

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 July 2007

Hospital workers strike enters third week

Thousands of health workers from Yonsei Severance Hospital, which is attached to the Yonsei University Health System in Seoul, remain on strike after rejecting a mediation deal by the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC).

Union members walked off the job on July 10 demanding a 4 percent pay increase, seniority allowances and the regularisation of employment for temporary workers. The Yonsei management proposed a maximum 2 percent wage increase but is refusing to discuss the issue of short-term contract workers. The NLRC made a non-binding proposal which included a 3 percent wage increase.

Four branches of the hospital in Seoul and Gyeonggi province have been affected. Less than 40 percent of the wards at the Sinchon branch are open while surgical procedures are down by 20 percent.

South Korean police attack retail workers

About 7,000 riot police were mobilised to smash sit-in protests at two retail stores of the E.Land Group chain in Seoul on July 20. About 135 sacked part-time workers, mostly young women, were dragged from the stores and taken to police stations around the city. E.Land claimed that the protest, which began on June 30 and essentially shut down the stores, was costing the company "tens of millions of US dollars".

The workers, mostly cashiers, claimed they were fired ahead of the implementation of new labour laws on July 1 requiring companies to give full-time status to part-time workers with two years experience. Management claim the workers were "let go" because their contracts had expired. The company, which employs 1,100 part-time workers, sacked 350 before the new law was implemented.

The workers have received little support from the union. The 800,000-strong Korean Confederation of Trade Unions failed to mount any industrial action to back the sit-ins limiting itself to calls for a national boycott of E.Land stores.

Philippines government stops transport strike

About 200 workers at Yellow Bus Line Incorporated were prevented from taking strike action scheduled for July 20 when the Department of Labor and Employment (Dole) assumed jurisdiction over the dispute. The strike would have brought the company's entire fleet of 50 buses to a standstill, paralysing services on the Davao City, General Santos and Koronadal routes.

Workers voted for strike action on June 28 and issued a strike notice on July 13 over the sacking of several union members and to demand a wage increase. The National Conciliation and Mediation Board then issued an assumption of jurisdiction order instructing the company and the union to enter into mediation.

Nike contract workers protest job losses

Over 5,000 workers from two Nike contract manufacturing companies in Indonesia rallied in Jakarta outside the stock exchange, the Ministry of Trade and Nike offices on July 23. Naga Sakti Pharama Shoes Corporation and Hardaya Aneka Shoes Corporation employees were opposing Nike's production cuts. Protesters carried banners declaring,

"Nike Lies".

Rally organisers said that Nike's move to cut orders from 650,000 shoes a month to 200,000 by early 2008 threaten the jobs of 14,000 workers who have been employed in the industry for over 18 years. The rally's aim, they said, was to send a message to Nike and government representatives due to meet in Singapore the following day with the owners of the two Indonesian plants.

There are 115,000 workers employed by contract factories manufacturing Nike products in Indonesia. The latest rally follows a similar action on July 16.

More than 5,000 workers in Thailand protested over a similar issue on July 11. Employees of Thai Silp South-East Asia Import Export Company, which manufactures Nike and Adidas products, blocked the King Kaew Road in Samutprakard to protest the company's decision to close down without informing its employees. They were later told to apply to the Labour Protection and Welfare Department for Employees Welfare Fund compensation.

Teachers rally in Jakarta

The Indonesian Teachers Association (ITA), which represents about 1.7 million teachers, rallied in downtown Jakarta on July 19. The teachers marched from the House of Representatives to the Education Ministry and the State Palace causing major disruptions to city and toll road traffic.

The protest was timed to coincide with a parliamentary debate over the education budget. The teachers want a 20-percent education allocation in the national budget. They have also called for a wage increase, social protection scheme, on-skills certification and national exams to be abolished as the sole factor determining student graduation.

The ITA West Java chapter chairman addressed the House and Regional Representatives Council and told them that teachers would continue their protest until "the government opens its eyes to the poor condition of education, including infrastructure and teaching staff."

Indian municipal workers strike

Indefinite strike action by over 5,000 municipal workers of Bijapur, Bagalkot and Kolar districts in the southern state of Karnataka is continuing. The workers want equal salary and benefit payments with other state government employees.

There are fears of a major health epidemic as rotting waste piles up in the city and sewage is flowing onto roads in some localities.

A spokesman for the district unit of Karnataka, Rajya Pouraseva Noukarara Sangha said industrial action would continue, along with protests, road blockades and hunger strikes. Employees responsible for water distribution and administrative workers are also on strike.

Indian doctors strike over safety

Indefinite strike action by around 300 junior doctors from the Sriram Chandra Bhanj (SCB) Medical College and Hospital at Cuttack in Orissa entered its third day on July 20.

The doctors want round-the-clock HIV and hepatitis testing centres at the hospital and adequate protection from the spread of deadly diseases.

Junior Doctors' Association president B. B Satpathy told the local

media: "It is risky to work in the present set-up as we have already lost a surgeon at MKCG medical college in Berhampur in the recent past due to AIDS. The post-mortem report and development symptoms of the surgeon indicated that he apparently contacted the virus from an afflicted patient operated on by him."

Established in 1944, the Sriram Chandra Bhanj Medical College at Cuttack is one of the oldest medical teaching and training centres in India.

Indian bank workers protest against privatisation

Indian bank workers demonstrated on July 19 in Salem, Tamilnadu, against the privatisation of public sector banks (PSBs). Demonstrators urged the government to withdraw its proposals to merge banks and demanded the strengthening the PSBs. The demonstration was organised by the Federation of Bank Employees Associations.

Sri Lankan power workers rally

On July 20, around 35 power workers in the war-torn Eastern Province demonstrated outside the Ceylon Electricity Board in Amparai over several demands. They want recruitment priority for Eastern Province residents and at least 30 percent of new jobs awarded to the family members of the power workers.

In a separate dispute, graduate workers from various state institutions, such as Inland Revenue Department, the Auditor General's Department and the Department of Census and Statistics, picketed the Public Administration Department in central Colombo on July 24 to demand abolition of salary anomalies. The graduate workers claim that the government's failure over the last 18 months to take action to rectify the anomalies has caused severe hardship.

Esselte workers continue strike

The five-week strike by 14 workers at the warehouse of stationary company Esselte in the Sydney suburb of Minto is continuing.

National Union of Workers (NUW) members are opposing company attempts to force them onto individual work agreements which eliminate annual leave loading, overtime pay and all shift penalties, and could leave them over \$50 a week worse off. The multi-national company claims it is acting in line with the Howard government's WorkChoices laws.

Esselte has called in the Office of Workplace Services (OWS) to pressure strikers. OWS investigators are interviewing workers and told them that if they refuse to answer questions they could face prosecution.

At the same time, the media has run articles claiming that NUM members and supporters have been involved in picket line violence.

NUW organisers have refused to condemn the media witch-hunt while Unions NSW secretary John Robertson told the *Australian Financial Review*: "There is no room for extremism and these people were not part of the mainstream union movement."

New Zealand mine strikes follow lockout

A wave of strikes hit New Zealand coal mines last week after Solid Energy contractor Henry Walker Eltin (HWE) locked out workers for three days at the Rotowaro mine, near Huntly. The Rotowaro workers went on strike on Friday July 20 when negotiations failed to resolve a pay dispute. They were locked out on July 23, after rejecting a revised pay offer and imposing an overtime ban and a go-slow.

Miners at Spring Creek, Terrace and Huntly East mines immediately went on strike and New Vale and Ohau mines in Southland and Stockton on the West Coast walked out a day later. An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) spokesman said miners nationwide were "outraged" by the lockout and voting on a separate Solid Energy's proposed pay settlement had been suspended.

The dispute at HWE was resolved after workers accepted a new pay offer. The EPMU agreed to a nightshift allowance although it was below what workers had asked for. The union also accepted a 4.5 percent pay increase while it had originally sought 5 percent.

New Zealand hospital lockout unlawful

A New Zealand Employment Court judge has ruled that a lock-out of

800 hospital workers is unlawful. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) took the matter to court 11 days after cleaners, caterers and orderlies were shut out by Spotless Services.

The union argued that the company's demand to have a minimum number of staff on duty during strikes, the basis of the lockout, was illegal and amounted to an attempt to compel workers to give up the right to strike. The judge agreed and ruled that there be no further lockouts over the demand.

The union also claimed that Spotless should pay wages lost during the lockout but the court reserved its decision on the issue. A SFWU spokesman said the decision was significant but the dispute with Spotless is far from over. Workers were instructed to resume work on July 24 and to put further industrial action on hold for at least 48 hours.

Fiji nurses strike after talks break down

Members of the Fiji Nursing Association walked out at midnight on July 24, after talks with the interim public service minister broke down. Some 1,700 nurses at 20 centres around the country went on strike after proposals on the restoration of a 5 percent pay cut and a demand for no reduction in the compulsory retirement age were rejected by the interim regime. Meanwhile, leave for staff in the Ministry of Education has been cancelled in preparation for a planned strike by members of the Fijian Teachers Association on August 2 over the same issues.

The Fiji military regime has warned that civil servants who remain on strike for seven days would be deemed to have resigned or be liable for termination. Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions affiliates warned they will take legal action against the use of scab labour. The government has threatened to bring in retired teachers and nurses to fill in for those on strike.

Last week, the Fiji military practiced riot control tactics ahead of the strikes. Fiji TV screened riot police in protective gear and armed with shields and large batons practicing crowd control. The exercise included troops with fixed bayonets and firing bullets at the ground.

Solomon Islands teachers' pay strike continues

The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) announced that the country's 6,000 teachers will continue a nationwide strike that began on July 16. Teachers say they will defy any call to return to work until salaries are adjusted in line with a government-approved revised service scheme.

The teachers met last week to consider the education minister's latest proposal for re-leveling pay but voted unanimously to reject it. The strike has closed all primary and secondary schools since the beginning of the new school term. The SINTA is considering legal action against the government's failure to act in accord with its own scheme.



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