

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 July 2007

Thousands of Korean workers take industrial action

Some 45,000 members of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) joined work stoppages and slow-downs over three days on June 25. Police have obtained arrest warrants for 23 KMWU officials over the industrial action, which was called to protest the Korea-US free trade agreement. The union wants the trade deal cancelled, arguing that the pact jeopardises jobs, and on July 1 announced that members will vote for strike action later this month for an annual wage rise.

Car workers employed by Kia Motors, an affiliate of Hyundai Motors, also went on strike for eight hours on July 4, following failed wage negotiations. The workers plan another eight-hour stoppage if the company continues to reject demands for an 8.9 percent wage increase, improved bonuses and the establishment of a parts factory to improve job security.

Kia's chief executive officer Cho Nam-Hong released a statement demanding an end to all industrial action and claiming the strikes were illegal. He warned that strikers would be held accountable for any company losses.

Striking Chinese migrants attacked by company thugs

One worker is dead, two are missing and six remain in hospital in a serious condition after armed company thugs in Guangdong province attacked about 300 workers on June 29 who were on strike over four months of unpaid salaries. The deceased employee—Lei Mingzhong—died from massive head injuries. The Quintian Construction Company at a hydropower station on the Dongjiang River employed the striking workers.

About 250 men armed with spades, axes, steel pipes and sabres and allegedly employed by power station proprietor Fuyuan Hydropower Development attacked the strikers. The vicious assault only ended after police were called. Four of the attackers were arrested.

Quintian Construction held back the workers' pay after Fuyuan refused to compensate it for losses suffered when some of its equipment and tools were lost in flash floods last summer. The workers were attacked while following orders from Quintian management to dismantle installations at the power station. The local government has set up a mediation team and all construction at the site has been suspended until the dispute is resolved.

Indonesian workers demonstrate over police interventions

A coalition of workers' associations demonstrated outside the National Police headquarters in South Jakarta on June 29 accusing police of supporting employers and taking bribes to deploy officers at several factories around Greater Jakarta. The demonstrators demanded that police remain "neutral" and withdraw from the factories.

In early June, more than 100 police officers turned up at PT Masters Steel and PT Pangeran Karang Murni during negotiations with the union after 2,100 workers were laid-off by the companies. Union vice-chairman Sumardiano said he had not expected truckloads of police to arrive during the negotiating.

Sri Lankan railway employees demonstrate

Railway workers demonstrated opposite the Transport Ministry in

Colombo on July 4 over massive salary anomalies in the department.

A workers' spokesman said that there was no proper promotion procedure, problems with permanency and employees wanted eight-hour shifts for all. "The Department administration is giving promotions to their favourites. Hundreds of workers have been waiting for promotions for years with relevant qualifications," he said.

Employees said that while thousands of Sri Lankan youth were unemployed, vacancies in the Railway Department were not being filled. On June 6, Transport Minister Dallas Alahapperuma told All Ceylon Railway Employees' General Union he would immediately address the issues but nothing has been done.

Sri Lankan environment officers on protest

On July 4, Divisional Environmental Officers picketed Central Environmental Authority's head office in Battaramulla over several demands, including payment for unused leave and improved travelling allowance. Workers also claim that motorcycles provided by the department on an easy-payment scheme are sub-standard. Instalments are still being deducted from their salaries.

A Divisional Environmental Officers' Association spokesman told the media that the minister had not responded to union requests for a meeting to discuss the issues.

Apparel workers protest factory closures

Over 500 workers in two garment factories in Vavuniya, in the war-torn north of Sri Lanka, demonstrated on June 27 against the closure of the plants the previous day.

Management claims that the war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam has made it increasingly difficult to transport raw materials to Vavuniya and the finished goods to Colombo and that orders have stopped. The garment factories are reportedly the only ones to have continued operating in Vauniya over the last period.

Sri Lankan teachers' protest

Nearly 400 teachers at 46 schools in the Dehiattakandiya education zone in the country's North Central province began a sick-note campaign and refused to attend work on June 27. They picketed the zone's education office over nine demands, including the effective processing of promotions, and the immediate payment of allowances for teachers working in remote areas and leave accumulated during previous years. They also want payment of salary arrears and increments and inter-provincial transfers for teachers who have completed service in remote or problem areas.

In a separate dispute, teachers who had qualified from the National Colleges of Education protested outside the Education Ministry in Battaramulla on June 27 to demand an end to what they termed "political transfers" and the victimisation of teachers who are not politically affiliated.

Indian doctors demand job regularisation

On July 1, around 300 doctors employed on a contract basis by Zila Parishads (district committees) in Punjab protested at the Municipal Corporation Office in Amritsar and then held a march.

The doctors, who came from districts across Punjab, were demanding the regularisation of employment conditions and basic benefits, such as maternity leave for female doctors, sick leave and the introduction of a post-graduate quota. The doctors have threatened to continue their agitation until the government acts on their demands.

Rural Services Medical Association president Dr Aslam Parvez alleged that qualified doctors were being discriminated against and their treatment was not on a par with other government departments.

“If the government does not wake up to our demands, the rural people who are being denied medical services for the past 15 years will have to suffer more in future,” he said. More than 150 doctors have already decided to quit due to employment insecurity under the contract system.

Indian port workers strike

India Gateway Terminal Limited (IGTL) employees at the Rajiv Gandhi Container Terminal at Kochi port in Kerala struck on July 1. They are protesting against the introduction of a 24/7 working schedule announced by Cochin Port Trust to drive up productivity. It was due to be implemented on July 1. The action involved reach-stack drivers, greasers and electrical maintenance workers.

Unions at the port had reportedly supported the new working arrangement asking only for conveyance for the late night shift change and proper arrangements to allow workers to eat and rest.

Indian municipal workers demand action

Panchayat (municipal) workers in the southern state of Puducherry demonstrated outside the Chief Secretariat office on June 28 over a slate of demands, which includes payment of a 750-rupee (\$US17) risk allowance for sanitary workers, the extension of Assured Career Progression benefits for long-service employees, permanency for temporary workers after two years service and improved stitching charges. The demonstration was organised by the Joint Action Committee of the municipality and commune.

Indian accounting workers protest over pay

Accountant-General’s office employees held a sit-in protest (dharna) in the main office in Thiruvananthapuram and branch offices in Kottayam, Kochi, Thrissur and Kozhikode in Kerala as part of a national action on June 27.

The workers want restoration of pay parity with the Central Secretariat division, a decision made in 1986, the sanctioning of arrears at the revised rate from 1996 and special pay rates for accountants who travel to outside work.

Indian explosive factory workers protest

More than 500 employees of the state-owned Tamil Nadu Industrial Explosives Limited (TEL) at Christianpet near Katpadi began a fasting protest outside the Collectorate in Vellore on July 3. They want TEL to drop retrenchment plans and offer employment to the relatives of 24 workers killed in an explosion in 2001.

They have called on the state government to provide 500 million rupees to support the ailing company in line with a recommendation of the Tamil Nadu Assembly Public Accounts Committee and for the central government to grant a license allowing the factory to manufacture nitroglycerine-based explosives banned since April 2004. They also want compensation for losses caused to the factory by the ban.

Workers oppose attacks under draconian IR laws

A strike by workers at Esselte Australia’s office supply Minto warehouse in Sydney’s southwest has entered its second week. Employees are opposing company attempts to push them onto Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) which will slash pay and conditions.

Esselte wants to eliminate afternoon or evening penalty allowances worth up to \$50 a week and abolish rostered days off, union picnic days, meal allowances and paid meal breaks. Under the AWAs demanded by the company employees would work a 38-hour week, but this can be averaged out over 12 months allowing the employer to cut overtime.

Supervisory staff will not be paid for working additional hours and employees who are sick must call in and state the nature of their illness and estimate how long they will be off work even before seeing a doctor.

Management has threatened to use the Howard government’s anti-worker industrial relations WorkChoices laws that allow the imposition of AWAs to the “letter of the law”. Esselte Australia is owned by the giant US-based J W Childs Corporation and has an annual turnover of \$US1.5 billion

New Zealand miners strike after pay talks collapse

New Zealand underground coal miners voted on July 3 to strike indefinitely and to picket mine sites after a breakdown in wage talks. Workers on the train-loading facility at the Stockton opencast mine near Westport had held a series of spontaneous stop-work meetings each lasting up to three hours. Miners at Huntly took 20-hour strike action over last weekend.

The more than 800 miners around the country began taking industrial action on June 24, including a national overtime ban and a series of rolling stoppages at 11 mines covered by the current agreement. The strike action started with West Coast miners walking off the job for several hours at Solid Energy’s Spring Creek (Greymouth), Terrace (Reefton) and at Stockton (Westport) mines. Waikato miners then refused to work their shifts at the East Mine in Huntly.

The strikes escalated on June 29, with miners at the Spring Creek and Terrace mines walking out for four days, following management’s refusal to transport workers at Springs Creek to the mine entrance as punishment for a two-hour stoppage at the beginning of their shift. Miners would have had to walk two kilometres to the mine entrance in full mining gear, up an unsealed industrial road, unprotected from heavy vehicles, and in hazardous conditions.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has reduced its original claim twice since negotiations started in April, from a 7 percent base rise and 7 percent in the second year to 4 percent in the first year and a cash lump sum of 1.5 percent. Solid Energy, which made a profit of \$100 million last year, has responded with an offer around 4 percent.

NZ Lab workers lift strike action

On June 29, New Zealand hospital laboratory workers called off rolling strikes to allow consideration of a new pay offer. About 1,200 laboratory workers at 15 of the country’s district health boards (DHBs), the New Zealand Blood Service, Southern Community Laboratories and Medlab South have been involved in a pay dispute since last year. Rolling strikes at various hospitals and laboratories began in November.

The conflict escalated last month as the Counties Manukau and West Coast DHBs issued suspension notices to striking staff. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union said industrial action ended after a new offer from the DHB that members will vote on by secret ballot.

Air Nelson workers accept pay offer

About 100 Air Nelson workers have accepted a new pay offer ending a six-week dispute that included rolling strikes. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union is now pursuing a court case over the airline’s labour practices during industrial action.

The union claims Air Nelson repeatedly used strikebreakers, even after the union won an injunction ordering the airline to cease the practice. The court ruling calls for Air Nelson and its parent company Air New Zealand to “explain their behaviour” before a full hearing at the Employment Court.

Fiji public servants set to strike

Public servants in Fiji are still preparing to strike despite Public Service Commission (PSC) attempts to intimidate workers from doing so. The PSC last week cancelled all leave for public servants, ahead of this month’s planned strikes against a 5 percent pay cut and the reduction in retirement age to 55.

The commission called the decision a “precautionary measure”.

Government ministries have been directed to review their contingency plans to deal with the strike. Fiji Teachers Union general secretary Agni Deo Singh said it was illegal to cancel workers' leave.

Three more public sector unions—the Fijian Teachers Association, the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and the Public Employees Union—lodged 28-day notices this week to strike after a cabinet meeting rejected their request to restore the pay cut. The three unions are affiliated with the Fiji Council of Trade Unions.

The Confederation of Public Sector Unions, consisting of the Fiji Nurses Association, the Fiji Teachers Union and the Fiji Public Service Association, has already lodged strike notices. While public sector workers voted overwhelmingly for strike action in a series of secret ballots, the unions have only recently given strike notice.

Tongan public servants threaten industrial action

Tongan public servants, who were involved in a six-week strike last year, have threatened further industrial action over pay and conditions. The Public Servants Association (PSA), however, is trying to avert a strike by petitioning the king and parliament and calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Feleti Sevele.

The PSA claims Sevele has refused to negotiate and that the government has ignored its calls for the resignation of the Public Service Commission's (PSC) board. The PSA is now calling for the establishment of a "partnership for quality" establish a basis for collaboration with the PSC and the government.

The PSA is directly targeting the chairperson of the PSC Mishka Tuifua who is also the general manager of the Westpac Bank in Tonga. PSA members are withdrawing accounts from Westpac and will ask for the removal of their portion of the retirement fund from Westpac unless Mrs Tuifua resigns as head of the PSC.



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