Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 April 2008

E-Land strike in Korea passes 300th day

On April 19, 200 retail workers rallied in Sangam-dong, Seoul to mark 300 days of a strike by displaced workers of Korea's retail chain E-Land Group. Three days earlier union members demonstrated outside Yeongdeungpo Prison where several strikers and union leaders are being held.

In June last year E-Land sacked over 1,000 casual workers, mostly female cashiers, and outsourced their jobs to avoid a new labour law that required all employers to convert part-time employees who have worked for more than two years into full-time workers.

Around 500 unionised workers struck and held sit-ins at many of E-Land stores on June 30, the day before the law was to be implemented. A campaign of store sit-ins and street rallies ensued. On July 31, 4,600 riot police stormed E-Land's Kangnam New Core department store in central Seoul and dragged away 260 sacked workers. On August 5, more than 1,500 E-Land workers and supporters participated in nationwide picketing at 10 of the company's stores. Company thugs attacked picketers, seriously injuring some of them.

Despite massive public support for the sacked workers, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) have failed to organise any meaningful industrial campaign against the company or the government. The Korean courts have warned the E-Land Union and individual workers that they will face massive fines if they hold more sit-ins.

The company has begun converting newly hired part-time workers to regular workers after 18 months but is still refusing to rehire sacked workers. Negotiations between management and the union have stalled since early April.

Philippines port conflict ends

Striking workers at the Dumaguete port, Philippines, are expected to end all industrial action after an agreement was reached on April 21 with employers over job security in a Memorandum of Agreement signed by the Philippines Ports Authority, the Prudential Customs Brokerage Services Incorporated (PCBSI) and the CASAI Employees Union.

PCBSI agreed to absorb all 119 union members on the same terms and conditions of employment before the labor dispute. The company also agreed to recognise the union as the collective negotiating agent and to negotiate a collective bargaining agreement within 30 days.

PCBSI took over the port management from Cipres Stevedoring and Arrestre Incorporated and refused to recognise the port workers as permanent employees, only offering to rehire them as casuals. The workers, who have maintained a blockade of the port since March 12, have been given until April 24 to lift their picket lines and report for work the next day.

Bangladesh garment workers strike for higher wages

Dozens of garment factories remained closed on April 15 in Dhaka as 15,000 garment workers sat idle in their factories demanding higher wages to compensate for increased food costs. The workers said they would not start work until the owners raised their salaries. A week earlier, a similar strike led owners of at least four adjacent factories to raise workers' salaries by 200-250 taka ($US3-4).

Bangladesh households spend nearly 70 percent of their income on food. The basic minimum monthly salary of a garment worker is $US25 while a kilogram of rice (2.2 pounds) costs 50 cents—enough to feed an average family for just four days.

Dhaka export zone workers attacked

At least 20 garment workers from Shine Fashion Limited in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone were seriously injured and five hospitalised on April 19, following an attack by suspected company thugs backed-up by police. Police arrested three workers and factory management sacked 19 workers accusing them of creating anarchy.

The workers suspect that they were being punished for a strike two days earlier. Shine Fashion workers have been agitating for higher wages and improved fringe benefits since January.

Aircraft manufacturing workers still on strike against sacking

About 700 employees of Hawker de Havilland in Port Melbourne are still on strike despite repeated attempts by the Federal Court and the company to force an end to the industrial action. Hawker de Havilland, a subsidiary of Boeing, manufactures aircraft components including for Boeing's new 787.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members have been on strike since April 9 over the sacking of a fellow worker for what the company claimed was "time-keeping irregularities". The union has disassociated itself from the strike, claiming that the company is considering multi-million dollar legal action against the union.

A group called Union Solidarity is running the picket lines but workers still face the prospect of being individually fined and have been sent company letters threatening legal action if they do not return to work.

While some workers claim that negotiators have agreed to a framework to deal with the sacked work through an unfair dismissal claim in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, others have warned that the company plans to axe 400 jobs and relocated work to other factories.

Victorian teachers continue protests

Victorian state school teachers protested outside Education Minister Bronwyn Pike's electoral office on April 23 to mark the fifth month of their industrial campaign for a 30 percent pay rise over three years, a maximum of 20 students per class, and a reduction in the number of contract teachers.

The state Labor government has offered only an annual pay rise of 3.25 percent for three years. The campaign by Victoria's 25,000 state school teachers has included three statewide strikes and five weeks of targeted half-day stoppages. A statewide strike is planned for May 13-15 if an agreement is not reached.

Reports have emerged in the media, however, that the Australian Education Union (AEU) leadership is preparing to compromise on teachers' demands. On April 23 the *Age* newspaper cited "well-placed sources" that claimed that the union leadership was close to a deal to drop its demand for a 30 percent pay rise and accept a lesser increase. After a

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two-hour meeting with Education Department negotiators on April 22 union chief Mary Bluett said there had been "significant negotiations over the last week and we are making progress on key areas", but refused to reveal any details.

Disability service workers in Victoria campaign for pay rise

Health and Community Service Union (HACSU) members in Victoria are demanding a wage rise, improved career structure, better training standards and additional resources to deal with increased workloads. The state government has offered only 3.25 wage increase.

Up to 5,000 disability-support workers have begun imposing bans and rolling strike action with HACSU members protesting outside the offices of state Labor MP last week.

On April 17 about 50 disability services workers outside state Labor MP Jacinta Allan's office in Bendigo made a similar protest in Geelong. The average disability worker's pay in Victoria is just over $16 an hour or up to 17 percent less than those with similar qualifications in Victoria's public health and welfare services.

Queensland power workers commence rolling strikes

More than 2,500 power workers employed by Ergon Energy began a campaign of rolling strikes on April 22, following stalled negotiations over pay and conditions. About 2,000 members of the Australian Services Union (ASU), comprising clerical, technical and administrative staff, struck for four hours after negotiations on April 17 failed to deliver a new collective agreement.

On April 23, 200 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members who service Mackay, Kingaroy, Monto, Moura, Theodore and Biloela struck for 24 hours over a new enterprise bargaining agreement and safety issues. Workers want a pay rise of $1.50 per hour and for the company to increase spending on network maintenance. ETU state secretary Peter Simpson said they had been negotiating since March last year and "[w]e're nowhere seeing light at the end of the tunnel".

Workers at other Ergon depots are due to strike on April 24 and overtime bans are planned to commence in all Ergon areas outside the south-east on April 25.

New Zealand public hospital doctors strike for pay rise

More than 2,000 New Zealand junior public doctors struck for 48 hours on April 22 causing hospitals to postpone thousands of surgical operations and discharge all patients able to go home. Hospitals have urged people to go to their GP rather than visit emergency departments if they do not have a real emergency.

A last minute meeting between the Resident Doctors Association (RDA) and the 21 district health boards (DHBs) failed to avert the strike which the doctors called in support of a 30 percent pay increase over three years. The DHBs' opening pay offer was just 3.4 percent.

While Labor's health minister David Cunliffe has denounced the doctors' demands as "unrealistic", RDA general secretary Deborah Powell said the public were "incredibly supportive".

The doctors have issued a further 48-hour strike notice beginning May 7, the same day senior doctors are due to meet and decide on a separate pay offer. They say the pay rise is needed to stem the flow of doctors moving to better paid jobs in Australia or into locum positions. Most work regular 65-hour weeks and calculate their pay rate at about $22 per hour.

Hospital workers end industrial action

New Zealand Service and Food Workers Union, which represents around 800 public hospital cleaners, service workers and orderlies, called off planned industrial action on April 18 after settling a long running dispute with contractor Spotless Services. Spotless agreed to a new minimum pay rate and the application of a collective employment agreement. The union had planned to implement 24-hour rolling strikes commencing April 22.

Workers wages will increase from $12 and $13 an hour to a minimum of $14.25 and overtime rates made consistent across the country. Workers will also be awarded back-pay dating from July last year.

The two-year dispute included a nine-day lockout of 800 service workers at various hospitals last July and a 24-hour national strike this month. It also involved an Employment Court battle regarding the question of pay during the lockout which is yet to be settled.

NZ power workers to implement bans

Nearly 100 Energex power-line workers maintaining distribution lines to Auckland, Manukau and parts of Papakura are planning industrial action on May 1 to demand a 5 percent pay increase. Energex, which is contracted to Vector Electricity, is offering only 4 percent.

Engineering, Plumbing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) organiser Joe Gallagher said that the industrial action will include bans on overtime, call-outs and standby work. He said members were already working around the clock to maintain Auckland's ageing electricity network and the bans would put serious strain on the electrical infrastructure.

New Caledonia unionists jailed

A Noumea tribunal on April 22 sentenced Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE) leader Gérard Jodar to six months' jail after he was found guilty of inciting armed clashes between striking bus drivers and French police on January 17. Jodar was also deprived of his civic rights for three years. Twenty-two other USTKE members were also found guilty of various offences in the same trial. Sentences range from one month to 12 months' jail.

The trial followed clashes between workers and French police, after an estimated 200 French policemen using rubber bullets and teargas were used to break up a picket by 400 strikers and supporters at the Carsud bus company on the outskirts of Noumea. A 12-hour battle ensued between police and picketers.

The union was demanding reinstatement of a bus driver who had been sacked for alleged theft of ticket money. Since then police have intervened on several occasions to disperse further attempts by USTKE members to erect new blockades outside Carsud's headquarters.

Jodar, who told local media that he would appeal his sentence, is also summoned to appear on May 16 on charges of organising at least five demonstrations without obtaining proper permits.

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