

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 September 2005

## Asia

### Thai workers clash with police in Taiwan

On August 21, over a thousand Thai guest workers clashed with police in the southern Taiwanese city of Kangshan during a protest over poor working and living conditions. A dormitory was set on fire and cars overturned.

More than 1,600 Thai workers lived in the dormitory on a construction site. They are building a mass transit railway system between Koahsiung and T'ainon. The workers had demanded the employer revoke a ban on alcohol in the dormitory, allow the use mobile phones and make Thai satellite TV available. They also called for the use of legal tender in the dormitory instead of tokens, payment of all overtime worked and the dismissal of some Taiwanese managers.

Although workers ended the protest when the employer agreed to most of their demands, Taiwan's Vice President Annette Lu visited Kaohsiung and singled out 300 workers for prosecution. She has rejected an appeal from six visiting Thai parliamentarians to drop the legal actions. The Thai government is threatening to delay sending about 800 workers to Taiwan, pending a review of all current contractual arrangements. Over 90,000 Thais work in Taiwan.

### More miners killed in China

At least 15 miners were killed by an explosion at the Zhulinwan Coal Mine in China's Renhuai County in Guizhou Province on August 25. Of the 21 miners underground at the time of the blast, only two escaped from the shaft. The others are still trapped.

A mine safety official said poor safety standards and the improper use of explosives likely caused the explosion. Yet, the mine, with an annual production capacity of 60,000 tons, is a new facility. The mine's owner, Li Zhengping, fled after the accident and is being sought by police.

### Kia workers in Korea begin five day strike

Over 27,000 unionised workers at Kia—South Korea's second largest carmaker—downed tools for four hours on August 29 as part of a five-day campaign of rolling strikes. The workers are demanding an 8.4 percent wage increase, a bonus equal to 300 percent of monthly pay, improvements in the daytime shift system and re-employment of laid-off workers.

They voted on August 26 to strike after nine rounds of negotiations ended in a deadlock. Despite increased sales last year, management rejected the union's demands, citing this year's prolonged slump in domestic demand.

The industrial action at Kia follows a six-hour walkout by about 42,000 Hyundai workers over similar demands. They are continuing shift-by-shift stoppages until a settlement is achieved. Hyundai management claimed it could not meet workers' demands due to declining auto sales.

### South Asian guest workers strike in Doha

Some 400 Indian, Pakistani and Nepalese construction workers employed by a major contracting firm in Doha, Qatar launched an indefinite strike on August 25. They are demanding the renewal of a number of work visas and payment of salary arrears.

The strike erupted after salaries went unpaid for a few months and when some Nepalese workers were declared illegal and deported by Qatar authorities. The company reportedly went back on its promise to clear part of the pay arrears last week.

One worker told the local Malayalam daily *Varthamanam*: "I have not been paid wages for more than nine months." Another said they were "scared to venture out" because they may be caught up in the government's campaign against so-called illegal workers. The strikers have called on their respective embassies to act on their behalf. The Indian Embassy contacted Qatar's Human Rights Committee and the Foreign Ministry to request immediate intervention.

On August 24, in two separate incidents, employers allegedly threw 93 Indian construction workers in Qatar out of labour camps. The workers had lodged a complaint with the Indian embassy about the non-payment of salaries.

### Indian miners strike over pay

Around 4,500 miners at Uranium Corporation of India Limited's (UCIL) mine in Jadugoda (East Singhbhum) Jharkhand state went on indefinite strike on August 27, demanding pay increments due since 2003.

About 240 strikers are staying in the mine about 555 feet below ground and are refusing to come out unless the management gives a written assurance to revise pay. Hundreds of family members brought food and water to the site to be sent underground on a lift. There are fears that the mine may flood.

Within hours of the miners' action, workers at the mine's processing plant also stopped work. The strike then spread to three other mines in the area, at Bhatin, Narwarpahar and Turamdih.

### Doctors in Kerala protest assault on colleague

Some 3,000 medical doctors in the southern Indian state of Kerala went on strike for 24 hours on August 25. They were protesting an alleged assault on one of their colleagues, Dr Jose D'cruz, at the Manjeswaram Government Hospital. Indian Union Muslim League leader, and former government minister, Cherkulam Abdullah, allegedly carried out the assault. Jose was admitted to hospital.

The strike affected general hospitals, district hospitals, taluk (municipality) hospitals and primary health centres in the state. "All 3,000 doctors working under the Health Service Department are participating in the token strike," the Kerala Government Medical Officers Association said.

Health Minister K. K. Ramachandran threatened to take action against the striking doctors under the Essential Service Maintenance Act.

### Power workers demand company implement agreement

Over 100 Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) workers held a two-hour protest outside the office of the company's executive engineer in Rajpura on August 29. They were protesting against the non-implementation of an agreement reached by management with the Technical Service Union. The agreement included the passing on of deceased employees' jobs to family members, no contracting out of project work and workshop tasks, and termination of a victimisation

campaign against some employees.

Workers threatened to intensify their campaign if the management continued to refuse to implement the agreement.

#### **Tanker drivers strike over assault on colleagues**

Petroleum tanker drivers in Tiruchi, in the Indian state of Tamilnadu, went on strike on August 29. They are protesting the incarceration and brutal assault on three drivers and two tanker cleaners, which resulted in them being hospitalised. The strike put 80 tanker lorries in Tiruchi off the roads. Strikers have called for legal action against those responsible.

The five men had worked for the company for 10 years. They were attacked by the employer and his thugs at his farmhouse in Kallur near Karaikudi and beaten with iron rods, wooden logs and cable wires. The attack took place after the workers asked for a miniscule increase in travelling allowance, from 10 rupees for every 100 kilometres to 12.

The employer confiscated vehicles and cell phones during the attack and forced the workers to sign documents stating that each of them owed him 20,000 rupees. He also warned them not to report the assault to the police.

#### **Kerala teachers stage sit-in**

Teachers at higher secondary schools in the southern Indian state of Kerala staged a dharna (sit-in protest) outside the Higher Secondary Regional office in Kozhikode on August 29. They are demanding a 12-point charter, including the payment of outstanding wages to teachers who joined the service in 1991, 1999 and 2000 and promotion for teachers who have completed five years service.

#### **Head-load workers demand improved conditions**

Head-load workers (employed to manually carry loads of goods) held a protest rally in Chennai on August 26. They are demanding that the state government immediately make available through the Tamilnadu Manual Workers Social Security and Welfare Board a range of benefits, including pensions, bonuses and housing loans.

They also want a separate welfare board established to deal with their matters and urged legislation limiting loads to no more than 50 kilos. The Tamilnadu Federation of Head Load Workers Unions organised the protest.

#### **Sri Lankan rail drivers strike**

About 300 railway engine drivers have been on strike since midday August 30. They are demanding salary increases and the rectification of pay anomalies. Drivers claim that basic salaries have not increased in 30 years. The government used emergency laws to cancel drivers' leave and threatened those who did not report for work with dismissal. Even so, all the 300 members of Locomotive Operating Engineers Union continued the strike.

Authorities have attempted to bring in retired and contract drivers, offering to pay an allowance of 1,000 rupees (\$US10) for each train journey. Assistant engine drivers have been promoted to drivers in an attempt to use them as strikebreakers. Police and military are also being used to run trains. Railway transport across the country remained crippled, with usually crowded railway stations deserted.

#### **Acting school principals demand promotions**

Acting school principals held a fasting protest outside the education ministry in the Colombo suburb of Battaramulla on August 24. They are demanding promotion to principals' posts after working in acting positions for five years. Despite election promises to act on the issue, the government continues to delay the promotions. The acting principals are threatening to step up the campaign from World Teachers Day on September 6.

Volunteer teachers in the country's North and East provinces picketed the provincial education ministry in the eastern port city of Trincomalee on August 24, demanding confirmation of their jobs. Many of the teachers have almost ten years service. The protestors have begun a poster campaign to publicise their case.

#### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Aged-care nurse seek pay increase**

Nurses at Bethlehem Mercy Health and Aged Care facility in Bendigo, Victoria will strike on September 6 and place bans on all admissions. The action comes after negotiations for a new work agreement broke down. The nurses want a 12 percent pay rise over three years. Management has offered 6 percent over two years.

In a last-minute bid to avoid the strike, the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) will meet with management on September 5. A spokesperson for the ANF said: "We're hopeful that Monday will see an end to this."

#### **Teachers defend funding to poor schools**

Teachers on the New South Wales (NSW) south coast voted at a protest meeting on August 31 to strike at the end of the school term. They were also planning, along with parents, to use upcoming state by-elections to campaign to defend the Priority Action Schools (PAS) program, which provides additional funds to NSW's poorest schools.

In all, PAS provides \$16 million worth of extra funding to the 74 poorest schools, including many on the south coast such as Warilla North Public, Koonawarra Public, Warrawong High, Warrawong Public, Corrimal High, Bellambi Public and Shoalhaven High. The teachers have given Education Minister Carmel Tebbutt a September 9 deadline to agree to fund PAS for 2006.

#### **Telstra contract workers strike over pay cuts**

Hundreds of telecommunications workers employed by Telstra labour-hire provider BDS Recruit, have endorsed a national strike on September 2. They are protesting savage pay cuts imposed by BDS Recruit and Telstra.

The Electrical Trades Union was informed in August that Telstra planned pay cuts for 800 workers at its four preferred labour-hire companies. The cut will reduce pay by about \$3.30 (\$US2.54) an hour.

#### **Auckland technology university staff strike**

Staff at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in New Zealand struck on August 30 after rejecting a 7 percent pay offer over two years. The workers are seeking 13 percent pay increase over the same period.

The Wellesley and Akoranga campuses were picketed and about 550 staff marched down Auckland's Queen Street. A strike meeting was held later to determine further action. A spokeswoman said salary rates at AUT are falling behind the rest of the university sector and staff at AUT's campuses had already been engaging in a campaign involving the "withdrawal of goodwill".

Meanwhile, all industrial action at New Zealand's seven main universities—including strikes planned for August 19 and 29—was cancelled following negotiations between vice-chancellors and tertiary sector unions last week. The parties signed off on a national "umbrella" agreement, claiming it provides a basis for "resolving current industrial problems".

#### **Fairfax NZ newspaper dispute deepens**

Newspaper workers seeking a 5 percent pay rise picketed the *Dominion Post* building in downtown Wellington this week. More than 40 workers employed at five Fairfax owned community newspapers walked off the job on August 29 as the pay dispute spread. The company is offering a 3.2 percent pay rise.

Workers at *Hutt News*, *Upper Hutt Leader*, *Kapi-Mana News*, *Wellingtonian* and *Kapiti Observer* have already struck for several days. Fairfax Holdings (Australia) also owns the *Dominion Post*. The company's departing CEO this week described himself as "between delighted and euphoric" as he reported a 24 percent rise in earnings for the past year, resulting in a \$NZ285.18 million profit.

#### **New Zealand brewery workers strike**

Some 170 workers at New Zealand's Dominion Breweries (DB) walked off the job for 24 hours on August 24 over pay. The strike—the first national strike at DB in more than 20 years—hit Otahuhu brewery in Auckland, Tui brewery in Mangatainoka, the brewery at Timaru, and

Montieths brewery on the West Coast. Workers also picketed the company's Otahuhu site in South Auckland

Workers are seeking a 5 percent pay rise but DB is offering only 4 percent. The company earlier boasted that it had done well exceedingly well over the past three years.

#### **New Zealand nurses to strike for pay parity**

Nurses employed by Nurse Maude in Canterbury's hospice, hospital and district nursing and community services voted overwhelmingly last week to strike for 24 hours on September 9 for parity with district health board (DHB) counterparts. A registered nurse at Nurse Maude with five years' experience receives \$7,000 less basic salary a year, as well as significantly less in penalty rates and allowances.

A NZ Nurses Organisation spokeswoman said the current offer of 2.1 percent for the first year, and 2.9 percent for the second year with no movement on weekend, afternoons or night rates does not even meet inflation for the first year. The company offered nothing to address serious staffing problems.

#### **NZ child welfare agency staff strike for pay increase**

Public servants employed in New Zealand's Child Youth and Family (CYF) welfare agency stopped work for two hours on August 26 over pay. CYF social workers are paid less than social workers in other areas. About 2,000 social workers and other members of the Public Service Association (PSA) were involved in the stoppage. While some workers staged a picket outside the CYF head office, others rallied outside the office of government minister Ruth Dyson.

The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) has separately given notice of a five-day strike at Kingslea residential centre and other CYF residencies. NUPE members in CYF want a 30 percent catch-up wage rise for all CYF workers, including clerical and administration staff whose pay is often below the poverty line. The weeklong strike is set to begin on September 11.

#### **Striking Air Vanuatu workers face prosecution**

The Vanuatu government declared illegal a five-hour strike by 100 workers at state-owned Air Vanuatu on August 22 and stated it intends to prosecute those responsible. The Vanuatu National Workers Union called the strike after a breakdown in negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement, and after the government indicated it wished to reduce, or eliminate, workers' social benefits.

There was a return to work after the company agreed to reopen negotiations. Management, however, failed to attend the first sessions, claiming it needed more time to consider the issues involved. Union secretary general Ephriam Kalsakau said he is prepared to wait until the management "sorted out their problems, and then come to meet us in arbitration". He has not yet responded to the government's threats to prosecute strike leaders.

#### **Sacked Saipan garment workers awarded compensation**

On August 26, 371 former garment employees from the now defunct Sako Corporation, in the Mariana Islands' city of Saipan were awarded \$US500 each for wrongful termination. The labour officer hearing the case, Maya Kara, ordered Sako to make the payments after she judged that the company had abandoned the non-resident workers and committed several labour law violations. She also ordered Sako to pay repatriation costs to all workers unable to find local employment before September 23.

#### **Tonga strikers call for constitutional change**

Tonga public servants—on strike for six weeks for a fairer wages system—have broadened their demands to include constitutional changes. The strikers, members of the Public Service Association, are going from village to village seeking support for a petition calling for constitutional change to present to the Tongan king when he returns to the country sometime after September 5.

The petition demands pay rises of 60 to 80 percent and calls for the constitution to be reformed demographically so that the people can elect

those who enter Tonga's parliament. Meanwhile, 84 percent of striking health workers returned to work after Tonga's Minister of Health outlined salary rises to 823 staff of 49 to 100 percent.



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