

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 July 2006

## Asia

### Hyundai Motor union launches rolling strikes

Some 20,000 workers at South Korea's second largest carmaker, Hyundai Motor, held a two-hour strike on June 26 over wages and bonus payments. Ten thousand night-shift employees later staged a similar walkout.

Over 80 percent of Hyundai's 39,903 unionised workforce voted to strike over the issue. The union declared that the walkout was only "the first step" in achieving their demands.

The union began negotiations with management on May 9 over a 9.1 percent basic salary rise, unspecified increases in bonus payments and other demands. Management claimed that they were unable to negotiate because Hyundai's chief executive Chung Mong Koo was on trial. He has been charged with embezzlement.

### Korean construction workers continue strike

Despite violent attacks by South Korean police, 2,000 striking Daegu Construction workers are continuing industrial action over safety and other employment conditions. Nine members of the Daegu Construction Site Workers Local Union have been jailed and six have been issued arrest warrants.

The construction workers, mostly carpenters and ironworkers, went on strike on June 1 demanding improved occupational and health standards and direct employment by main contractors.

Initially the sub-contract employers were willing to negotiate but stopped meeting with the union after the government mobilised police and told them not to deal with union representatives. About 100 workers were still maintaining a sit-in vigil at the construction site on June 28.

### Chinese police attack construction workers

Ten migrant construction workers were injured when Chinese police brutally attacked a protest outside the Guangzhou University Sports Centre on June 23. About 50 workers had gathered to demand two months back pay, a wage increase and better living conditions.

Construction workers are often paid a fraction of their wages in the form of a small daily amount to buy food and other essentials. The remainder is supposed to be paid at the end of the job or at Lunar New Year.

### Indonesian timber workers maintain indefinite strike

Some 500 workers at plywood producer PT Panah Porest Perkasa in the Cikupa district struck on June 19 demanding an increase in the minimum wage, fulltime jobs for contractors and improved working conditions. After five days lost production the company agreed to two demands but refused to offer contractors fulltime employment.

The strikers have said that they will not return to work until management meets all their demands.

### Indian metal and mine workers strike over privatisation

On June 23 about 5,000 employees from the National Aluminium Company's (Nalco) Angul plant, about 200 kilometres from Bhubaneswar, capital of the eastern state of Orissa, went on strike against privatisation of the partially state-owned enterprise. Sit-down protests were also staged at Nalco's refinery unit in Koraput district.

Meanwhile, over 19,000 employees from the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu held protests on June 26 to demand the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government abandon its decision to sell part of the company. The Congress-led UPA government announced that it would sell a 10 percent stake in Nalco and Neyveli Lignite Corp on June 22.

Nalco is India's second-largest aluminum maker and one of the largest aluminum producers in Asia producing 950 tonnes of metal a day.

Neyveli Lignite Corporation is the leading lignite mining and lignite-based power generating company in India. NLC workers are planning widespread strike action from July 4 in Tamil Nadu.

### Indian shoe workers protest low wages

On June 27 nearly 3,500 employees from Liberty Shoes walked out in protest over police attacks the previous day on 2,000 workers picketing against low wages. At least 50 employees were injured by a police baton charge near the company's Karnal plant in Haryana state. The police also fired tear gas and rubber bullets at the picketing workers. The workers have been pressing for an increase in wages and a bonus for the last 10 months.

Liberty Shoes employees at the Kutail and Gharonda plants struck on June 27 and only 15 to 20 employees came to work at the Karnal factory, which has about 500 employees. Liberty Shoes employs around 4,000 workers.

The company has not paid any bonus in the last one and half years and workers wages were only raised from 1,600 to 2,300 rupees (\$US50) per month during the past 10 years.

### Indian road transport workers on protest

State Road Transport Corporation (RTC) employees staged a sit-down protest and relay hunger strike outside the regional manager's office in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, on June 21.

Workers want payment of overtime allowance for double duty, improved health care facilities at RTC dispensaries and an end to management's arbitrary action against employees. They have warned that the protests will intensify unless the government quickly responds to their demands.

The Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) Employees Union organised the campaign.

### Pakistani power loom workers rally over wages

Power loom workers demonstrated outside the Faisalabad Press Club on June 25 to demand the local administration implement the current wages formula and duty hours. Protesting employees said that they were forced to work for petty allowances in unhygienic conditions.

Employees from the Samanabad Factory Area, Mominabad, Nawabanwala and Maqsoodabad carried banners and placards as they marched through city roads. They also held a demonstration outside the city district nazim (head of district government) office.

Workers claimed that the city district nazim had assured them three months ago that they would be enrolled with the Social Security Institution and paid accordingly but nothing had been done about it. They

threatened to intensify protests if their demands were not met within a week.

### **Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate**

Thousands of Bangladeshi garment workers protested in the national capital Dhaka on June 26, demanding a 30 percent pay rise and improved working conditions. Garment workers, who are mostly women, have long been pressing for better conditions, including days off, fair wages paid on time, better safety and maternity provisions.

In May a dispute over salaries at a knitwear factory sparked a wave of strikes and protest action which closed dozens of factories and saw violent confrontations with police. As a result the government, employees and factory owners signed an agreement last week to improve conditions. The demonstrations were called on Monday, however, because workers were not satisfied with the deal.

Dilara Begum, a 21-year-old worker from Dhaka, said they should have organised action a long time ago. "We work but we do not get due wage. We work but we cannot even buy our food. We cannot pay the rent of even a small space for three female workers to stay together. The oppression and exploitation has crossed our tolerance limit."

By law, the minimum wage should be reviewed every two years, but it has not changed since 1994. Another major issue is health and safety with over 290 workers killed in factory fires in the past 15 years. Twelve months ago in April 2005, 300 workers were killed when a sweater factory collapsed.

### **Philippines labour groups demonstrate against measly wage hike**

Members of three labour groups stormed the Labor Department in Manila on June 27 over the low 25 peso (\$US0.50) daily minimum wage increase granted by the National Capital Region (NCR) wage board for Metro Manila workers. The increase is far short of the 75 peso rise demanded by workers.

Judy Ann Miranda, spokesperson for the groups which include Partido ng Mangagawa (PM), Sanlakas and Bukuluran ng Mangagawang Pilipino (BMP), said workers were particularly concerned that the NRC decision virtually nullified a 125 peso across the board daily wage pending before Congress.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **ACT teachers stop work over jobs cuts**

Australian Capital Territory (ACT) public school teachers walked off the job for four hours and held a 2,500-strong demonstration on June 26 against the territory government's latest pay offer. The government has offered a minimal 12 percent increase over three years in exchange for increases in face-to-face teaching hours.

The increase in classroom hours—by 15 minutes a week for primary school teachers and by two hours and 40 minutes a week for secondary school staff—will axe 145 jobs, 120 of them in secondary schools. The government also plans to close 39 schools.

The teachers have threatened an extended campaign of industrial action, including rolling stoppages in August if the government attempts to proceed with the education cutbacks.

#### **Health workers rally against aged care cuts**

Victorian aged-care workers held rallies in the regional cities of Ballarat, Bendigo, Geelong and Moe on Monday to protest proposed redundancies by the Aged Care Services Australia Group (ACSAG). The rallies and community meetings were held out ACSAG facilities.

The company plans to cut 49 nurses jobs and reduce the hours of another 34 nurses and 53 personal care workers. The Australian Industrial Relations Commission has been in talks with company ACSAG director Arnan Rouse and the Australian Nurses Federation since the cuts were announced on May 24.

#### **New Zealand track workers ban overtime**

About 600 New Zealand rail track maintenance workers employed by Ontrack began a continuous ban on overtime and callouts on 28 June in

support of wage and allowance increases. The Rail & Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) gave notice of the national action after Ontrack refused to increase wages by more than the 3.4 percent inflation rate.

An RMTU spokesman said the union was claiming an increase sufficient to bring Ontrack workers up to \$16.22 an hour, the average paid to employees with similar skills elsewhere in the industry. Until the dispute is resolved, the workers will keep regular work hours and only attend callouts in the event of signalling or power disruptions if there is a danger to the public.

Eleventh hour wage negotiations between the RMTU and Ontrack were held in a bid to avert the action. The talks failed, however, and the bans went ahead, forcing rescheduling of commuter rail services and causing widespread disruption in the Wellington region.

#### **New Zealand regional air staff protest**

Workers employed by the South Island-based commuter airline Safe Air protested outside the business at Woodbourne near Marlborough on June 28. Most of the 180 Safe Air staff, who are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), held a lunchtime protest over stalled wage negotiations.

An EPMU spokesman said it was not strike action but a "warning" to Safe Air management. The union, which had been negotiating since January for a collective agreement, hoped that the protest would be enough to force management to resume negotiations. Safe Air is one of Marlborough's biggest employers, with more than 300 staff working mainly in aviation maintenance.

#### **PNG health workers threaten to strike**

Members of the Allied Health Workers Association (AHWA), which covers 2,000 health workers in Papua New Guinea (PNG), are threatening to strike if entitlements awarded on June 17 last year are not paid by the next pay period.

On June 24, Jack Suao, the union's general secretary, said that the national government approved 2 million kina (\$US645,100) in 2005 to cover the entitlements "but still they can't pay".

The AHWA is composed of dental therapists, x-ray technicians, pharmacists, physiotherapists and anaesthetists.

#### **Fiji cane drivers close crushing mill**

About 400 lorry operator/drivers parked their vehicles outside the Rarawai Mill in Ba on June 28 forcing management to stop sugar crushing operations. The drivers, members of the Rarawai Mill Cane Transport Association (RMCTA), are protesting over long delays in unloading cane from their trucks.

RMCTA secretary Mukesh Chand said many drivers, after travelling long distances on poor roads, were forced to wait for extended hours, including overnight, to have their load processed. The mill management have agreed to meet with the drivers to discuss their grievances.

#### **Fiji pinewood contract workers strike for better rates**

More than 80 sub-contract workers are continuing protests outside the offices of state-owned Fiji Pine Limited. The strikers want the government to force the company to meet and resolve longstanding employment grievances, included logging and cartage rates.

Many strikers said they were unable to pay their bills because of the company's low rates and its refusal to review their contracts. They began their protest on June 22 and said they would not return to work until their grievances are heard.



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