

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.

Korean auto workers continue occupation

Over 900 sacked Ssangyong Motor workers, supported by family and members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, are maintaining their occupation of the company's main plant at Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi. The auto workers began indefinite strike action and an occupation of the plant on May 21 in protest against company plans to axe over 2,600 jobs from its 7,100-strong workforce.

Ssangyong responded by locking out its entire Pyeongtaek workforce and released a list of employees who will lose their jobs in a planned restructure. This has split the workforce with more than 2,500 non-striking employees protesting outside the plant and demanding an end to the occupation.

Ssangyong, which is South Korea's smallest auto manufacturer, is facing possible bankruptcy due to a precipitous decline in 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.

Korean truckers end strike action

Members of the 15,000-strong Korean Cargo Workers' Union terminated their five-day strike on June 15 after Korea Express agreed to reinstate 78 parcel delivery workers it sacked last month following a disagreement over service fee hikes. Management, however, rejected the union's demand for recognition, claiming that the truckers were self-employed professionals who sign individual contracts with delivery companies.

The Ministry of Land, Transport and Maritime Affairs threatened to cancel the truckers' drivers licenses and discontinue government subsidies if they struck. The ministry also mobilised over 4,000 military

trucks to ports and railheads and issued arrest warrants for five union officials during the walkout.

Philippines lampshade workers strike

Some 300 employees of lampshade manufacturer Paul Yu in the Mactan Export Processing Zone, Lapu-Lapu City, began indefinite strike action on June 15. Workers rallied outside the factory demanding better conditions and the reinstatement of seven suspended union leaders.

Paul Yu workers' association leaders were sacked after organising a strike on May 8 over long-standing grievances. Employees returned to work after management agreed to hold joint discussions with employees and the Philippines Export Zone Authority. The union leaders, however, remain suspended.

Outstanding workers' grievances include outsourcing (which has halved their work-week), permanency for irregular employees (who are forced to sign new contracts every two months), and the non-payment of holiday pay, paternity leave and break time.

Export zone officials met with employees, urging them to end their industrial action. The strikers are adamant that all suspended workers must be reinstated. Paul Yu employs around 1,000 people.

Indonesian taxi drivers protest

Blue Bird taxi drivers rallied in Central Jakarta on June 11 to demand reinstatement of six fired employees and improved employment conditions, including labour insurance and holiday allowances. The Indonesian Blue Bird Employees' Association has reported the taxi company to the manpower and transmigration ministry and PT Jamsostek, the state insurance corporation, over its alleged mistreatment of its drivers.

Indian port workers strike

Mormugao Port Trust cargo-handlers at Vasco Harbour, Goa, began indefinite strike action on June 11 against management plans to cut 50 jobs at four of its berths. Work at the berths has stopped, affecting four ships waiting to unload naphtha, iron ore, coal and oil.

The dockers are refusing to return to work, claiming it is unsafe with reduced staffing levels. Management and the striking employees were due to enter negotiations on June 13.

Indian LPG workers end industrial action

LPG and tank truck workers at the Bharat Petroleum Corporation in Kochi, Kerala, ended their week-long strike on June 14 after lorry owners agreed to demands for a wage rise.

Kerala State LPG and Tank Truck Workers' Union members accepted an extra 750 rupees (\$US25) per month for the remaining two months of their current wage agreement after which a new agreement will be negotiated.

Maharashtra anti-malaria workers on hunger strike

Anti-malaria workers in Nagpur district, Maharashtra, began a hunger strike outside the health service deputy director's office on June 16 to demand permanent jobs for over 400 workers who have been temporary employees for the past three decades.

Zilla Hivtap Nirmulan Asthai Karamchari Sangathana members want the government to end its practice of employing the temporary workers for 29 days every month and then giving them a one- or two-day break to prevent them from becoming permanent.

More than 3,000 sanitary workers are involved in the malaria control program which includes various measures to prevent mosquito breeding.

Indian university teachers demand pay rise

Over 250 Pune University teachers protested outside the joint director's office on June 15 to demand 6th Pay Commission pay scales, cancellation of plans to privatise the pension scheme and the implementation of a University Grants Commission leave package. The Pune University Teachers' Association (PUTA) and the Pune University and College Teachers Organisation (PUCTO) organised the demonstration.

PUTA general secretary Ram Ashtekar claimed that the state government had already accepted the 6th Pay Commission

recommendations for its 1.5 million employees but the Department of Higher and Technical Education never forwarded a proposal to the Department of Finance seeking revised pay scales for teachers.

Uttarakhand nurses and municipal workers strike

Municipal employees and public hospital nurses across the Indian state of Uttarakhand struck on June 15 to demand 6th Pay Commission pay scales. Workers at the Doon Municipal Corporation, Mussoorie Dehradun Development Authority, Jal Sansthan and Panchayats stopped work after their year-long talks with the government failed.

The nurses want pay parity with their colleagues in New Delhi. General Secretary of Uttarakhand Nurses Association, Anjana Bhowmik, said the nurses have decided to remain on strike until their demands are met.

Andhra Pradesh beedi workers demand higher wages

Beedi (cigarette) workers in Karimnagar staged a sit-down protest outside the state collectorate on June 15 to demand the government set a 100-rupee (\$US2) per 1,000 beedies minimum wage for all workers and provide housing and pensions.

The protesting workers said that they work from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. but only receive 55 to 70 rupees per 1,000 beedies.

Sri Lankan nurses begin industrial action

Maharagama Cancer Hospital nurses banned radioactive injections at the country's only dedicated cancer treatment hospital on June 15. The nurses want a monthly risk allowance of 10,000 rupees (\$US86), training in handling radioactive injections and life insurance cover of two million rupees.

In a separate dispute on June 11 nurses at the Kegalle Base Hospital near Kandy wore casual dress in protest against the non-payment of uniform allowances. Nurses are entitled to 9,000 rupees per year for four sets of uniforms. Nurses in other government hospitals allege that they have not received the allowance since 2007 and are threatening to take similar action.

The Health Ministry claims that it has not received adequate funds from the Treasury for the uniform allowance.

Sri Lankan zoo workers on strike

Dehiwala zoo workers in Colombo walked out on June 15 to demand salary increases in line with the Government Circular 2006/6, regularisation for casual workers and employment priority for the children of all zoo employees. The Independent Workers' Union members also want a full-time zoo director appointed.

Zoo management has prevented all media access to the institution and no further detail is available.

Victorian paramedics impose bans

Victorian paramedics began industrial action on June 19 after the Health Minister Daniel Andrews rejected various demands in a new workplace agreement. The paramedics want their wages brought into line with Victorian nurses, 10-hour rest breaks between shifts, and better "on-call" conditions.

Ambulance Employees' Australia state secretary Steve McGhie said union members were taking 10-hour rest breaks to ensure they were not fatigued on the job and would not participate in clinical trials or relieve managers. With the exception of Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia, all other Australian states and territories have 10-hour breaks.

McGhie said that the bans would escalate next week, potentially prompting paramedics to strike for the first time in 36 years, if the state Labor government did not agree to the union's requests.

Victorian private school teachers walk out

More than 120 members of the Victorian Independent Education Union (VIEU) at the privately run Mowbray College, Melbourne, struck for four hours on June 17 over wages and safety issues. Classes at the college's three campuses were suspended during the walkout.

The union claims back pay is owed from January this year and that the school breached the Occupational Health and Safety Act. In May, the school's occupational health and safety officer reported 12 complaints—including one accusation of bullying and intimidation by the school board—to Worksafe Victoria.

A VIEU spokesman claimed it was the first strike at a Victorian private school and said that teachers were threatening a 24-hour strike if negotiations broke down.

Australia's arts funding employees strike

Over 100 Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members at the Australia Council, the federal government's arts funding body, walked off the job for four hours and rallied at the council's Sydney office on June 17 in protest against management's refusal to meet salary and workload demands. Last year the council cut its staff by 20 percent, from 150 to 122, in line with the Rudd government's 2 percent "efficiency dividend".

Australia Council workers have rejected a 2.5 percent annual wage increase over three years with trade-offs that include substantial cuts to the incremental advancement system and a reduction in flex-time entitlements. The union wants at least a 6 percent increase and improvements in working conditions and entitlements.

CPSU deputy secretary Nadine Flood said that last year's cuts have forced employees to work an unsustainable 12 hours per day, plus weekends. The union wants negotiations to recommence by the end of this week.

New Zealand metal delegates reject pay offer

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) delegates last week rejected the latest offer from New Zealand's metal industry employers of a 1 percent pay rise, declaring that it was equivalent to a pay cut. The current annual cost of living increase is 3 percent while food prices have risen by 8.8 percent. Union representatives have begun meeting members across the country to decide on their next step.

The Metals & Manufacturing MECA (multi-employer collective agreement) is the EPMU's largest and considered a national trend-setter for wages and conditions.

Solomon Islands public servants issue strike notice

Unions representing public servants in the Solomon Islands issued a strike notice to the Ministry of Public Service last week demanding compensation for "lost and damaged properties during the April 2007 earthquake and tsunami."

Samson Maena, speaking for employees at the Gizo Hospital, complained that the Western Province government paid \$20,000 compensation to members of the provincial assembly and support staff, but health workers had received no humanitarian assistance. Health workers signed the strike notice along with 16 delegates from other unions. The notice lapses on June 23.

New Caledonian airline workers resume duties

USTKE members at Air Caledonia (AirCal) resumed normal duties on June 14, ending two-and-a-half months of protests over the dismissal of a Kanak employee. The union is demanding payment for wages deducted during the dispute. The French High Commission mobilised the military to remove union blockades outside businesses, schools, oil depots and the national broadcaster RFO.

USTKE members briefly occupied Noumea's domestic airport in early June, affecting flights for 3,000 passengers. Twenty-eight workers, including union president Gerard Jodar, 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.

Following talks with New Caledonia's president Philippe Gomes and the French High Commissioner, USTKE president Jodar signed a settlement drawn up by government mediators. Despite the return to work, AirCal has refused to sign the settlement. A ruling on the charges is not due until June 29. If convicted, union members could face 10 to 15 months in prison.



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