

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

30 July 2005

South Korean government forces end to hospital strike

Over 3,000 striking workers from 30 South Korean hospitals were forced back to work on July 22 when the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) ordered hospital managers and the Korean Federation of Hospital Workers' Union to accept a compromise.

The health workers struck on July 19 in support of a log-of-claims, including the full implementation of the five-day workweek, a 9.89 percent wage hike and a guaranteed monthly minimum wage of 820,000 won (\$US808.70). Hospital managers refused to increase their original 2 percent wage increase offer and a monthly minimum wage of 700,000 won. They are also demanding retention of Saturday working.

The NLRC ruling on July 21 forced the workers to accept a 3 percent wage increase in public hospitals and 5 percent in the private sector. It reduced work on Saturday for all workers and granted an unpaid day of menstruation leave each month for female employees. No decision was made on the monthly minimum wage.

About 1,000 hospital staff protested outside the NLRC office in Seoul against the government's intervention. Their union has threatened legal action against the NLRC and to bring its case to the National Human Rights Commission of Korea.

South Korean pilots' strike enters second week

Asiana Airlines, South Korea's second largest airliner, has been forced to cancel numerous domestic flights and all its cargo flights after half its cockpit crews began an indefinite strike on July 17. Non-unionised pilots are being used to maintain international flights. It is estimated the airline has been losing 3 billion won (\$US29.5 million) per day since the walkout.

The airline employs 830 cockpit crew, of whom approximately 520 are union members. Long-running negotiations between Asiana and the union collapsed after the management failed to respond to a 20-point log-of-claims for better working conditions.

Workers want the retirement age raised from 55 to 58 years, cuts in flight hours from 1,200 to 1,100 hours per year, more rest time between flights, a five-day week and maternity leave benefits.

The major sticking point is the pilots' demand for a say in promotions and demotions. Airline management has been intimidating pilots by permanently demoting captains following accidents or flight mishaps. The pilots argue that demoted captains should be given a second chance. Airline management is refusing to negotiate on the matter.

The government has asked the NLRC to consider forcing Asiana and the union into arbitration, but has admitted this will be difficult because the pilots have correctly followed all the legal procedures. The airline industry is not designated as an "essential public service", ruling out emergency legislation to squash the dispute.

On July 25, the union moved its headquarters from Seoul to Mount Songni, a two hour drive from the capital, raising fears of a prolonged strike. Immediately afterwards, Asiana vice president Joo Jaehong called on the government to intervene. The Ministry of Construction and Transportation is looking at a plan to allow pilots from Korean Air to fly

some of Asiana's domestic routes but is reluctant to act for fear of provoking further industrial unrest in the airline industry.

Pilots at Korean Air, the country's largest airline with 2,000 cockpit crew, are also demanding that the retirement age be lifted from 55 to 59 years and more rest time between flights.

Strikers storm Philippines gold mine

On July 23, some 1,500 striking workers and their supporters stormed Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company (LCMC) compound in Mankayan, 340 kilometres north of Manila. Fifty police assigned to guard Gate 3 at the mine site clashed with the strikers and fired warning shots but failed to prevent the crowd pushing through to the Lepanto Employees Union hall.

Over 1,600 LCMC workers struck on June 2 when their collective bargaining agreement (CBA) reached a deadlock. The Lepanto Employees Union wants an 81 peso per day (\$US1.65) wage rise over three years. Company management has refused to increase its 77 peso offer.

In an attempt to end the dispute, Labor Secretary Patricia Sto Tomas intervened on June 14 and granted an 82 peso rise over three years and ordered employees back to work. While the union has accepted the wage offer, after pressure from local town officials, it is refusing to call the strike off until LCMC reinstates 75 union officials who were sacked at the beginning of the strike.

Sto Tomas has ordered the NLRC to rule on the union's demand, the LEU is insisting that direct negotiations be held with the company. Management claims that its operations are almost normal because 1,000 workers returned to work after LCMC started hiring strike-breakers in early July.

Hundreds of Indian Honda strikers injured by police attack

Indian police attacked a protest by thousands of striking Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) workers in New Delhi on July 25. According to some reports, 700 employees were hospitalised, while 100 were arrested. The *Hindu* newspaper wrote that the police "surrounded the workers and thrashed them, leaving many bleeding with broken limbs" and that "many of the injured were bleeding profusely, while many lay unconscious".

Over 3,500 workers at the HMSI's Gurgaon plant, near New Delhi, have been on strike for more than a month to demand the reinstatement of four union leaders and 20 other workers. The company sacked or suspended the men, on various grounds, after they demanded higher wages.

Hundreds of workers demonstrated outside government buildings on July 25, condemning the police. Workers also protested against the police violence on July 26 in front of the Gurgaon hospital, where most of the injured were admitted for treatment. Police attacked again, dispersing the demonstration with baton charges and water cannons.

India's National Human Rights Commission has demanded that the Central Bureau of Investigation probe the incident. Unions have announced that protest general strikes will be held in Gurgaon on July 28 and August 1.

Indian state workers on strike

Employees of the Kerala State Financial Enterprises (KSFE) in Thiruvananthapuram stopped work for two hours on July 20 to protest against the suspension of 13 managers for participating in a July 11 strike demanding higher pay. The KSFE workers demonstrated outside district centres throughout the state.

Tamilnadu state government employees in Krishnagiri district struck July 21 to demand one month's salary as an annual bonus, pensions to be calculated on the last drawn salary, 15 days annual leave and other improvements to wages and benefits.

Punjab passport and bank workers protest

Regional Passport Office workers in Chandigarh, in the state of Punjab, protested during their lunch break from July 23 to July 27 against privatisation. Passport-related work has been contracted to private companies.

Employees from a number of state-owned banks in the Punjab city of Jalandar also held a massive demonstration on July 20 against any government moves to privatise, merge or disinvest from the companies. Union officials said that bank employees would join a September 29 national strike organised by the Central Trade Unions and the National Federations of Trade Unions.

Sri Lankan timber corporation workers demonstrate

Hundreds of State Timber Corporation (STC) employees demonstrated near the Sri Lankan parliament in Colombo on July 20, to demand full-time positions for 385 contract workers. The contractors, who have held a relay hunger strike outside the workplace since July 14, allege that they were recruited by STC in June 2001 with the promise of permanent positions.

Sugar factory workers protest

Sri Lankan sugar factory workers in Sevanagala, around 200 kilometres from Colombo, have been on hunger strike since July 4. They want more staff recruited and payment of a 2,500 rupee (\$US25) allowance promised in the governments' 2004 budget.

Sri Lankan health sector workers on sick note campaign

Clerks, drivers and other workers attached to the health services in the North and East provinces of Sri Lanka called in sick on July 19 to demand the payment of salary increases outstanding from 2004. Work at health offices throughout the provinces was paralysed by the campaign.

Bangladesh textile workers on strike

Employees at Ringshine Textile, in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ), launched an indefinite strike on July 14 against the harassment of female workers by their superiors. Two workers were arrested on July 17 and efforts to hold demonstrations were blocked by police and DEPZ security guards.

Car factories stand down due to component factory strike

More than 4,000 autoworkers at the Toyota and Ford factories in Melbourne were stood down on July 20, following strike action by 120 workers at the ICON component factory. ICON staff walked out over concerns that they may lose their entitlements after the company announced that it might be forced to shut down. It is reportedly losing \$A50,000 per month and if declared bankrupt employees could lose \$4.3 million of the \$4.7 million the company owes them in holiday pay, sick pay, long-service leave and other entitlements.

The parts manufacturer supplies the major car producers with battery boxes, brake fluid bottles, hoses and other components.

Council workers strike over proposed new agreement

Dozens of Moonee Valley Council workers in Melbourne took industrial action on three consecutive days last week in an attempt to force the council to improve wages and conditions.

The workers, members of the Australian Services Union (ASU), are amongst the lowest paid in the city. An ASU spokesperson claimed that the council has refused to negotiate any more than a 13 percent wage rise.

The workers protested outside of the council's office and organised a 30 vehicle convoy down the main street of Moonee Ponds to draw attention to their demands. Last May, garbage workers placed bans on the collection of rubbish as part of the ongoing wages dispute.

Truck drivers strike new pay deal

About 90 truck drivers from Boral Transport and other concrete plants in the Hunter Valley, north of Sydney, walked off the job for 24 hours on July 25. The strike was over company attempts to force the workers onto individual contracts. The drivers, who are members of the Transport Workers Union, met on July 26 to discuss further action.

Air NZ and union strike deal

The Flight Attendants and Related Services Association (Farsa) has struck a pay and conditions agreement with Air New Zealand following two strikes by cabin crews last week.

The deal, which was presented to Farsa members at the first of a series of meetings this week, includes an average 3.3 percent annual pay increase over the next three years, increased allowance provisions, an additional in-flight meal on certain services and 10 cabin crew on each Boeing 777 flight, subject to three reviews on the introduction of the first aircraft during the next year.

The airline earlier had to cancel about 90 international flights, affecting up to 15,000 passengers. As a result of the agreement, the union's strike notice was withdrawn, and 1,000 long-haul flight attendants returned to work. A final 48-hour strike was abandoned.

Long-haul cabin crew had demanded a 3.8 percent pay rise for each of the next three years, extra meals and more rostered staff. The airline had initially offered a 3.3 percent rise in the first year, 3.4 percent the next year and 3.3 percent in 2007.

Strikes to continue at New Zealand universities

Protest action and rolling strikes are set to continue at campuses throughout New Zealand, culminating in a second national strike on August 4. Academic and general staff at six universities are taking action over pay and a multi-employer collective employment agreement.

Canterbury University staff held the first of several lightning strikes this week when more than 40 walked off the job for two hours. Victoria University academics abandoned lectures for second-year students on July 26, while staff at Auckland and Lincoln Universities also walked off the job for up to two hours.

In the first-ever national strike, 6,000 staff walked out on July 20 in response to a 2 to 4.5 percent pay rise offer and the vice-chancellors' refusal of multi-employer bargaining. Lecture theatres were left empty at Auckland, Waikato, Massey, Victoria, Canterbury and Lincoln and staff established pickets or held demonstrations outside most campuses. Otago University is the only one to have settled the dispute.

Staff want a national settlement and salary increases of least 10 percent this year, which will bring them closer to what the tertiary sector unions claim is an internationally acceptable level. Negotiations broke down after vice-chancellors refused to agree to the national settlement and made pay offers conditional on single-employer bargaining.

The NZ University Students' Association issued a statement saying students supported the industrial action.

New Zealand manufacturing workers continue strikes

Workers at National Aluminium in Te Rapa went on strike on July 22 for increased pay. The aluminium extrusion plant ground to a halt, with 87 workers walking off the job for 24 hours. The workers want a 5 percent pay rise, but the company is offering 4 percent. A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said that the company had presented no evidence that it could not afford to pay.

Christchurch polytechnic staff strike over pay

More than 200 academic staff at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) went on strike and picketed on July 27 over unsatisfactory pay offers. The Association of Staff in Tertiary Education

(ASTE) has been negotiating a new collective agreement with the polytechnic for several months but has reached a stalemate.

The academics say they are not prepared to accept a management offer of 2 percent this year, followed by 3 percent in 2006. An ASTE spokesman acknowledged concerns about the worsening financial situation at the polytechnic, which is likely to register a deficit of \$2.8 million this year, but said a "raid" on staff salaries was not the solution. Management is cutting costs after a drop in forecast student numbers. CPIT has about 2,000 employees.

Fijian government intervenes against national hotel workers strike

Over 2,000 striking hotel employees, members of the National Union of Hospitality, Catering and Tourism Industry Employees, were forced to end their four-day strike when Fiji's Labour Minister declared the action illegal on July 24 and ordered the strikers back to work. All five-star hotels and resorts were affected but able to maintain operations using non-union and administrative staff to service customers.

Union general secretary Timoci Naivaluwaqa said talks over the past weeks had ended in a stalemate. He said employees were frustrated with the Fiji Hotel Association's continuous refusal to meet three outstanding issues in their 2004 log-of-claims. He said members voted last month for strike action and, "[s]ince we already had a mandate to take industrial action [we] decided that it was time for a strike."

The union wants a 10 percent wage hike for all workers covering the next three years and the current tipping system to be replaced with a 10 percent service charge to be distributed evenly among all workers. They claim the current system of tipping is unfair because only staff dealing directly with customers benefit.

The Hotel Association is holding to its offer of a 5 percent wage increase for the large hotels and 4 percent for all others.

Although all workers responded to the labour minister's return-to-work order, some hotel managers have chosen to further intimidate their employees and 40 have been sacked for participating in the strike. Naivaluwaqa has declared that the union will not allow its members to be intimidated and has filed a 28-day strike notice with the government.

Construction workers in Samoa strike

About 180 workers employed on the Aquatic Centre construction site in Apia walked out on July 22 and vowed not to return until they receive a pay increase. They are also protesting over the minimal amount of overtime available. The Samoa Games Authority, a state body, employs them.

The workers claim they should have received a recent government general pay increase. But Samoa Games Authority spokesman, Fonoti Etuale Ioane, said that the workers were not entitled to the increase because they were already paid above the minimum wage.

Tonga public servants begin indefinite strike

A national strike by over 4,000 Tongan public servants has crippled almost all arms of government except hospital services. At least 1,000 workers walked off the job on July 22 after the government refused to deal with their claims. By July 25, the strike had extended to include all islands in the country.

The public servants want the government to reconsider plans to pay large increases to top level public servants but only a minimal rise to lower grade officers. Lower grades typically receive a yearly salary of 2,600 paanga (\$US1,336) while government ministers receive 100,000 paanga (\$51,000). The Public Service Association is also calling for the minimum wage to be increased from \$1,490 to \$2,570.

About 4,000 striking public servants marched to parliament on July 25 where the union presented a petition to the House Speaker.





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