

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

13 August 2005

South Korean government intervenes in pilot strike

The South Korean government is preparing emergency legislation to end a strike by Asiana Airlines pilots after management and the union failed to reach settlement by the government's August 7 deadline. The legislation will order the pilots back to work and impose a 30-day cooling-off period, during which industrial action will be banned.

Over 370 of Asiana's 826 pilots walked off the job on July 17 to win better working conditions and greater participation in management. All cargo flights have been suspended while domestic and international passenger flights have suffered major disruptions. Asiana's losses are estimated to be over 200 billion won (\$US197 million).

If an agreement is not reached during the cooling-off period, the state-run National Labor Relations Commission will impose a binding arbitration—a move that Asiana management has been demanding since the strike began.

More deaths in Chinese mines

A gas build-up in a central China coal mine killed 24 miners on August 2. More than 40 workers were underground in the Xinfu coal mine in Yuzhou, Henan province, when the shafts began to fill with gas. Two men are still missing.

In another mining disaster, 102 workers have been trapped underground since August 7 at the Daxing mine in Xingning, Guangdong province. Floodwaters filled the shafts and there is little chance that any miners have survived. On July 16, flooding killed 16 miners in the same town.

Indian workers demand improved conditions

Some 1,500 teachers, nurses, municipality workers, drivers and university workers demonstrated outside a state government office in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, on August 2. They are demanding a 30 percent salary increase, abolition of the contributory pension scheme, provision of medical insurance and steps to end contract labour.

Bank workers demonstrate in Kerala

State Bank of India employees in Kerala demonstrated outside the bank's head office in Thiruvananthapuram on August 4 to stop management moves to end the system known as "dying-in-harness". Traditionally, the jobs of workers who die or contract major illnesses while employed by the bank are given to their children on compassionate grounds.

Textile workers fight factory closure

Kharar Textile Mill employees in Punjab protested outside the factory on August 3 against management plans to close the mill.

While management claims the factory is running at a loss, workers have rejected this and demanded wage increases. They also want the company to re-employ retrenched workers and introduce a voluntary retirement scheme.

Mumbai income tax workers strike

Over 800 staff from the Income Tax office at the Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC) in Mumbai walked out on August 4 over unhygienic toilet facilities and the lack of drinking water. According to workers, the toilets had not flushed for eight days. The BKC tax office processes a high proportion of the tax returns lodged in the city and there were long queues outside the complex caused by the protest.

Western Australian power workers threaten industrial action

Up to 1,000 electricity workers attended stopwork meetings this week in Perth and the southwest of Western Australia to discuss Western Power's moves to force them onto individual contracts or AWAs (Australian Workplace Agreements). They also rejected the latest enterprise deal put forward by the energy utility company.

The agreement reportedly offered a pay rise of between 14 and 30 percent. Power workers have threatened to strike if management does not increase the offer and rule out the introduction of AWAs. According to the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, Western Power workers are among the lowest paid energy workers in Australia.

Australian Boeing workers still locked out

The long-running industrial dispute between aircraft maintenance workers and Boeing Australia at the RAAF base at Williamstown near Newcastle has entered its tenth week. Boeing locked out the maintenance workers after they demanded the right to negotiate a collective agreement. The 35 employees are also demanding pay rises to give them wage parity with other workers in Sydney plants.

The Australian Workers Union, which covers the maintenance workers, has not called on its members in other plants or appealed for other unions to take industrial action in support.

A delegation of workers attended a rally in Canberra on August 10 calling on the Howard government to intervene in the dispute. Prime Minister John Howard told parliament that Boeing was entirely within its rights to refuse to collectively bargain with its employees.

Rail drivers meet over wages and job cuts

About 2,200 coal and freight drivers employed by Pacific National Freight (PNF) attended a series of stopwork meetings

across the country this week to discuss a new wages and conditions agreement and management proposals to cut staffing. Newcastle employees met at the coal terminal on August 12.

PNF was formerly the state-owned FreightCorp, which was privatised by the New South Wales government.

IT workers to strike over wage cuts

Employees of BDS, a labour hire company that supplies IT staff to a number of Australian telecommunication companies, are threatening industrial action over cuts to their pay and conditions. The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union has threatened strike action if BDS refuses to negotiate a workplace agreement by August 17.

Radio New Zealand suspends strikers

Radio New Zealand employees who struck for two hours on August 3 have been suspended and had their pay docked. Over 180 workers are campaigning for a 5 percent pay increase and an extra week's annual leave. The broadcaster is offering a 3 percent rise and no extra holidays.

The strike was the third in a series of stoppages over the past two weeks intended to disrupt primetime programs. A spokesman for the two unions involved said more walkouts are "almost certain".

New Zealand health workers to strike

The New Zealand Public Service Association (PSA) has issued the Canterbury, Nelson Marlborough and Wellington District Health Boards (DHBs) with notice of a one-day strike on August 15. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) has asked its members to support the industrial action.

The PSA, which covers health workers in mental health nursing, allied health and clerical areas, has been trying to negotiate a 12 to 20 percent pay rise across all occupational groups and achieve parity with recent increases won by nurses.

NUPE members in the Canterbury DHB want a 30 percent catch-up and have voted for a five-day strike to commence after August 15. A spokeswoman said hospital clerical and administration staff wages are so low that many live below the poverty line.

Universities strike to continue

Staff at five New Zealand universities will take further strike action after vice-chancellors refused to accept national employment agreements or make satisfactory salary offers. Academic and general staff at Auckland, Waikato and Canterbury will strike on August 19, while those at Victoria and Lincoln will walk out on August 29. The strikes will be supported by a variety of other actions, including refusal to participate in open days, bans on some administrative duties and work-to-rule measures.

On August 4, hundreds of staff walked out at Waikato University in the second of a series of day-long strikes. Striking staff received support from students. Victoria University academics have refused to attend faculty board meetings or participate in Performance-Based Research Fund (PRBF) activities, which help determine levels of government funding.

Vice-chancellors have offered salary increases of between 2 and 4.5 percent, conditional on single-employer agreements. A union proposal to end the current dispute and concentrate on "resolving salary problems" through a University Tripartite Forum was rejected. An Association of University Staff spokesman said the union had "moved significantly" in an attempt to reach settlement.

Tonga public service dispute escalates

Teachers and health workers throughout Tonga have joined over 3,000 striking public servants demanding a more equitable wage system for government employees. The strikers have defied a Ministry of Justice return-to-work order and face possible dismissal.

About 10,000 workers and their families marched to the Royal Palace on August 8 to lobby the king. The Public Service Association, which organised the protest, is hoping the monarch will overrule the cabinet and grant workers' demands.

In an attempt to end the three-week strike, cabinet lifted its wage offer from 12.5 percent to 30 percent, but public servants are committed to their original call for 60 to 80 percent increases.

In a move designed to split strikers, on August 6 the Ministry of Education offered teachers pay increases ranging from 60 percent for the highest grades to 125 percent for lower grades. The teachers rejected the offer and said they will remain in solidarity with other public servants.

Fijian nurses end five-day strike

Fiji's nurses returned to work on August 9 after the Fiji Nurses Association reached an agreement with the government over pay anomalies. A Memorandum of Understanding includes an increase in starting salaries for graduate nurses, a pledge not to demand refunds from 420 nurses who were erroneously overpaid, and other anomalies to be settled by October.

Over 1,300 nurses walked out on August 4, forcing hospitals to cancel all non-emergency surgery and send convalescing patients home.

Labour minister Kenneth Zinck immediately declared the strike illegal and notified the Director of Public Prosecutions. Despite the threat of fines and jail terms, the nurses refused to return to work without a settlement.

Although the strike has ended, Zinck has refused to end a police investigation that could see charges laid against the strike leaders. They face possible fines of up to \$US300 or a 12-month jail term.



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