

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 August 2008

Asia

Thousands strike for pay rise at Vietnam footwear factory

Nearly 14,000 workers at the South Korean-owned Hwa Seung Vina factory in the Dong Nai Industrial Zone, near Ho Chi Minh City went on indefinite strike on July 26. They are demanding an increase in travelling allowance plus a 300,000 dong (\$US18) per month salary increase to compensate for escalating consumer prices.

The company offered a 200,000 dong increase if the workers returned to work but this was rejected by workers. The Dong Nai Industrial Management Board and Labour Federation have intervened and are currently trying to convince workers to accept 250,000 dong.

South Korean auto union agrees to temporary plant closure

On July 30, around 5,200 workers at Chinese-owned auto maker Ssangyong Motor Corporation in South Korea ended a campaign of rolling strikes and accepted a 4.6 percent increase and a 2 million won (\$US2,000) bonus.

In return the union agreed to a management plan to close down production at its Pyeongtaek plant, 65 kilometres southwest of Seoul, for 15 days because of plunging unit sales. Ssangyong Motor produces sports utility vehicles (SUVs) and luxury sedans. Sales have declined by 67 percent over the past twelve months.

Stalled negotiations spark hospital strike

Workers at over 100 hospitals throughout South Korea went on strike over two days from July 29. The strike was called by the Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union after long-running negotiations for a pay rise and improved working conditions became deadlocked.

The union has scaled back its pay demand from 10.2 percent to 7.5 percent but hospital management refuses to increase its latest 4 percent offer. Management also refuses to meet other demands, including staff increases, improved conditions for non-regular workers and the scrapping of a plan to establish a profit-making medical corporation on Jeju Island.

Indonesian shipyard workers demand improved conditions

Over 2,000 workers at PT Jaya Asiatic Shipyard in Batam, Riau Islands struck on July 28 demanding the company improve working conditions. The workers, mostly contract welders, claim the management is neglecting sanitation and safety and not providing workplace insurance. The company has also prevented the workers establishing their own union.

Workers want the company to provide safety shoes, helmets and fireproof uniforms and to pay insurance into the government-

owned PT Jamsostek insurance company. A spokesman for the Batam chapter of the National Workers Union said employees were reporting for work but refusing to carry out any work tasks until the issues are addressed.

Hong Kong Nestlé workers strike

Nestlé drivers and deliverymen in Hong Kong walked off the job on July 27 in support of a 7 percent rise, a 12-hour cap on daily working hours and commissions based on the wholesale value of the goods carried. Workers complained they could not understand the formula by which commissions are calculated.

Despite company threats to withdraw from Hong Kong or to outsource jobs if the strike continues workers maintained industrial action. The returned to work only after the company agreed to increase commission rates by 6.5 percent and review basic wages at the end of the year.

Indian airport workers defy government pressure

Around 2,000 employees from Airports Authority of India (AAI) stopped work on July 29 and demonstrated outside the Rajiv Gandhi Bhawan in New Delhi. They were protesting over being pressured by the government to resign from AAI and sign up with Delhi International Airport Ltd (DIAL), a private company contracted two years ago to manage and develop the airport. Workers say employment conditions would worsen under the new management.

AAI signed an Operation, Management and Development Agreement with DIAL and Mumbai International Airport Ltd (MIAL) in 2006 for an initial 30-year term with an option for a 30-year extension. According to DIAL, the original contract required it to make an employment offer to 60 percent of AAI employees by May 2009. This was extended to include all employees. Only nine percent of the over 2,300 AAI employees working at the Delhi airport have joined DIAL.

Protesters submitted a memorandum to Civil Aviation Secretary Ashok Chawla and Airports Authority of India (AAI) chairman K Ramalingam on July 29. Airports Authority Employees Union members have threatened an indefinite strike on August 20 if the issue is not resolved.

Pakistan telecommunication workers end protracted strike

Thousands of workers of Pakistan Telecommunications Company Limited (PTCL) returned to work on July 29 ending a two-week strike over pay and working conditions that severely disrupted phone services and made more than half a million fixed line connections non-functional. Strikers locked up PTCL premises and closed down call centres during the stoppage.

The workers, members of nine unions in the Mutahidda Workers Alliance (MWA), walked out on July 16, following a brutal attack by Pakistan Rangers on a peaceful demonstration outside the PTCL headquarters in Islamabad causing 16 workers to be hospitalised.

After talks between government, company and union representatives, PTCL agreed to a 35 percent pay increase for all non-managerial employees and to provide regular employment for over 8,700 contract workers. In return, union alliance negotiators pledged to work to improve “the company’s services and image”. Workers threatened to jam the national network if the government moved against employees occupying PTCL’s headquarters during the strike.

Australia and the Pacific

Teachers to strike for pay increase

State school teachers in South Australia (SA) will begin four-hour state-wide rolling stoppages between August 4 and August 7 in an ongoing dispute for a 21 percent wage increase over three years. The SA Labor government is offering less than 10 percent over three years.

The teachers are also calling for extra funding to reduce class sizes and improved working conditions to attract and retain staff. An Australian Education Union (AEU) spokesperson said talks with the Industrial Relations Minister Paul Caica had been “constructive” but not good enough to head off the strikes. The AEU is also planning to hold rallies outside the offices of state premier Mike Rann, treasurer Kevin Foley and education minister Jane Lomax-Smith.

Northern Territory teachers threaten strike action

State school teachers in Australia’s Northern Territory (NT) will walk off the job for four hours on August 7, two days before the NT election. The stoppage will be the fourth strike by NT teachers this year.

The teachers have won improved allowances for colleagues in remote areas but the NT Labor government refuses to budge on wages. Teachers want a 15 percent pay rise over two and a half years but the government’s latest offer is only 12 percent over three years backdated to September last year.

Truck drivers protest escalating costs

More than 40 semi-trailer drivers, accompanied by colleagues in 13 cars, drove in convey around the CBD in Queensland’s capital city Brisbane on July 28 to protest rising fuel prices, registration fees and operating costs. They accused large transport companies of refusing to pass on fuel levies to the independent drivers.

The protest jammed traffic in William Street and the Riverside expressway. One driver told the media: “Enough is enough. Finally these boys have come together to demonstrate that companies are getting big money, but we get nothing.”

The drivers are also questioning new laws relating to fatigue management that they say are ineffective and impact further on drivers’ ability to meet the deadlines demanded by transport companies. The industry is notorious for conditions that force drivers to engage in practices that threaten their health and well-being.

The Australian Long Distance Owners and Drivers Association (ALDODA) and the National Road Transport Forum (NRTF) have

called on drivers to take action, including picketing at oil refineries and other forms of protest, over the issues.

Public sector workers protest government salary cap

Around 300 workers, including firefighters, teachers, construction workers and police rallied in Sydney on July 30 to protest the NSW state Labor government’s 2.5 percent cap on pay increases for public sector workers. A protest was also held outside the Newcastle office of state treasurer Michael Costa.

Public sector unions say they will impose work and overtime bans and hold stop-work meetings. State government departmental employees have threatened to ban all communication with ministers or ministerial offices. A government spokesman ruled out any change to its wage cap declaring that anything above 2.5 percent would have to be offset by productivity increases and savings in other areas. The government’s cap is well below the current 4.5 percent inflation rate.

Agreement reached in New Zealand Fisheries staff dispute

Planned industrial action by 220 staff at the New Zealand Ministry of Fisheries was called off this week after an eleventh-hour settlement on a new collective agreement. Fishery officers, investigators, scientists, scientific observers, and clerical and administrative staff were all due to walk-out on July 28, as part of a two-week campaign of industrial action that included a series of 24-hour strikes.

The Public Service Association (PSA) and the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) have been negotiating a new collective agreement since September last year. Key issues included pay, travel allowance, annual leave and fitness testing. A ratification vote is still pending.

Fiji airport workers vote to strike

Around 170 Airports Fiji Limited (AFL) employees, members of the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) and the Air Traffic Management Association of Fiji (ATMAF), voted to strike on August 29, after attempts to reach a solution over outstanding employment issues failed. The ballot results were validated by the Registrar of Trade Unions this week. Workers want immediate payment of a 10 percent wage rise overdue since 2002.

A union spokesman said the AFL had challenged the 10 percent pay rise in court and although “the ruling was in our favour” the company still refused to comply. Other issues which arose in 2003 and 2004, including cost of living adjustments, remain outstanding. According to the union, the company owed the workers about \$4 million in back-pay and other benefits.

In a separate dispute, labourers brought in from India to work for the Fiji sugar industry in Labasa walked out on strike this week over outstanding pay and poor working conditions.



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