

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

18 June 2005

Korean union leader killed on picket line

Kim Tae-hwan, a regional leader of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, was killed by a cement truck while taking part in a picket in Chungju on June 14. Drivers employed by the Sanjo Remicon cement company struck earlier in the day to demand the company agree to a collective employment agreement for all the drivers, instead of the existing arrangement whereby they are hired as "self-employed".

Workers established the picket in order to prevent the company breaking the strike with replacement drivers. As Kim stood in the path of a truck attempting to enter Sanjo Remicon's depot, the driver ran him down. The drivers have continued their strike, with rallies every day at the Chungju City Hall.

Filipino miners maintain strike under threat of police attack

Over 1,600 miners employed at the Philippines' largest gold mine have defied a government order to return to work and are maintaining their pickets at several gates leading into the complex. The mine is owned by the Lepanto Consolidated Mining Corporation (LCMC) and is located 348 kilometres north of Manila. The miners struck on June 2 in support of their Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and the return-to-work order was issued on June 9 by Labor Secretary Sto Thomas.

On May 10, Thomas ordered the deployment of 85 troops to the villages surrounding the gold mine, just two days before a mandatory cooling off period lapsed.

The miners are seeking a daily pay increase over three years of just 29 pesos for the first two years and 33 pesos for the third (\$US0.52 and \$0.60). While this is far short of their original demand of 100 pesos per day, LCMC is refusing to shift from its offer of 21 pesos, 27 pesos and 29 pesos over three years.

The miners are manning five pickets around the mine, and are determined to stay until their latest demands are met by the company. Lepanto Employees Union (LEU) president Ninian Lang-egan said police in full riot gear were positioned near two of the picket lines.

During a 2003 strike at the LCMC mine, police killed two miners while dispersing a picket of LEU workers. Lang-egan said: "We are ready to be dispersed from our picket lines by the police. We just hope they will not be violent [like in 2003]."

Hotel workers in Cebu defy order to end picket

Around 60 workers at the Holiday Plaza Hotel in the Philippines city of Cebu demonstrated on June 9 in front of the offices of the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC), in protest over its order that the workers end their week-long picket at the entrance to the hotel. The strike began on May 20 over the management's refusal to sign a Collective Bargaining Agreement despite two years of negotiations.

The workers, members of the Cebu Holiday Plaza Hotel Incorporated Employees Union (CHPHIEU) and the Associated Labor Union (ALU), are claiming that the NLRC order is illegal because it was issued without notice to the unions. An ALU official said the workers will maintain the picket and are demanding the NLRC withdraw its order.

Indian steel workers continue indefinite strike

Contract workers at the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh are continuing the indefinite strike they began on June 2. Some 8,000 workers struck demanding higher wages, increased allowances and bonuses, and medical facilities. The dispute has crippled production at VSP.

The contractors are employed by sub-contracting firms. Their present minimum monthly salary is just 3,334 rupees (\$US66), which is lower than workers at other steel plants. The strikers allege that management is denying them even the minimum bonus of 8.33 percent.

VSP management has declared that the dispute is illegal and is trying to intimidate the strikers by threatening to cancel the gate passes they need to enter and work at the plant. The contractors are calling for support from other VSP workers and have vowed to continue the strike until their demands are met.

Autoworkers walk out in Jharkhand

Three hundred workers attached to the transport section of Tata Motors in Jamshedpur, in the east Indian state of Jharkhand, struck for four hours on June 7 to protest against the suspension of an executive member of the union, Lalan Yadav.

Yadav was stood down for opposing a management plan to outsource the company's general transportation to a contracting firm. The strike was ended after the management guaranteed it would revoke the suspension order.

Indian childcare workers launch protest

Childcare (Anganwari) workers in Punjab protested outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Jalandhar on June 13 as part of a campaign for the regularisation of their employment.

At present, childcare workers are employed as casuals. They are demanding to be re-classified as full-time government employees, with the same conditions. The workers intend to strike and hold sit-in protests (dharnas) until their demands are met and the government honours a promise to increase their pay.

On June 10, childcare workers in Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh, protested to demand the reinstatement of two workers. One worker was dismissed on the basis of a false allegation that she resides over two kilometres away from her workplace, which is beyond the stipulated limits. Another worker was dismissed because she allegedly has two different names.

Tamil Nadu power workers continue strike

Contract workers employed by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) have been on strike since May 28 to demand permanent positions. Workers organised a demonstration in front of the TNEB offices in Thanjavur on June 8. On June 10, they held a one-day hunger strike.

The strike is being organised by the Central Organisation of Tamilnadu Electricity Employees (COTEE). According to COTEE, the workers have launched several campaigns over the past seven years for regularisation of their employment, but the government has refused to meet their demands.

Indian workers oppose privatisation

Dockworkers in Mumbai picketed the port office on June 14, as part of

nation-wide protests against moves to privatise India's major ports. Addressing a rally, S.R. Kulkarni, president of the All-India Port and Dock Workers Federation, warned the government that it was only the first step in a "prolonged struggle".

The day before, thousands of state sector workers in Punjab held a rally against moves to privatise the state's schools and health services. Workers from the Punjab State Electricity Board, the Indian Institute of Technology, state-owned sugar mills and many other government enterprises chanted slogans against the central and state governments outside official buildings in Ludhiana.

Workers also demanded that the government guarantee there would be no loss of jobs and full-time positions for staff hired on a daily or contract basis. The rally proceeded in defiance of threats of legal action by the government and a massive police presence.

The protest was organised by the Anti-Privatisation Sangharsh Committee of Punjab. On July 14, the committee is planning to organise another demonstration. Over the next several weeks, campaigns will be conducted in rural areas to win the support of village councils and poor farmers.

Sri Lankan workers protest against non-payment of tsunami allowance

Workers employed by the Galle municipal council picketed the District Secretariat office on June 9 to demand payment of an allowance that was promised to those engaged in tsunami relief work. Galle city, 115 kilometres south of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo, was devastated by the December 26 tsunami. The picketing was ended after the council guaranteed the allowance would be paid soon.

Sri Lankan graduate workers hold protest picket

Graduate trainee workers who were recently recruited by various state sector organisations, picketed the Galle bus station on June 9 to demand salary increases, transfers and appraisals of work. The United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government recruited thousands of trainee workers several months ago to honour an election promise. The trainees, however, are only being paid a small allowance and have not been given responsibilities in their workplaces.

On June 8, some 600 graduate workers who were recruited in 1999 picketed the provincial council office in Ratnapura, 80 kilometres from Colombo, demanding promotions, transfer schemes and appropriate job descriptions.

Australian Trico workers strike over job losses

About 100 workers at the Trico car parts plant in Melbourne went on strike on June 16 over the company's decision to transfer production overseas and lay off 160 workers. The striking workers picketed the company's Springvale head office.

Trico, a US-based company, manufactures windscreen wipers. The first 65 jobs will go in December and the rest by August 2006, with most production being shifted to China and Taiwan. The company claims the job cuts have been caused by the loss of several contracts and global pressures on the company to cut wage costs.

New Zealand universities face strike action

More than 90 percent of academic staff who participated in a ballot last week have voted in favour of industrial action. The ballot was held after employers at seven universities refused to agree to new multi-employer agreements and offered salary increases of between 2 percent (at Massey) and 4.5 percent (at Auckland) on a single-employer basis. It is the first time that industrial action has threatened to close universities across the entire country.

A combined unions' spokesperson said the vote was an unprecedented rejection of the employers' position. The current salary offers are among the lowest in the current wage round. Two days of national strike action will occur on July 20 and August 4, with rolling stoppages scheduled to take place in the intervening period. First semester examination results

will be withheld indefinitely.

General (administrative and support) staff represented by the Public Service Association (PSA) also voted to strike. Members at six of the seven universities covered by the negotiations voted in favour of taking industrial action.

Despite the overwhelming support for a national strike, the unions have agreed to resume negotiations with an industrial mediator.

New Zealand supermarket, steel workers offered pay rises

The National Distribution Union, which represents New Zealand retail workers, is recommending members accept a pay offer at Progressive Enterprises supermarkets that will see the average rate of pay for thousands of staff rise by 5.2 percent.

Supermarket workers have been involved in a combined unions' pay campaign for a 5 percent across-the-board rise. They had also voted to bring workers at Foodtown, Countdown and Woolworths supermarkets into one collective agreement. The agreement includes a requirement for non-members to pay a "bargaining fee", which the union claims is to ensure the gains are not passed on to non-union members for free.

Workers at one of the country's biggest industrial sites, the NZ Steel mill at Glenbrook, have also won a 5 percent pay rise. This week, about 1,000 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union voted to accept a three-year collective agreement that provides a 5 percent pay rise this year and 3.5 percent in each of the following years.

Wellington hospital staff to strike

Laundry workers at Capital and Coast District Health Board (DHB) will take strike action from June 23. The Clothing, Laundry and Allied Workers Union filed notices of the strike this week after a breakdown in collective agreement negotiations.

The workers have been offered a 2.5 percent pay rise, plus 2.5 percent over two years. They are already paid almost \$1 per hour less than other public hospital laundry workers in the lower half of the North Island, and are being offered a lower increase than that already agreed by other health boards.

Union spokesperson Maxine Gay accused the DHB of treating laundry workers as "second class citizens". The DHB had continued its previous practice of offering lower wage increases than the rate of inflation. As a result, the wages of Capital and Coast laundry workers have dropped by more than 20 percent compared to the minimum wage over the last 4 years.

Gay bemoaned the fact that "every suggestion" the union had put forward to resolve the dispute on terms it presumed would be acceptable to the employer, including productivity increases, production bonuses, skill-related pay, saving schemes and changes to work practices, had been rejected by the DHB.

Fijian contract workers quit Kuwait

About 40 Fijian workers contracted to work in Kuwait by Meridian Services Agency (MSA) returned to Fiji on June 10 and have called for the government to investigate all recruiting agencies. Many returned worse off financially than when they left. On May 23, 200 Fijians sent to Kuwait by MSA struck over pay and conditions.

The returning workers said the conditions promised by MSA were not given when they arrived in Kuwait. One worker, Mikaele Jiuta, who was recruited as a truck driver in December 2004, said allowances promised to cross the border into Iraq, along with injury compensation, were never paid. He said: "It is a tiring job. When it is payday, either it is less or no pay at all for some of us. Most of the men who are there have not got paid at all and we have had to feed them."

Jiuta also claimed that sick or injured workers could not get treatment from qualified medical personnel because they were not covered by medical insurance. Worse still, he said, they didn't find out until returning home that they had been working illegally in Kuwait because the visas obtained for them by MSA were only tourist visas and did not permit them

to work.

A number of Fijian men who six months ago paid \$US180 in application fees to MSA for work in Kuwait are now convinced they have been misled and are demanding a refund. MSA has offered to repay just \$US90, claiming the rest has been spent on government charges. The company has declared it is up to the individual workers to negotiate repayment with the state. Over 15,000 Fijians are waiting for work in Kuwait.



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