

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 August 2005

Korean Hyundai workers to strike

About 71 percent of the 42,500 unionised workers at the Hyundai Motor Corporation, South Korea's largest carmaker, voted on August 23 to strike. Negotiations over pay and working conditions are deadlocked. The union is calling for a greater say in managerial affairs, an 8.5 percent rise in base salaries and a special bonus equivalent to 30 percent of employees' earnings.

Management has rejected the demands, claiming the company is facing a fall in overseas demand for Hyundai vehicles. Immediately following the strike vote, management called on the union to return to the negotiating table.

Filipino power workers give strike notice

Some 200 employees at Cagayan Power and Electric Company (Cepalco) in the Philippines ended a protest over wages and retirement pay on August 24. They had been wearing black t-shirts and black ribbons to work. The Cepalco Labor Union (Celu) has now filed a 30-day strike notice with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB) following a stalemate in pay negotiations. Along with pay increases, workers are seeking a 200 percent hike in retirement benefits.

They have rejected a management offer of a 1,200 peso (\$US21.80) increase over the next three years, a signing bonus of 10,000 pesos and a Christmas cash gift of 1,500 pesos that is dependent on "management's discretion".

Teachers launch indefinite strike in India

Around 300 teachers and non-teaching staff in the Indian state of Manipur began an indefinite strike on August 20, demanding the payment of salaries outstanding for the past three months. Thirty junior high schools, nine high schools and three higher secondary schools have been affected.

The Zeliangrong Students Union of Tamenglong District (ZSUTD) has expressed concern over the government's indifference and is threatening to organise mass agitation in support of the teachers. ZSUTD coordinator Namdingpou Kamei explained that many of the teachers live in rented accommodation. "When salaries are delayed they are unable to sustain themselves," he said.

The Tamenglong district is one of the least developed areas in Manipur. Road conditions are so bad that politicians and top government officials usually fly in.

Bank workers protest in Tamilnadu

Thousands of cooperative bank employees in Madurai, in the south Indian state of Tamilnadu, held a hunger strike on August 19 to demand salaries that have not been paid for the past six months. Nearly 24,000 bank employees are affected.

Workers also demanded that all staff be retained and for the allocation of sufficient government funds to support the banks. According to the Tamilnadu State Primary Cooperative Bank Employees Association, most of the primary cooperative banks across the state are in a financial crisis and unable to meet administration expenses.

The association is also calling on the government to quash Section 164

A of the Cooperatives Act, under which employees can be arrested without an inquiry. It is proposing to hold a statewide rally in Chennai on September 9.

College teachers protest for improved conditions

Teachers from 170 non-government colleges in Punjab and Chandigarh struck for two hours and held gate rallies and campus dharnas (sit-in protests) on August 23. The teachers want the Punjab state government to restore grants to non-government colleges, withdraw a ban on staff recruitment and drop threats of layoffs. The Punjab and Chandigarh College Teachers Union plans to strike and hold statewide protests in Chandigarh on September 5.

Sri Lankan workers protest for job security

Thousands of road workers from across Sri Lanka protested in Colombo on August 18. They demanded permanency for 7,000 casual workers who have been working for the Road Development Authority for over 10 years and called for improved wages and working conditions. They are presently paid just 155 rupees (\$US1.50) per day.

The workers marched to the prime minister's office, where representatives presented their demands. Police anti-riot squads armed with water cannons and tear gas were deployed. Some 24 unions have pledged support for the road workers and sent representatives to the protest.

On the same day, health workers picketed the health ministry in Colombo, demanding permanency for casual and temporary workers. They also demanded the payment of a 2,500 rupee wage increase (\$US25) promised in the budget eight months ago, a revision of the health service's salary structure and a uniform allowance.

Hotel management leaves workers in the lurch

Hotel workers at the Swani Tourist Resort at Moragalle in Aluthgama—a coastal city around 50 kilometres from Colombo—have been picketing the premises since August 17. They are demanding reinstatement and payment of salaries owed since May.

Following the December 26 tsunami, the staff worked long hours to repair the resort without extra pay. Although the hotel has been closed since April 2004, management agreed to continue to pay the salaries of the 50 staff. The hotel's 15 executive officers, however, disappeared on August 16.

South Australian teachers threaten strike action

South Australian public school teachers are threatening to strike for 24 hours on September 1. They are demanding a 14 percent wage rise over three years, plus a \$1,000 extra payment for higher grade teachers and a reduction in class sizes.

The Australian Education Union has given the South Australian state government until August 25 to respond to the claim. If there is no agreement, the union will revert to an original pay claim of 16.5 percent.

Seafarers stranded on vessel for six months with no pay

A lawyer acting for the crew on board the Kuwait-registered ship Mawashi Al-Gasseem served a writ in an Australian court on owner-operators Kuwaiti Saudi Livestock on August 18, demanding payment of

wages and repatriation expenses. The 69 crew members, who are mainly Filipino, have been stranded on the ship in Adelaide for six months without pay.

A creditor, OW Bunker, to whom the ship's owners owe a substantial sum of money, secured the vessel's arrest while in the Adelaide. The vessel has been anchored in the port since March. The seafarers are hoping OW Bunker will put up the money owed to them so they can be repatriated as soon as possible. The company could retrieve costs from the sale of the vessel.

New Zealand mental health nurses strike over pay

Up to 3,000 New Zealand mental health nurses from 15 hospitals struck for 24 hours on August 22 after the Public Service Association (PSA) and district health boards (DHBs) failed to reach agreements in wage negotiations. The DHBs have offered pay rises averaging 20 percent but workers object to conditions contained in the contracts, such as penalty rate cuts.

A second strike is planned for August 29. Overtime bans will begin from September and remain in place until the dispute is resolved. The National Union of Public Employees is also claiming a 30 percent catch-up pay increase for maintenance staff at hospitals.

Carter Holt Harvey workers demand pay rise

More than 1,000 workers at Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) plants around New Zealand took industrial action on August 19 to protest over the company's refusal to agree to a 5 percent pay rise. Strikes were held at CHH lumber mills in Nelson and Whangarei, a truss making plant in Christchurch, the company's paper bag business in Auckland and at one of its manufacturing plants in Auckland. Stop-work meetings were held at another 11 plants, including at the biggest pulp mill, Kinleith.

The action is the beginning of a nationwide campaign by members of the National Distribution Union, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), and the Amalgamated Workers Union employed at CHH. The EPMU said the company was in a financially strong position and could afford a "reasonable" pay rise. Prominent businessman Graeme Hart, the country's richest individual, recently bought a controlling interest in CHH, the largest forest-products conglomerate in Australasia.

Further strikes at Radio New Zealand

Radio New Zealand (RNZ) programming was again disrupted by strike action on the morning of August 19 as a month-long pay dispute deepened. Broadcasting staff, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Public Service Association, walked out at 7 a.m., taking RNZ's flagship "Morning Report" program off the air for the third time. Workers picketed the state broadcaster's head office in Wellington before returning to work at 9 a.m. They seeking a 5 percent pay rise but have been offered only 3 percent.

NZ mine workers strike over pay

Coal production, processing and loading at Solid Energy's Ohai mine in Southland was halted this week when workers walked out and set up a picket. Ohai miners are seeking conditions comparable with their counterparts employed by Stevenson Engineering, which services vehicles and equipment. The claim includes paid overtime. Pay rates dropped from about \$25 an hour to between \$15 and \$18 when Solid Energy contracted out coal processing work to Ohai Mining.

Workers placed a load-out ban on commercial coal at the weekend but the company brought in outside labour. A ban was then put on domestic supply and 24-hour pickets established to prevent vehicles and trailers entering the site.

Ohai has offered a 14 percent rise over two years. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has been negotiating a multi-employer collective agreement with mining companies throughout New Zealand to establish a national agreement. Ohai Mining, a subsidiary of the Auckland-based Stevenson Group, is the only company yet to reach agreement.

Strikes at three NZ papers

Staff at three Wellington Fairfax newspapers went on strike for three hours on August 22. Three of the four newspapers in the company's Capital Community Newspapers group—*Hutt News*, *Upper Hutt Leader* and the *Kapi-Mana News*—were simultaneously hit by strikes. About 25 workers picketed the *Hutt News*. Earlier strikes had affected only one paper at a time.

An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman said the 3.2 percent pay rise the company had offered was well below the going rate of 5 percent.

PNG government orders power workers into mediation

On August 22, the Industrial Registrar ordered the Papua New Guinea Energy Workers Union into mediation talks after the union notified the Registrar and the Department of Industrial Relations of its intention to strike.

The union is protesting the PNG Power Corporation's decision to appoint an Australian as chief executive officer instead of a PNG national. The union is calling for the removal of the expatriate board chairman and termination of a contract with consultancy firm Korda Mentha.

Vanuatu aviation workers walk out

More than 100 Air Vanuatu workers in Port Vila and Luganville walked off the job on August 22 over the breakdown of discussions for a collective bargaining agreement, job security and severance pay conditions. Company CEO Terry Kerr has offered since to reopen negotiations if the workers return to work.

Fiji council workers give notice to strike

Lautoka City Council employees voted to strike in a secret ballot on August 19, because negotiations on a 2004-2005 log-of-claims have reached an impasse. Fiji Local Government Officers Association general secretary Sada Naidu said a 28-day strike notice would be filed.

Immediately following the vote, a council representative called for further negotiations. Naidu said the association has already registered the dispute with the Ministry of Labour.

Tonga government demands end to five-week strike

On August 24, Tonga's Public Service Association secretary Vuna Fa'otusia called off all negotiations with the government over a five-week strike. He said the association would not enter into an arbitration process until the government agreed to pay the 60 to 80 percent pay rises under the old salary scale demanded by the union.

The government negotiating team chairman responded by demanding that all public servants return to work under the new salary structure, which grants only a 1 percent pay rise to low salary earners while giving large increases to those in the top salary scales.

Teachers and health workers in Tonga are supporting the public servants. This week the Ministry of Education called for the sacking of all teachers participating in the public sector strike. If the recommendation is implemented, two-thirds of the teachers in Tonga will lose their jobs.

Extra police have been put on guard duty at the Tongan King's temporary residence in New Zealand, after allegations that demonstrators supporting the strike tried to break through the main gate.



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