

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Striking Korean auto workers sacked

A total of 976 striking employees of the troubled Ssangyong Motors Corporation were sacked on June 8 after refusing to return to work. Workers began indefinite strike action on May 21, opposing restructuring plans to slash over 2,600 jobs, and are picketing the company's main plant at Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi.

At the beginning of the week the strikers rejected a company offer to delay the restructure if they returned to work, and instead pledged to stage a "do-or-die battle" against the job-cut plan. Management has closed the plant, locking out over 4,000 non-striking employees.

Ssangyong is South Korea's smallest auto manufacturer, with 7,100 employees. It is currently facing possible bankruptcy due to decreased sales. By cutting its workforce by 36 percent and offering its Pyeongtaek plant as collateral, the company hopes to secure 250 billion won (\$US199.5 million) in new loans.

Indonesian shoe workers strike

Over 2,000 employees of shoe manufacturer PT Prima Inreksa in Tangerang, west of Jakarta, walked off the job and staged a rally at the company's plant on June 10, demanding the company honour an agreement to pay 80 percent of the wages of 1,000 colleagues laid-off since March 2007. Laid-off workers say they are being paid just 30 percent and sometimes nothing.

Prima Inreksa used to produce shoes for Adidas, but the German sports apparel corporation terminated its contract in 2006, and Prima Inreksa now supplies shoes of various brands for export to the United States and other countries.

Yogyakarta department store workers strike

Over 100 employees at French retailer Carrefour in Yogyakarta, Central Java, continued their strike and picket in front of the department store for a second day on June 6. Indonesia Trade Union Federation members are demanding the company pay a 15 percent annual salary increase stipulated in their work contract.

Carrefour insisted that the economic downturn had forced them to limit a pay rise to 10 percent this year. Negotiations between the two sides and a mediation facilitated by the regional labor office have failed to settle the dispute.

Indonesian nurses rally for new legislation

At least 300 nurses and nursing students from the Indonesian Nurses Association's (PPNI) Purwokerto branch marched in Purwokerto and rallied at the state radio company RRI and the City Council last week, demanding the government speed up deliberation on the Nursing Practice Bill. The bill was submitted to parliament in 2005 with the purpose of clarifying the rights and duties of nurses.

PPNI, representing 500,000 nurses across Indonesia, said it would organise nationwide rallies if the government and House of Representatives did not endorse the bill soon.

Indian dockworkers end strike

Over 2,000 contract labourers in the Haldia Dock Complex, a major trade port for Calcutta, ended a five-day strike on June 7 after a government spokesman assured them their pay demands would be met within five days. Supported by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), strikers alleged that their contractor paid them just half what they were entitled to, and demanded a "substantial pay increase".

The strike stopped the loading of ships with sand and iron ore, causing a massive bank up of trains waiting to unload onto over 20 waiting ships.

Bus employees strike in Kerala

Transport workers in Vadakara, Kerala struck for 24 hours on June 3, demanding the implementation of government-approved wage rates. Schools, shops and restaurants were closed in the city as the bus service was suspended due to the strike, conducted by the joint action council of bus employees' trade unions.

The bus owners association rejected the strikers' demand, saying it could not implement the government direction on wages in a single revenue district alone. Workers have threatened to launch an indefinite strike.

Indian bank workers continue industrial campaign

During this week, public sector bank employees in Salem and Tirunelveli in Tamil Nadu, Shimoga in Karnataka and Chandigarh protested as part of a United Forum of Bank Unions national campaign for improved wages and conditions. Employees said their associations had submitted their demands in October 2007, but banks were yet to come up with an acceptable offer.

Demands include implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations, an unconditional pension scheme, cancellation of outsourcing and immediate action for fresh recruitment. Another demand is jobs on compassionate grounds for heirs of employees who die during service.

In May, United Forum members in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh, demonstrated after rejecting a 15 percent pay increase offer. They are demanding 20 percent. Forum members have supported a call for a national one-day strike on June 12.

Sanitary workers protest in Uttar Pradesh

On June 8, sanitary workers in Varnasi staged a protest at the Varnasi Nagar Nigam (civic council) offices, demanding investigation into alleged exploitation by the district administration of contract staff. Other demands include the filling of job vacancies, granting of 200,000 rupees (\$US4,000) as personal loans and rotation of sanitary inspectors and administrative staff to minimise exploitation.

Municipal workers picket in Andhra Pradesh

Public servants employed at the Zilla Parishad in Warangal picketed the municipal complex on June 9 and prevented chief executive officer P. Sudhakar Rao from entering the building. Andhra Pradesh Panchayat Raj Ministerial Employees Association district president S. Prasad said that despite repeated complaints to the authorities, employees still lacked drinking water, working toilets and adequate office furniture, including chairs.

Bangladeshi garment workers strike over pay

About 50 people were injured on June 9 in the Fatulla industrial area, Dhaka, when police, supported by security guards, broke up a picket at the Rahim-Aziz Sweater factory. About 500 employees at the factory walked off the job in the morning and barricaded a road, demanding payment of salary arrears.

Last month, Rahim-Aziz Sweater employees joined a strike of around 15,000 textile workers from 14 factories in the Fatulla industrial area protesting over wages arrears. Fifty workers were injured by police, who used rubber bullets, tear gas and batons to force them back to work.

Bangladeshi doctors protest

Diploma Medical Association doctors employed in Rajshahi city formed a human chain at Shaheb Bazar on June 7 to press for their five-point demand that includes a designation upgrade and improved training with one-year internships in medical schools.

Association president Halimuzzaman Sona addressed the protesters and warned the government that they would "fast unto death" from June 21 if their demands were not met.

Pakistan municipal workers set strike date

At a press conference this week the Municipal Labour Union (MLU), covering employees of the City District Government Rawalpindi (CDGR), announced it would launch a protest movement to push for longstanding demands on June 18. The union claimed it had submitted demands six months ago but the district authorities had not responded.

MLU representatives said the most important issues outstanding were the releasing of pension, commutation, death grant and insurance benefits for some 60 recently retired workers, plus promotions, medical facilities and overtime allowances. Other demands include regularisation of daily wage employees, an improved quota in housing societies, access to housing after retirement, restoration of the Hajj quota for the sanitation

workers and leave for Christian workers visiting Marriumbad.

A union spokesman said that in the first phase of action, cleaning activities across the city would be stopped. After that, members would consider a hunger strike and protests at the courts

Construction workers protest at Adelaide court

On June 9, about 200 Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members rallied at the Elizabeth Magistrates Court, Adelaide, South Australia, to support Ark Tribe, 47, a rigger who faces six months' jail for refusing to be questioned by the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

Tribe faces being the first Australian worker jailed under the new law that only applies to the building industry. The Rudd Labor government has stridently defended its retention of the powers of the ABCC, which was set up by the former federal government to target industrial action within the building industry.

CFMEU state secretary Martin O'Malley said a national strike would be called if Tribe were convicted and fined or jailed. Tribe was not required to enter a plea during the brief court hearing and the case was adjourned until August.

NSW prison officers strike over privatisation

On June 10, about 600 New South Wales prison officers in Sydney, Bathurst, Kirkconnell and Lithgow walked off the job, protesting a plan by the state Labor government to privatise Sydney's Parklea prison.

The Public Service Association (PSA) claims that prison officers are willing to accept reforms and deliver "sensible savings". In early May, the government reversed its plan to privatise the Cessnock prison after the union agreed to significant concessions. These include employment of 300 casual officers, centralised rostering, a new absenteeism policy and revised workforce management plans.

Newcastle sweets factory workers protest lockout

Around 20 employees of Sugartrip picketed its Metford factory in Newcastle on June 10 after being locked out for no given reason. The Metford business was one of three confectionary factories recently bought from Australian Sweets that appear to be facing financial difficulties. Workers at one of the company's Sydney sites were suddenly locked out a fortnight ago and have not received any pay since.

Protest in Australia over Air New Zealand pay dispute

Australian transport workers stopped traffic in Brisbane's central business district on June 3 in support of New Zealand flight crews who are in a pay dispute with Air NZ. Police eventually stopped the protest. Transport Workers Union, Maritime Union of Australia and Rail, Tram and Bus Union members took the action after a New Zealand union delegate addressed the Australian Council of Trade Unions triennial congress in Brisbane about the air crew dispute.

The New Zealand Amalgamated Engineering Printing & Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has been in dispute with Air NZ since the airline created a new company, Zeal 320, to contract work at much lower rates. Zeal flight attendants are paid tens of thousands of dollars a year less than those employed directly by Air NZ. Last month, some 240 Zeal crew members struck for four days, seeking pay parity.

The EPMU has not initiated any further industrial action and has kept the Zeal workers isolated by not involving EPMU members employed in Air NZ. EPMU negotiators are currently meeting with Air NZ, but have already dropped the original demand for full pay parity.

Strike threat over New Caledonia airline dispute

New Caledonia's Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) has threatened to call out its 5,000 members in an indefinite strike on June 14 unless the French territory's airline AirCal agrees to return to the negotiating table. The two sides have been locked in a dispute over a dismissed Kanak employee for several months. The union is demanding payment for wages deducted during the dispute.

AirCal claims it is struggling with a funding shortfall of more than US\$4.5 million and "has no intention" of paying workers for strike action.

Last week, USTKE members briefly occupied Noumea's domestic airport, affecting flights for 3,000 passengers. Twenty-eight workers were arrested after riot police used tear gas to break up the occupation. The arrested workers have been released on bail, but face charges related to blocking the airport's runway and boarding an AirCal flight to stop it taking off.



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