (FSU) broke down.

The FSU wants a 5.5 percent pay increase over 28 months and staff increases. A union spokesperson said the company was demanding that employees handle an unrealistic number of calls per hour. "It seems the

bank is only interested in the quantity of calls each operator handles every day, rather than the quality of assistance they provide for customers," he said.

The call centre strike follows a half-day stoppage on August 6 by CBA office staff in four states seeking a pay increase. They are paid 7.5 percent less than their counterparts employed by the National Australia Bank. The CBA recorded a 28 percent rise in profits for the financial year ending June 30.

Lockout continues at crane company

Workers at Eagle Crane and Rigging are maintaining their picket in Gladstone, Queensland. They have been locked out since July 8 in a dispute over a collective work agreement. They are seeking a 36-hour week and wage parity with other workers in the industry.

The workers, members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, have rejected attempts by the management to shift them onto individual non-union work contracts.

New Zealand potato processing workers reject pay cuts

Workers at the McCain potato processing plant in Feilding voted unanimously on August 9 to reject cuts to wages and conditions. Last week the management informed workers it was considering the plant's future and demanded that they accept a 23 percent pay cut or lose jobs. About 100 workers attended the meeting called by the Amalgamated Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU).

Some workers will be hit harder than others, losing shift work allowances and penalty rates that will cut hourly rates by \$NZ3 to \$4.

An EPMU spokesman said that when McCain first purchased the plant in 2001 from Heinz Watties it promised to retain wages and conditions and to invest in new technology. In the 2002 pay round, the company proposed a freeze on wages and cuts to conditions such as shift allowances and overtime rates.

There are 125 employees at McCain. The management claims that three successive poor growing seasons since the 2001 takeover have forced it to regard Feilding as "a high-cost operation in an unreliable growing area". The EPMU will go back into formal negotiations with the company next week.

NZ meat workers vote down secret ballot on pay cuts

A meeting involving more than 500 workers at Smithfield meat works was held last week over management proposals to cut wages in the boning room Boners at the Timaru plant currently earn up to \$4.50 a carcass, but the new contract offered by the owners Alliance Group would cut that to \$3.58, meaning a loss of about \$200 a week. Workers voted down a proposal for a secret ballot on the new contract.

In June, management announced a plan to close three departments with the loss of about 70 jobs, while other workers would have their contracts downgraded. It also announced it intended to inject \$5 million into upgrading the meat works funded by the cuts to boning room wages. Meat Workers Union officials from Smithfield and Christchurch were due to meet with workers again on August 12.

Nurses vote to strike over contract

About 200 nurses employed by the Christchurch-based Nurse Maude Association voted this week to strike over collective agreement negotiations. The nurses, members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO), are employed in hospice and dementia units and as district nurses.

An NZNO advocate said the nurses had no option but to strike because the employer's offer was around \$3,500 lower than salaries for other experienced registered nurses employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (DHB).

Negotiations have also stalled on a number of other issues. The employer refuses to make an offer on weekend rates in line with the industry standard of time and a half, to increase sick leave or to pay the full cost of practicing certificates, offering only to meet half of the

amount. While other nurses get 10 days paid sick leave annually, Nurse Maude staff get only seven.

The DHB nurses are currently in negotiations for a pay settlement, which if granted would leave Nurse Maude employees even further behind.

General strike called in French Polynesia

Two large Tahiti-based labour unions, ATi'A I Mua and the Confederation of Independent Unions in French Polynesia (CSIP), have announced they will call a general strike on August 16. They filed a strike notification on August 6.

The unions are in dispute with the government because they suspect it is attempting to take over the affairs of the social services agency, Caisse de Prevoyance Social (CPS) , which is jointly managed by the unions and the employer. The strike call followed a two-day strike by CPS workers, which ended after they received a 2 percent pay increase.

The CPS has a yearly budget of 50 billion francs (\$US526 million) and has reserves of more than \$421 million. Determined not to lose control over the assets, a union spokesman said: "It's an enormous kitty that belongs to salaried employees and it's them and the employers who participate in its financing and management."

French Polynesia fuel workers on strike

Fuel workers, members of the Confederation of Independent Unions in French Polynesia (CSIP), went out on strike on August 12, stopping the delivery of fuel to petrol stations and the refuelling of planes.

They are demanding a guarantee of their conditions if their fuel company changed hands. The CSIP has been in negotiations with companies to determine if workers would be covered by current collective work agreement. It is not yet clear when petrol stations are likely to run out of supplies.



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