

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 July 2007

South Korean retail workers continue strike

Employees of Korean-owned retailer E.Land Group remain on strike after negotiations over the dismissal of 800 casual workers broke down on July 10. The Ministry of Labor has demanded a 30-day peace period and called on striking workers to end sit-ins at the retailer's outlets nationwide.

The sit-ins, which began on May 30 at E.Land's Homever outlet in north-western Seoul, spread to the company's 13 other Homever and New Core outlets across the country. Around 200 unionised workers picketed New Core in Seoul's wealthy Gangnam District.

Korean auto vote to strike over pay

GM Daewoo Auto and Technology Co workers in South Korea voted on July 10 to strike unless the company agrees to pay an 8.8 percent pay increase. The strike vote was carried by 66 percent of the 8,182 workers attending a mass meeting.

Employees also want the company to pay a special bonus equivalent to four months salary in recognition of their contribution to the automaker's strong performance last year. GM Daewoo posted a net profit of 592.7 billion won (\$644 million) in 2006, up from 65.4 billion won the previous year.

Indian childcare workers seek improved conditions

Childcare (Anganwadi) workers and helpers held a sit-down protest in Kadapa, in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh, and several other towns across the district on July 10. They want government-employee status and a 3,000-rupee (\$US66) minimum wage for primary workers and 2,000 rupees for helpers. Other demands include a retirement benefit of 100,000 rupees for primary carers and 50,000 rupees for helpers, a dearness allowance, provision of house sites and prompt payment of monthly rental assistance.

Childcare workers marched from the Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) office in Maruthinagar to the Collectorate but police prevented them from entering the building. The protests, which were organised by Karnataka State Anganwadi Noukarara Sangha, also occurred in Gulbarga, Karnataka and other cities.

Childcare workers also demonstrated in Salem, Tamilnadu, calling on the state government to extend ICDS.

Pakistani primary teachers demand reinstatement

Primary school teachers protested outside the local press club in Mirpurkhas on July 7, demanding that the Sindh government

reinstate them in accordance with a directive of the Sindh High Court. The teachers were sacked in 1998. While most were reemployed, around 40 were denied appointments.

The teachers are determined to maintain their protests until they get a satisfactory outcome. The protests are being organised by the Action Committee for the Rehabilitation of Teachers.

Union announces possible solution in psychiatrists' dispute

The Salaried Medical Officers Association in South Australia this week announced a possible breakthrough in the long-running public sector psychiatrists' dispute. Resignations lodged by 41 senior psychiatrists as part of the dispute over pay and staffing were due to take effect at the end of this week. Psychiatrists want a 40 percent pay rise to match interstate salaries.

The announcement came after the Industrial Relations Commission recommended that the South Australian Labor government employ more workers and offer a better pay deal to attract and retain staff. Mental Health Minister Gail Gago had earlier announced that the government had a "detailed contingency" plan in place to counter resignations if further negotiations failed. The plan includes recruiting psychiatrists from interstate and overseas and only providing treatment to high-priority patients.

New Zealand coal miners suspend industrial action

More than 800 coal miners involved in a nationwide pay dispute with Solid Energy and its contractors voted last week to suspend planned industrial action ahead of mediation with the company on July 10. Miners at West Coast mines Spring Creek and Terrace had been on indefinite strike for nine days.

Workers at other mines had imposed an overtime ban and carried out rolling stoppages. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said the miners would suspend action, pending the outcome of mediation, as a "gesture of good faith".

On July 6, Solid Energy's release of false information overstating employees' wage rates sparked protests, with more than a 100 striking miners demonstrating in Greymouth, where they presented work contracts and pay slips to the local newspaper.

The EPMU has already reduced its wage demands. It

originally sought an immediate 7 percent increase and 7 percent in the second year. It now wants a 4 percent rise in the first year and a cash lump sum of 1.5 percent. Solid Energy had offered just 4 percent.

New Zealand hospital workers locked out

Over 1,000 New Zealand public hospital service workers were locked out on July 12, with the backing of the Employment Court. The cleaners, kitchen workers and orderlies employed by contracting company Spotless Services at 12 hospitals throughout the country had planned rolling stoppages of 55 minutes in every hour in a dispute for a pay increase. Spotless claimed the strikes posed a “health and safety hazard” and responded with lockouts. The Services and Food Workers Union (SFWU) has appealed the court decision.

The SFWU has negotiated a deal bringing up hourly pay rates for 2,000 employed by contractors at other hospitals to between \$20 and \$25 but Spotless Services has refused to come to a similar agreement. Spotless workers are only paid \$11.33 an hour, just 7 cents above the minimum wage. The lockout includes workers at Invercargill, Palmerston North, Hastings, Wanganui, Tauranga, Rotorua, North Shore, Waitakere, Middlemore, North Shore, Waitakere, Whangarei and Northland.

In a separate dispute, striking radiographers returned to work on July 5 to consider a pay offer negotiated by the Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex) with District Health Boards (DHBs). Radiographers employed at DHBs in Southland, Otago, Canterbury, Hutt Valley, Bay of Plenty, Lakes and Tairāwhiti will meet to consider ratifying the agreement.

Fiji public sector unions withdraw strike notices

Three public sector unions in Fiji called off a national strike after reaching a deal with the military regime’s interim administration in Suva this week. The Fiji Public Service Association, the Fiji Teachers Union and the Nurses Association signed an agreement proposing the 5 percent pay cut imposed by interim administration be restored in a series of increments beginning with 1 percent in December.

The timetable for restoring the remaining 4 percent will be “subject to negotiation” and dependent on improvements in the economy. Government moves to lower the retirement age from 60 to 55 is the subject of legal action.

The Fijian Teachers Association, the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and the Public Employees Union maintain they were not party to the agreement and say they will press ahead with a strike early next month. A spokesman for the three unions said the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) affiliates had capitulated to the Minister of Finance and Labour Party leader Mahendra Chaudhry. CPSU rival, the Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions, denounced the deal as a “sell off”.

Nurses have indicated they will strike despite the CPSU decision. A Nurses Association spokesperson said members wanted the union to withdraw from the deal. In the five months

since the regime imposed the public sector pay cuts, thousands of public sector workers have overwhelmingly voted to strike. All unions have persistently sought to derail and delay mounting opposition to the regime.

New Caledonia miners and shop workers strike

SLN Kouaoua mine workers in New Caledonia struck for three days last week over employment conditions. Workers blockaded the mine entrance by padlocking the gates. Police later removed the locks. Work resumed on July 5.

In a separate dispute on July 6, the Géant de Sainte-Marie hypermarket in Noumea was disrupted for most of the day when Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) members protested the external hiring of a cashier. The workers wanted an internal promotion to the position. Protests began in the morning but quickly developed into a strike.

PNG hydro workers cut power

Electricity supplies to Port Moresby, the Papua New Guinea capital, were cut on July 11 after power workers switched off supplies from four Rouna Hydro Power stations. Telecommunication services were thrown into chaos when Telecom’s back-up generators failed during the 17-hour blackout.

Workers originally planned to switch off power at midnight the previous day but five minutes before midnight were told by PNG Power Board management that CEO Patrick Mara would address their grievances. The workers took action the next day when they learned that the CEO had no intention of honouring the pledge.

PNG Power Energy Workers Union and the Public Employees Association employees restored power after the intervention of Trade Union Congress acting president Michael Malabag. Workers have given the PNG Power Board and the government seven days to remove the CEO and address their demands or face a national power shutdown.

Workers want the Power Board to withdraw the 2007 Enterprise Agreement, which they say is discriminatory because it removes all work allowances and is in breach of the Employment Act. Power Board chairman Sari Maso said all payments would be processed in accordance with the 2003 award and the board would review the CEO’s employment and the legality of the 2007 Enterprise Agreement.



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