Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 July 2007

South Korean auto-workers strike

About 80,000 employees of Kia Motors and GM Daewoo stopped work for up to six hours on July 18. The workers, members of several unions grouped into the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU), are demanding collective negotiations instead of plant-to-plant agreements. They are also calling for job security for part-time workers and an increase of 128,805 won ($US140) in their basic monthly salary.

As well as demands by the KMWU, individual unions are putting forward additional claims on employers. South Korean automakers are opposing the demands, claiming they face intense competition for export markets due to the strong won.

Indian civic workers on strike

Over 70,000 civic workers in Karnataka launched an indefinite strike on July 16 for guaranteed regular work for daily wage earners and the implementation of the recommendations of the Fifth Pay Commission. The Fifth Pay Commission, among other things, recommends new pay scales for government employees.

The strikers said their actions were necessary as the state government had repeatedly ignored their demands. Karnataka State Civic Bodies Employees' Association president G.S. Manjunath said that if the government had not backed down by July 20, its members would stop the supply of drinking water and close drainage in all towns and cities.

The strike is affecting services in the districts of Arakalgudu, Alur, Belur, Channaraypatna, Holenarsipur, Sakleshpur and Arsikere.

Indian mine workers on strike

More than 10,000 contract miners working for the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamilnadu launched a strike on July 16 in support of a 10-point charter of demands.

The supply of lignite (brown coal) from the mines to power stations will be severely affected. Power generation is expected to be disrupted if the strike continues.

All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) secretary P. Kuppuswamy said the major demands of the workers include a wage rise of 19.23 rupees ($US47 cents) a day, payment of wage arrears dating back to February 2004, full-time positions for workers who had served over 10 years and free treatment in the NLC general hospital.

The industrial action follows three unsuccessful attempts at mediation in the presence of the Central Assistant Labour Commissioner. The Assistant Labour Commissioner has declared the strike illegal under the Industrial Disputes Act 1947 because another meeting was scheduled for July 26.

AITUC district secretary M. Sekar wants the state and central governments to resolve the issue.

Sri Lankan ceramic workers on strike

Some 400 employees of Lanka Ceramic launched an indefinite strike on July 11 to demand a salary increase of 5,000 rupees ($US123). The striking workers said that they have been denied a wage rise for a number of years, including the payment of an increase that was awarded in the government's recent budget. They have vowed to continue the strike until their demands are met.

In a separate campaign, workers for the Mahaweli Development Ministry demonstrated outside the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Mahaweli Development on July 9. Their demands include the abolition of a policy pushing workers to take early retirement and an end to political promotions for supporters of the ruling coalition government.

Nurses close psychiatric beds over safety issues

Psychiatric nurses working at the Maroondah and Box Hill hospitals in Melbourne closed down over 12 beds on July 13 in protest over health and safety issues. Health and Community Services Union assistant secretary Denise Guppy said the hospitals' refusal to replace nurses on maternity and sick leave had put remaining staff at unacceptable risk. The nurses confront the possibility of assaults in the wards by acutely ill mental patients.

Both hospitals are operating at full capacity and for several years have struggled to cope with growing numbers of patients. Guppy said the nurses were put under increased pressure since their employer, Eastern Health, had cut the staffing level of its community mental health teams by 25 percent.

An Eastern Health spokesman admitted staff on leave on some shifts had not been replaced but claimed there was no safety issue.

Public sector dentists reject pay offer

Public sector dentists in South Australia threatened on July 17 to resume work bans after rejecting the government's one-off offer of a 10 percent salary increase. The dentists have been in dispute with the government since it failed to keep a promise made late last year to begin additional negotiations over salary increases and staffing levels. The agreement followed a multi-union acceptance of a state-wide Parity Enterprise Agreement (PEA) for public servants.

The PEA provides an average 10.5 percent pay increase over three years for all professional public sector workers. Dentists are seeking a 24.5 percent rise over three years and increased staffing levels. They claim the latest offer will only bring their annual level to $A60,000 ($US51,700),well short of the private sector rate of $A80,000 for first year dental graduates.

A spokesman for the Public Sector Union (PSU) said low salaries were causing dentists to move interstate, creating staff shortages and long patient waiting lists. Jan McMahon, general secretary of the PSU-South Australia, gave the government 24 hours to respond before work bans are resumed. The government has said there will be no

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change to its latest offer.

NSW Health Services workers rally over job losses

About 50 health workers and union delegates rallied outside the NSW Department of Health in North Sydney on July 19 and delivered a petition. The Health Services Union (HSU) members were protesting over the state government's proposal to centralise corporate health services into two transaction centres, instead of having them attached to each Area Health Service.

The union is concerned that the "relocation of several hundred positions outside the Sydney basin" will result in job losses and staff dislocation.

Lockouts reimposed at New Zealand hospitals

Workers set up picket lines at 12 New Zealand hospitals on July 17 after mediation failed to resolve a pay dispute between contractor Spotless Services and 800 cleaning, kitchen and orderly staff. Service and Food Worker's Union (SFWU) members are in dispute with the company over its refusal to accept a union-negotiated pay increase which the District Hospital Board's (DHBs) and three other contracting companies have already signed.

The union says Spotless Services is not giving its employees the benefit of a national pay deal. The deal followed a $16 million boost in government funding, which the union claims should have led to its members, who currently earn about $12 an hour, receiving an extra $2 to $3 an hour. The two sides have agreed on a pay deal for existing employees, but Spotless wants different conditions for new workers.

Threatened strike action by the workers last week was superseded by a company lockout, which claimed the strikes posed a "health and safety hazard" for the hospitals. The SFWU appealed to the Employment Court but the court backed the company action. A temporary stay over the weekend was removed after mediation on Monday failed to resolve the situation. The workers were locked out again from midnight.

The workers are now facing 14 days of lockout notices. The SFWU has called on the DHBs to pull their contractor into line. A helpline has been set up to raise donations for the workers. Affected hospitals are Invercargill, Palmerston North, Hastings, Wanganui, Tauranga, Rotorua, North Shore, Waitakere, Middlemore, North Shore, Whangarei and Northland.

New Zealand doctors begin rolling stop-work meetings

Senior doctors throughout New Zealand this week began a series of rolling stop-work meetings to discuss pay negotiations with the country's district health boards (DHBs). The union representing the doctors, the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), has been in discussions with the DHBs for a year. The parties have reached an impasse, with the doctors asking for a two-year agreement, with a salary rise of seven percent in the first year and 3.5 percent in the second year.

It also wants an increase in expenses for senior doctors' continuing education and a rise in the pay rate for on-call work. New Zealand salaries are currently about $NZ33,500 behind Australia for a first year specialist, rising to a gap of over $50,000 after seven years service. The DHBs have offered a 46-month agreement, with an annualised increase of 3.8 percent.

The two-hour stop-work meetings will be held at 26 hospitals over the next two weeks. The ASMS said further strike action could not be ruled out. It described the industrial action as unprecedented, but necessary for a hospital system "creaking at the seams" due to problems with recruiting and retaining senior doctors.

Fiji public sector strike to proceed despite unions' deal

Unions affiliated with the Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions (FICTU) have promised to go ahead with a national strike if the military regime's interim administration fails to reinstate the pay of civil servants prior to the five percent pay cut imposed last December. Last week, the rival Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) announced that its affiliates would withdraw from a national strike planned for July 19 after reaching a deal to have the pay cut restored in stages. The agreement, however, does not begin until December 2007 and only if "economic conditions allow". The CPSU's withdrawal has produced bitter recriminations between the two union groupings.

The FICTU is also demanding that the new regime pay a 10 percent Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) that was agreed to by the deposed government. Unions affiliated to the FICTU are the Fijian Teachers Association, the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers and the Public Employees Union. Between them there are 12,000 members who will strike, plus nurses belonging to the Fiji Nurses Association.

Solomon Islands teachers to strike indefinitely

The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) says teachers will continue a nationwide strike indefinitely. The strike has kept all primary and secondary schools closed since the start of the new term on July 16.

The 6,000 teachers are frustrated that the government is yet to implement a Scheme of Service, which was signed by the government and SINTA in January. The agreement provided for salary improvements, the payment of long service benefits back-dated to July 2006, certification of probationers and teachers' travel arrangements.

Tongan state of emergency extended after civil servants march

A state of emergency imposed by the Tongan government after riots in the capital Nuku'Alofa in November last year has been extended for the eighth time. Emergency provisions were due to expire this week. The government has decided to extend them for another month following an attempt by civil servants two weeks ago to march on the Palace Office, which is located inside a restricted area. The workers defied a warning by the army in order to present a petition calling for the king to dismiss Prime Minister Feleti Sevele.

Sevele has refused to meet members of the Public Service Association to negotiate over the pay and conditions of public servants. Civil servants are campaigning for the continuation of an agreement signed at the end of a July 2005 strike in which the government agreed to pay rises of 60, 70 and 80 percent over two years while they carried out a wages review. The review has not been completed so workers are demanding the extension of the now-expired agreement.

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