

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 August 2005

Korean government steps in to end pilots' strike

Striking Asiana pilots have been forced to end their 25-day strike without a settlement after South Korean Labor Minister Kim Dae-hwan invoked emergency intervention powers on August 10. The intervention imposes a 30-day cooling-off period during which industrial action is banned. The 370 striking pilots did not return to work until August 12 in protest against the government's actions.

The Asiana dispute has been referred to the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC), which will have 15 days to review the major issues and engage both parties in arbitration. If arbitration fails, the NLRC can force both sides to accept a compulsory agreement.

The strike dragged on due to the airline management's refusal to meet the pilots' call for better working conditions and a greater say in management decisions.

Korean metal workers call strike

The Korea Metal Workers Federation (KMWF) has announced that over 110,000 members will hold a six-hour strike from 10 a.m. on August 26, in protest against laws governing the employment of casual workers. A union statement said business conglomerates were threatening the livelihood of casual workers by mass lay-offs and unilateral termination of contracts.

Strikers will hold rallies in 11 major cities across South Korea. The KMWF has 140,000 members in over 80 worksites, including automakers Hyundai and Kia. The union said it would be striking against the government, not the employers, despite industrial action over government policies being illegal in Korea.

Aviation union cancels strike

About 900 flight attendants at Indonesia's flag-carrier Garuda Indonesia were left angry and confused on August 8 when the Association of Garuda Cabin Crew (Ikagi) called off a three-day strike due to commence that day.

Ikagi chairman Zainuddin Malik cancelled the walkout after meeting the night before with three government ministers. Garuda is \$US826.5 million in debt, mostly to European creditors. The planned strike was for a wage increase.

China: three die while cleaning cement tank

Three workers were killed in Pudong province on August 12 while cleaning sediment from the bottom of a chemical tank used in the production of concrete. The migrant workers entered the tank at the Xinghou Chemicals Factory, in Chuansha township, at 4.30 p.m., and were not discovered until the following morning. Investigators discovered the workers had not been given training or supplied with safety equipment. The cause of their deaths has not been released.

Indian health workers on 50-hour hunger strike

Health workers employed by the federal government began a 50-hour hunger strike on August 16 in New Delhi, as part of a national protest against moves to privatise services in the health sector. They also demanded that the government fill all vacant positions and issue employees with at least four sets of uniforms.

Staff from the four federal government hospitals in Delhi held a sit-down protest outside their respective hospitals while Central Health Employees Federation members demonstrated in the city.

Kerala health workers protest

Over 350 health workers employed at the Kozhikode Medical College Hospital (KMCH) in the southern state of Kerala have been conducting a relay hunger strike since August 1. The workers began the protest on July 23 to force KMCH to discuss their grievances. Talks on July 29 broke down with no agreement.

Their main demand is for a wage rise. KMCH only pays a minimum daily wage of 70 to 110 rupees (\$US1.60 to \$2.50) even though the legal minimum daily wage in Kerala is 140 rupees to 170 rupees (\$3.20 to \$3.90). The health workers, who are hired as temporaries, also want permanent positions and paid maternity leave.

Biscuit workers in sit-down strike in Haryana

Parle Biscuits employees in Jhajjar, in the Indian state of Haryana, have maintained a sit-down strike inside the factory since August 13 to demand management honour an agreement on wages and conditions negotiated in April. Parle manufactures a popular brand of biscuits.

About 200 workers are inside the plant, supported by over 600 others outside. Management has threatened disciplinary action against all employees who refuse to return to work immediately.

Indian dam workers protest

Thousands of workers on the Ranjit Sagar dam project in Punjab demonstrated outside the Chief Engineer's office in Gurdaspur against the state government's decision to stop a special allowance. Workers will lose between 800 to 1,000 rupees from their pay each month. They claimed that the allowances were still being paid at other engineering projects.

Government spokesmen claimed the state was losing about 100 million rupees per month by paying the allowances.

Indian municipal workers hold protest

Local government workers in Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, stopped work and held a sit-in protest on August 16. Their action was part of statewide agitation for a 19-point log-of-claims tabled by the Andhra Pradesh Municipal Employees and the Workers Joint Council of Associations and Unions. Municipal workers and staff throughout the state will strike from August 21 if their demands are not met.

Sri Lankan textile workers demand jobs

Hundreds of the 3,200 workers who were sacked two years ago from the bankrupt Kabul Lanka factory in Thulhiriya picketed the labour secretariat in Colombo on August 10 to demand the government re-open the plant. In addition to their jobs, the former employees also want the state to take responsibility for paying out their Employee Provident Fund.

Employees are collectively owed over \$50 million. Kabul Lanka, which was owned by a Korean investor, also defaulted on \$48 million in loans from local banks.

Colombo health workers demand job security

Around 1,000 health workers gathered outside the National Hospital in Colombo and marched to the Ministry of Health on August 10 to demand

permanent jobs. Employees said that although they were promised permanency after six months, some had not been confirmed in positions after seven years, meaning they were not entitled to benefits such as pensions.

Sri Lankan trainees demand permanency

Thousands of graduates employed as state sector trainees protested at Lipton circle in Colombo on August 11 to demand permanency. The government had promised to provide permanent jobs for 42,000 graduates but many are still unemployed or working as casuals.

Graduate trainees, who said "their patience had come to an end," have accused the government of political interference in appointments. They have vowed to fight until permanency is confirmed for all trainees. Police in riot gear were deployed against the protest.

Hundreds of truck drivers protest at parliament

Hundreds of owner-operator truck drivers, members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU), travelled in convoy from Sydney to parliament house in Canberra on August 17 to protest against the Australian government's proposed changes to industrial relations laws.

The drivers are angry that under new legislation their right to a union-organised collective bargaining agreement would be eliminated. The government claims that as small business operators, the truck drivers could still bargain under the Trades Practices Act.

A TWU spokesperson said thousands of independent contractors were essentially employees because they worked for one company in a wholly dependent relationship. The union claims that the changes would mean that the right to get rulings from industrial tribunals on such issues as pay rates would be removed.

Butter factory workers strike over unfair dismissal

Around 170 workers employed by the Dairy Farmer butter company in the country town of Allansford, Victoria went on strike last Wednesday over the unfair dismissal of a fellow worker. The worker, who had been employed for 17 years, was sacked after a workplace accident that damaged some equipment.

A National Union of Workers (NUW) spokesperson said the sacked employee was extremely upset by his treatment and had an impeccable work record. Dairy Farmers took the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission in an attempt to have the dispute declared illegal. The NUW agreed that no more action would be taken.

Qantas threatens new job losses

Qantas Airlines, Australia's largest international and domestic carrier, has recorded a \$763 million profit. Despite this, Qantas has announced plans to carry out further cost-cutting measures by axing thousands more jobs.

The company is justifying the cuts by citing the high cost of fuel. Over the past three years Qantas has cut its workforce by 3,000 and increased casual workers by 25 percent with the support of the unions, in particular the Transport Workers Union. Qantas wants to cut costs by 5 percent per year.

Disputes escalate in New Zealand manufacturing industry

New Zealand manufacturing workers are involved in ongoing disputes as part of a campaign by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) for an across-the-board 5 percent pay rise.

Workers at National Aluminium in Hamilton unanimously rejected a lower offer last week, made during mediation between the employer and the EPMU. An overtime ban remains in place. The union offered to drop its claim to 4.75 percent, but the company countered with 4.25 percent and threatened to withdraw it if it was not accepted immediately.

Workers at Wellington fabrication firm A.E. Tilley held a three-day lightning strike from August 12 after negotiations broke down over a 4.5 percent offer.

About 180 workers at Atlas, formerly Southward Engineering, voted to reject a company proposal that would give it the right to unilaterally force

day-shift workers to work nights, and vice versa. The company has offered what it says is a 4.25 percent rise but it is effectively 4 percent because of reduced allowances. Workers at the Auckland plant have staged one strike, a load-out ban is in place at the Wellington site, and more action is likely.

Photocopier technicians at Fuji Xerox held stopwork meetings in Auckland and Wellington this week in protest over the company's pay proposal. Clawbacks proposed could cost the 55 technicians more than \$5,000 a year. The company, which made a \$9 million profit last year, has offered a 3.25 percent rise.

New Zealand university strikes to continue

New Zealand university staff will intensify strike and other protest action in their dispute with vice-chancellors over national collective employment agreements and salary increases. Industrial action in various forms has occurred at most campuses following a national strike on August 4, when more than 5,000 staff at five universities walked off the job for the day.

Further strike action was endorsed for some universities on August 19 and others on August 29. Other actions that will be taken include lightning strikes, a refusal to participate in open days, bans on some administrative duties and working to rule. An international boycott of New Zealand universities will be sought if a settlement is not reached soon.

The Association of University Staff is seeking a multi-employer contract to cover the country's seven main universities and pay increases of up to 30 percent, to bring salaries into line with international rates.

Five-day hospital strike in Christchurch

Six hundred health workers employed by the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHB) have issued a strike notice for a five-day walkout for the week of August 29. National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) delegates voted to proceed with the strike because the government did not provide funding for an acceptable pay offer.

NUPE has spent nine months petitioning parliament and holding rallies outside the offices of Labour MPs to call for a 30 percent wage rise for all health workers, but has not received an offer.

In a separate dispute, a national one-day strike by about 15,000 health workers set for last week was called off by the Public Service Association (PSA) after the country's 21 district health boards agreed to more talks. The PSA threatened to strike after negotiations for a multi-employer collective agreement collapsed four weeks ago.

Industrial action hits NZ newspapers

Industrial action has hit the Australian Fairfax publishing group's New Zealand operation, with workers at the Lower Hutt-based *Hutt News* going on strike. Pre-press, classified and front office staff struck for two hours on August 12, while journalists and production workers struck on August 15. Further industrial action in the Fairfax group is possible.

Workers at the company's Wellington-based community newspapers group, who are seeking a 5 percent rise, rejected a 3.2 percent offer.

Staff at four other daily newspapers also walked off the job this week for a 5 percent pay rise. More than 100 workers at the *Wanganui Chronicle*, *Hawke's Bay Today*, the *Wairarapa Times-Age* and the *Levin Chronicle* went on strike for 24 hours and set up pickets. The papers are owned by Australian Provincial Newspapers, which has offered 2.8 percent. The company last year made a record \$142.8 million profit, up 26 percent from the previous year.

Fijian power workers give notice to strike

The Fiji Electricity and Allied Workers Union (FEAWU) served a 28-day strike notice on the Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) on August 11. Union members voted to strike in a ballot on June 30, over FEA management's refusal to pay a 1 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for 2003-2004, and management's repeated refusal to negotiate a COLA for 2004-2005. Conciliation talks were postponed indefinitely on August 10, prompting the union to serve the strike notice.

Guam health workers robbed of retirement money

Over 50 hospital employees at the Guam Memorial Hospital (GMH) cannot retire because the hospital has not been depositing their 10 percent salary deductions into the government-administered Retirement Fund. The money was used to pay hospital debts instead.

In December 2004, the Retirement Fund Board of Trustees took the position that no one from GMH, which at the time owed the Fund \$US15 million, would be permitted to claim retirement benefits until the amount was paid in full.

The decision has virtually made employees captive to their workplace. The issue came to a head after Guam Medical Society president Dr. Vincent T. Akimito told the local newspaper *Marianas Variety* that two employees recently died waiting for their retirement benefits. Hospital workers are considering suing the hospital for embezzlement.



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