

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 June 2000

Security guards shoot striking Cambodian garment worker

Security guards near the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh shot a striking 21-year old female garment worker in the head on Wednesday. The shooting took place outside the Malaysian-owned June Textile Company where over 1,000 workers were on strike for improved pay and working conditions.

Factory guards fired on the workers as they attempted to storm the factory gates. The female worker is now in hospital and her condition is described as stable.

Sri Lankan nurses protest over shortage of staff

All the nurses attached to North-Colombo Hospital in Ragama boycotted overtime on June 21 in protest over the severe shortage of staff in the hospital. Despite the existing nursing staff working excessive hours, no graduates from the government nursing training schools were allocated to the hospital.

A spokesman for the nurses said: "We want an extra 200 nurses to fill the shortage. If the authorities fail to address our demands, we will continue our campaign". The action forced the hospital to cancel four lists of surgeries and affected the intensive care unit and clinical services.

Sri Lankan hospital workers strike over violation of recruitment procedures

Around 300 staff workers from the government hospital in Badulla, the capital of Uva Province in Sri Lanka went on strike for six hours on June 17, protesting the violation of recruitment procedures by the provincial health authorities.

The strike was in open defiance of the government's May 3 emergency laws, which prohibit all industrial action by workers. A police squad of between 20-30 in civilian clothes went to the hospital during the dispute handing out letters to the striking workers warning them that their actions were illegal.

The recruitment procedures stipulate that when new recruits are needed in the health service, 75 percent must be employed from lower grades and the remaining 25 percent can be recruited from outside the service. The regulations also stipulate three months of training.

The hospital workers complained that the Provincial Health Ministry had violated the procedure several times by only recruiting workers from outside the service, without an examination or an interview and employing them without any training. This practice was depriving patients of proper care.

Workers explained that they were not opposed to the recruiting of new staff from outside the health service and were not demanding that these people be sacked. Rather, they are opposed to the authority's failure to train them and that the breach in procedure was unfair to older health service workers who were being denied the opportunity for promotion.

The strike was called by the Janaraja (Republican) Health Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Nava Sama Samaja Party (NSSP). The union sent a protest letter to the Secretary of Provincial Health Services over two months ago and called the strike when the authorities failed to respond.

In response to the strike, the Provincial Chief Minister, who also holds the Provincial Health portfolio, sent a letter to the Director of Provincial Health Services asking him to suspend the services of the newly recruited attendants. On the same day, the Medical Director of the hospital called the union leaders into his office and read out a copy of the Chief Minister's letter.

The union leaders responded saying they were not satisfied by the action taken by the Chief Minister and warned of industrial action that would affect all the hospitals in the province if the authorities failed to resolve the dispute.

Investigation into Japanese plant explosion continues

A team of 200 police and government officials is still investigating an explosion at the Nisshin Chemical Company, which killed four workers a fortnight ago. Initial reports that there was a similar explosion at the plant two years ago have now been confirmed.

Investigators said that the chemical hydroxylamine, which overheated and caused the recent blast, was also responsible for an explosion in November 1998, which left one worker injured. The source of both explosions has now been traced to a distillery tower.

Investigations have revealed that a vacuum pump had been turned off whilst oil in the tower was being changed and when the pump was turned back on, it created an explosive reaction. Company officials have admitted that a cooling device in the tower had failed.

Indian workers chained by employers

Four stone crushers were freed from virtual slavery in the Karnataka Mandya district near the city of Bangalore on Thursday. They were discovered working with their legs shackled. The owner of the stone-crushing unit defended his actions, saying it was the only way he could keep his employees working.

The men had come from poor villages looking for employment. They were forced to work from early morning till evening and had to sleep in a shed near the stone crusher. One of the freed workers said that, at times, up to 30 men were shackled, for periods ranging from a few months to a year.

Nepali bonded laborers demand their freedom

Seventy-three bonded labourers in far eastern Kanchanpur district of Nepal held a demonstration this month.

Bonded labourers, known as "kamaiyas" in the local language, are mainly agricultural workers. They are forced to work for landowners without any payment, to pay off debts owed by themselves, their parents or sometimes by their forefathers. In some cases, a lifetime of labour is not sufficient to pay off the debt. Even though it has been illegal for 70 years, there are an estimated 25,000 bonded laborers in Nepal.

The workers filed a joint petition at the district administration office, demanding their liberation from the "kamaiyas" system, the establishment of a minimum wage and compensation from those who had held them bondage.

Eight Indonesian workers perish in dormitory fire

Eight workers from the PT Kencana Aga Lestari plant in the Siantan

District in West Kalimantan were killed on Tuesday morning when a fire swept through the dormitory they were sleeping in. Seven of the workers were aged between 17-20 years old.

Firefighters had trouble extinguishing the blaze despite the fact that the dormitory is located near a river. It is not yet known how the fire started. Another fire in the region that had begun around the same time as the one at the dormitory destroyed 70 houses and placed a strain on fire crews and their resources as they tried to battle both blazes. An investigation into both fires is continuing.

Chinese miners continue to die in their thousands

A recent conference on the coal mining industry in China revealed an increase in the number of fatalities amongst miners in both state and privately run mines. Whilst China produces more coal than any other country, a quarter of the world's production, it also accounts for four-fifths of all mining fatalities.

The government Coal Bureau estimates that 10,000 miners are killed each year, a figure coal industry experts say greatly underestimates the actual number of deaths. For every million tons of coal mined, China has 11 times more fatalities than Russia and 182 times more than the U.S. Working six and seven day weeks without meal breaks, many miners barely make \$US120 a month.

Whilst the government has moved to close down hundreds of privately run mines, it is doing so not out of any concern for miners safety, but to protect the seams of the state run mines and to reduce surplus production.

New Zealand steel workers return to work after pay deal

A week-long strike, which shut down the BHP-owned Glenbrook steel mill south of Auckland, ended on Wednesday when 1,000 workers voted to accept a pay deal negotiated by the Engineers' Union.

The mill workers had begun an indefinite stoppage the previous Thursday after rejecting the employers' offer of a five percent rise on the base rate. The vote had been 87 percent in favour of the strike. Engineers' Union regional secretary Mike Sweeney said that BHP's offer was actually worth only 3.3 percent because basic pay made up only 60 percent of the total pay packet.

The final settlement negotiated by the union provides for an immediate rise of three percent, with another two percent in six months. While Sweeney claimed that the workers "got what they deserved", it is significantly below their original claim of 10 percent.

The small increase comes at the end of a long period of union-imposed productivity agreements, entered into by the Engineers' Union in order to make the mill "internationally competitive". BHP threatened a year ago that it was considering closing Glenbrook as part of its global restructuring plans. According to Sweeney, Glenbrook has recently become a "core" BHP business, after mill staff "had worked hard to reduce costs and boost profits." The workers had "done everything asked of them".

Last year the workers accepted a union proposal for a nil increase because, according to Sweeney, the company was in "dire straits". By this year, it had become the most profitable of BHP's field divisions, returning a record profit of \$NZ56 million after tax.

The beginning of the strike provoked a hostile reaction from employer groups, who were afraid that it marked the beginning of a "winter of discontent" by workers moving to break out of the declining wages and conditions spiral of the past decade or more. The Engineers' Union, however, was quick to scotch such suggestions, with Sweeney reassuring employers that they had "no need to fear" a rampant union movement.

Papua New Guinea Teachers Association opposes calls for strike

The PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA) has appealed to teachers in the Highlands region to call off their planned strike. Teachers have threatened to resign en masse to protest the rejection of their pay demand for a 200 percent rise.

The PNG Government held negotiations last week with the PNGTA.

The government responded to PNGTA proposals for a 55 percent pay rise with an offer for only five percent and a promise to discuss outstanding concerns of teachers.

A meeting was held in Goroka on the weekend, called by PNGTA branch presidents from five provinces—Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, Western Highlands, Egna and Southern Highlands. The meeting resolved that teachers had no choice but to resign in protest over the government's "negligence". Teachers in the West Sepic Province and Northern Province have also voted to support any industrial action initiated in the other provinces.

The PNGA's general secretary Hosea John however opposed the calls for mass resignations, appealing to teachers to put their strike action on hold. "Our appeal to the teachers is to give us time and to appreciate that we are talking with the government about salaries, allowances, housing needs, professional programs, but all this takes time," John said.

He said that the teachers' decision not to resume duty was uncalled for and that their call for strike action was in breach of the PNGTA constitution, claiming that the Association's national management committee was the only body that could initiate strike action.

He indicated to the government the Association's willingness to continue negotiations, saying the union would continue to talk until a decision was made to refuse the teachers' demands. "This is when we can talk about strikes, walkouts or sit-in protests," he said.

Australian miners hold national strike

A 24-hour national strike by 20,000 coal miners was held on Tuesday, affecting over 100 open cut and underground mines. The strike was called by the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) in opposition to a 10-year freeze on wage increases under the coal industry award. Also in dispute is legal right of companies to introduce 10-hour shifts across the coal industry.

The 24-hour strike is related to the union's High Court attempt to overturn the Federal government's stripping of award provisions to just twenty basic working conditions.

Meanwhile, coal miners at Coal and Allied's Howich mine near Singleton in the Hunter Valley have been on strike for three days over a breakdown in enterprise agreement negotiations. The workers returned to work Wednesday.

Victorian kindergarten teachers set to strike

Kindergarten teachers throughout Victoria have voted to go on a 24-hour strike on July 27 to pursue a 15 percent pay rise and higher funding for pre-schools.

Victorian pre-school teachers earn 25 percent less than their colleagues in primary education despite having the same qualifications. Australian Education Union (AEU) state president, Mary Bluett, claimed that pre-school funding in Victoria was 25 percent below the national average.

She said the campaign was designed to "highlight the chronic underfunding, escalating fees and ballooning group sizes". Low wages, teacher shortages and excessive workloads have created an enormous sense of anger and frustration amongst teachers and parent committees.



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