

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 June 2011

India: Maruti Suzuki strike ends without resolution

Isolated by India's two peak union bodies, 2,000 striking workers at Maruti Suzuki, the country's largest car maker, finally succumbed to pressure from the company and the government and ended their 13-day strike at the company's Manesar factory on June 18. The Manesar workers had walked off the job on June 4 over union recognition and job security for contract workers.

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC-CPI affiliated) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU-CPM affiliated) had earlier pledged support for the newly-formed Maruti Suzuki Employees Union-Manesar, but called off a two-hour solidarity stoppage on a request from the government after thousands of workers from 40 local unions said they would join the stoppage.

Maruti Suzuki agreed to reinstate 11 employees sacked during the strike, but refused to accede to the main demand for a new labour union and instead said it would form a "governing council" with workers' representatives. In a further blow to the workers, a company spokesman said the strike was illegal and strikers would be docked 33 days' pay—3 days for every working day lost.

Hyderabad coal mine workers walk out

At least half of the 67,000-strong workforce at 50 government-owned Singareni Collieries (SCCL) mines in Hyderabad walked off the job on Monday. Their 47 demands include shift change-over allowances and that employees be given four promotions during their service periods, which stretch up to 30 years.

SCCL operates 14 open-cast and 36 underground mines. Coal production fell by 20,000 tonnes on Monday, threatening supply to 10 thermal power stations in three Indian states, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Maharashtra. Emergency talks on Tuesday ended in deadlock. The strike was called by the Singareni Collieries Workers Union, which is affiliated with the Communist Party of India.

Cochin Shipyard workers' strike in fourth week

About 2,000 contract workers at the state-owned Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL) in the Indian west coast port of Kochi have been on strike since May 28 to demand a wage increase from 170 contract companies represented by the Cochin Shipyard Contractors Federation. The current work agreement negotiated by the Cochin Shipyard Workers Union

expired on January 1, 2010.

The strike has affected export orders for platform supply vessels, ship repairs and ship building. CSL management claimed that by Tuesday it had lost 80 billion rupees (\$US1.72 billion) in revenue.

Assam rail workers protest

Hundreds of thousands of Northeast Frontier Railway (NFR) workers at Guwahati city, Assam have been holding limited stopwork action over long pending demands. Their 36-point charter includes the filling of 200,000 vacant positions, the creation of new positions to cater for the increased number of trains and rectification of salary anomalies.

Organised by the Northeast Frontier Railway Mazdoor (NFRM), the five-day campaign in the north-eastern Indian state included wearing black badges, a six-hour hunger strike and a special convention on Thursday followed by a demonstration at the general manager's head office at Maligaon.

Pakistan power strike in seventh week

Thousands of Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers are continuing strike action, begun on April 30, against plans to transfer regular workers onto contracts. Workers are also opposed to the placement of more than 4,000 reinstated employees into a "surplus pool". They fear that the workers could be retrenched again and then rehired through a sub-contracting company.

KESC Labour Union members have established a protest camp outside the Karachi Press Club and are picketing KESC offices and depots. Despite a media campaign blaming the strikers for prolonged power outages in the city, other workers have been attending street rallies to support them. Several rallies this week spilled over onto main arterial roads into Karachi CBD, bringing traffic to a standstill.

KESC, controversially privatised by the Musharraf dictatorship six years ago after more than 50 years of public ownership, has been run since 2008 by a management team appointed by Abraaj Capital, a United Arab Emirates-based private equity firm. The company has ignored requests from the government, which is under pressure from Karachi businesses and residents over power blackouts, to transfer the 4,000 workers in the surplus pool back to full duties so power can be restored.

KESC management has attempted to force the government to ban the strike by dragging out negotiations and falsely claiming that the escalation of power outages was caused by strikers sabotaging equipment.

Balochistan doctors end strike

The Young Doctors Association in Pakistan's Balochistan province called off its two-and-a-half month-long strike on Tuesday after the provincial government agreed to form a parliamentary committee that will include doctors' representatives to resolve their long-standing issues. In addition, the government said it would increase the doctors' salaries to be on par with their colleagues in other provinces, and pay compensation to the families of 10 doctors killed in targeted killings.

During the strike, doctors stopped treatment in all government hospitals, more than 120 doctors were sacked, 1,000 resigned and over 200 were being detained by police. The government has promised to take back the sacked doctors and drop all legal charges.

Sri Lankan university teachers demonstrate

Hundreds of teachers from all 13 Sri Lankan universities on Tuesday held a two-kilometre procession from Colombo University to Colombo public library as part of a two-month campaign for a 200 percent pay increase.

Lecturers and professors resigned en masse from administrative positions on May 9, crippling many university functions, and have resolved to boycott the GCE Advanced Level examination scheduled for August.

The academics are among the poorest paid in Asia, with monthly salaries as low as 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for a junior lecturer and 57,000 rupees for a professor. They have not received a rise since 1996. In 2006, the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse cut their academic allowances from 30 percent to 25 percent of their monthly salary.

The Federation of University Teachers Associations (FUTA) also proposes the creation of a professional category for university teachers and the trebling of the budgetary allocation for education, from 2 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product.

Telecommunications and postal workers protest in Colombo

On Tuesday more than 1,000 Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers demonstrated in front of its head office in Colombo over several demands, including a minimum 25,000 rupees (\$US290) transport allowance per month, increased food allowance, abolition of the private contract system and outsourcing, and rectification of salary disparities.

On the same day, 5,000 postal workers struck for 24 hours to protest against the government's failure to address their long outstanding demands. At least 600 out of 647 post offices were closed as a result. The demands included the filling of all vacancies, the approval of a revised postal service constitution and permanency for acting postmasters.

South Korean police detain Vietnamese construction workers

Ten migrant workers from Vietnam are being detained in South Korea, facing charges that include obstruction of business, inciting group violence, mob assault and assault with a deadly weapon. The Prosecutor's

Office claims they led an illegal strike, intimidating other workers into joining them with threats and force.

Two hundred Vietnamese construction workers employed by Taehung Construction, a subcontractor for Hyundai Construction, took limited industrial action at a container wharf project in Incheon, a port city. They held brief stoppages over a 12-month period over short pay for hours worked, poor working conditions and excessive deductions for meals and accommodation.

At a hearing on May 26, prosecutors pushed for prison sentences from one to three years. If convicted, the workers are likely to face deportation.

One of the catalysts for the strikes was the management's decision to charge 240,000 won (\$US223) a month for breakfast and dinner. Workers demanded the reinstatement of three free meals, an end to forced night work and to be allowed to have visitors, food, drink and alcohol in their company-provided living quarters.

Migrant workers typically work 12-hour shifts with only a one-hour break, 7 days a week, despite their contracts stipulating a 5-day week and the Labour Standards Act guaranteeing a minimum one day off a week. They are paid the minimum wage of just \$US3.80 per hour.

The Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU) has not organised any campaign among its members to have these workers released or to improve the conditions of workers on construction sites.

Indonesian workers demand social insurance

Hundreds of workers arrived in Jakarta on Monday evening after walking 250 kilometers from Bandung (capital of West Java) since June 16 to demand the immediate passage of the social insurance bill, currently being debated in parliament. The Action Committee for Social Security handed over a petition with 80,000 signatures to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono and House of Representatives Speaker Marzuki Alie.

The bill, which stipulates that all Indonesian citizens must have health insurance for life, was meant to become law in December but has been delayed by disagreement over who should manage the massive funds that will be accumulated. Under the scheme, contributions will be made by the government, employers and employees.

According to an International Labor Organisation report, less than 20 percent of Indonesia's 170 million working age people are registered to a pension scheme and 83 percent of workers remain uncovered by social insurance for occupational injury and death. Only 46 percent are covered for health care through Jamkesmas, a tax-funded healthcare provision for the poor.

BHP mine workers reimpose rolling stoppages

Some 3,000 BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) workers at six Queensland coal mines reimposed rolling stoppages this week after negotiations broke down for a new work agreement. Members of the CFMEU, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union planned to stop work for the 12-hour night shifts on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. The action followed rolling six-hour stoppages at the six mines last week.

The unions claim that six months of negotiations were deadlocked because BHP wants radical work rule changes, including replacement of

the current five-day roster with a seven-day roster, unrestricted use of contract and part-time workers, and increased flexibility of operators' jobs. The unions want enhanced training opportunities and contractors to receive the same pay and conditions as BHP workers.

The unions have not yet made a pay claim, insisting on resolution of other issues first. BHP has offered only a 15 percent pay rise over three years, and withdrew a \$5,000 sign-on bonus after this week's talks broke down.

Western Australian health union rams through work agreement

At least 1,200 public hospital employees, including pharmacists, radiation therapists, ward clerks and administration officers, attended a stop-work meeting at the Perth Convention Centre on Wednesday.

The Health Services Union (HSU) called the meeting to report on the deal it had reached with the state Liberal government for a new work agreement. Although the majority in attendance voted to accept the offer of a 12 percent wage increase over three years (members had been demanding 13.25 percent), many were dissatisfied that the union had called the meeting without finalising important disputed issues.

Unresolved issues include the inclusion of a mobility clause (being instructed to work at various sites at short notice) and the absence of a clause to guarantee job security against outsourcing. Any finalised agreement must go to a ballot of the HSU's 12,000 members.

Solomon Islands fish cannery workers end strike

Around 570 members of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) ended a three-day strike at the Soltai cannery in Noro, Western Province on Monday after agreeing to allow their dispute to be heard in the Trade Dispute Panel. Workers downed tools and occupied the factory on June 17 after 63 local supervisors were sacked for refusing to sign a new work contract. The supervisors were opposed to a clause in the contracts that prohibited them from registering with SINUW. Other demands include higher salaries and allowances, job security, better working conditions and payment of overtime rates.

Workers complained to the media about the "inhumane conditions" they work under. "They used to treat us like slaves having to be locked up in the cannery for hours without food and water," one reported. "From January to March, we only got \$500 (\$US61) for our salary which was quite unrealistic."

New Caledonia workers stop work over jobs

On Wednesday, 2,000 people marched in New Caledonia as part of a strike called by the Federation of Unions of Kanak Workers and the Exploited (USTKE) in its push for the increased hiring of locals. The union has criticised businesses for hiring workers from overseas.

In May, thousands of workers across the French colony held three days of strikes and demonstrations to demand that authorities provide jobs and reduce food, housing and transport prices.





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