

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 April 2003

Rail strike abandoned in Korea

The Korean National Railroad (KNR) union called off a planned strike in South Korea after it struck a deal on April 20 with rail management.

The management agreed to abandon a plan for an extension of a one-driver system and promised to hire 1,420 extra personnel ahead of the introduction of a new high-speed rail network. The intake will include 45 workers who had been previously laid off. Management also dropped its demands for compensation for losses suffered in previous strikes.

In return, the union agreed to accept KNP moves to outsource a number of its operations. While the union is claiming a “significant victory”, acceptance of further outsourcing will result in future job cuts. Moreover, the agreed 1,420 intake barely compensates for elimination of over 900 jobs in 2000. Other positions were axed in the same year when KNP introduced one-driver trains on the Bundang line.

Malaysian rubber workers gain improvements

This week, 9,540 rubber tappers and 48,200 general field employees on the Malaysian peninsula gained a slight improvement in their notoriously poor working conditions. Under collective agreements signed between the National Union of Plantation Workers and the Malayan Agricultural Producers Association workers were granted a 350 ringgits (\$US92.10) minimum monthly wage.

Employers also agreed to increase the basic daily payment of 11.50 ringgits for collecting 11 kilograms of dry rubber to 12.50 ringgit, and to pay outdoor workers unable to be redeployed during wet weather.

subhead>Malaysian government demands union drop picket plan

The Human Resources Ministry warned the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) this week to drop plans for a nationwide industrial picketing campaign over an Employees Provident Fund (EPF) low dividend payout. The EPF has offered to pay a 4.25 percent dividend but the umbrella union wants at least five percent. Minister for Human Resources Dr Fong Chan Onn demanded the union

look at the “larger picture” and maintain the “present united front”. The MTUC has not responded to date.

Malaysian turf club employees sue for reinstatement

Former Penang Turf Club workers are suing over their wrongful dismissal in May 1997. The 26 workers are demanding reinstatement, without loss of service or seniority rights, and the payment of back wages. The claim went before the Industrial Court this week.

The workers contend they were sacked and barred entry to the club after they established the Penang Turf Club Race Day Workers’ Union. Club management claims they were sacked because they had “committed an act of sabotage” by failing to report for work on May 10, 1997. The court has held the case over for hearing in June.

Indian truck drivers strike continues

Truck drivers in India are continuing nationwide strike action to demand stable fuel prices and fewer industry levies. The drivers ceased work on April 13, following a call by the All-India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), which represents about 2.7 million drivers.

This week an AIMTC spokesman dismissed media reports that truck drivers in Orrisa and West Bengal had returned to work. The prolonged industrial action has seen the price of fruit and vegetables increase throughout the country.

Postal workers strike in southern India over staffing

More than 400 postmen in the Madurai region of the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, went on strike on April 21 against the dismissal of several postmen and management’s refusal to fill 26 vacant positions. Staff shortages have dramatically increased workloads and according to a union spokesman, the overall numbers of postmen have been reduced every year since 1999 through a process of attrition.

Bangladesh primary school teachers demonstrate

More than 1,000 non-government primary teachers in Bangladesh demonstrated in Dhaka for several hours on April 20 demanding nationalisation of the education services. A five-member delegation from the Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers Association presented a memorandum on their demands to the prime minister’s

office.

Teachers allege that although they perform the same work as public school teachers, they do not enjoy the same conditions. Non-government teachers who have joined the service in the last three years receive only 70 percent of the salary paid on the government scale. There are about 100,000 teachers in 23,500 registered non-government primary schools across Bangladesh.

Australian nurses escalate industrial action

Emergency and maternity nurses at Maitland Hospital in the Lower Hunter Valley in New South Wales met on April 24 to discuss the escalation of industrial action over staffing levels.

NSW Nurses Association members at the hospital want a clerical assistant to be employed in each department between 11:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m. The nurses, who placed work bans on performing clerical duties after management refused their request, claim they cannot cope with their current workloads if forced to do clerical work on night shift.

Zoo staff impose work bans

Staff at Sydney's Taronga Zoo voted this week to impose work bans from April 25 over management intimidation. While the Public Service Association (PSA) did not specify the incidents, it issued a statement saying the bans were a result of management failure "to provide a commitment that they would stop the intimidation of union delegates and members who exercise their industrial rights and raise issues with their union."

While the work bans will not adversely affect the welfare of animals at the zoo they will close down many popular exhibits and information sessions.

New Zealand mill owners threaten closure

Carter Holt Harvey (CHH), the owners of the Kinleith pulp and paper mill in Tokoroa, threatened to mothball the plant within a fortnight unless talks immediately resume to end a six-week production workers' strike. About 270 employees went on strike when an agreement could not be reached on their collective contract, which lapsed in 2001.

CHH has been attempting to impose new work practices after sacking almost half the workforce earlier this year. Workers claim the company has failed to address health and safety concerns about the extra duties being demanded, which include fighting fires and cleaning up chemical spills. They are opposed to CHH's new proposals governing staff promotions and are demanding a pay increase after CHH put forward a plan to eliminate overtime payments.

Workers on the picket line outside Kinleith's entrance were unmoved by management threats to close the plant. Barry Corban, who has been at the mill for 25 years, said the strikers were prepared to keep fighting and were receiving a

lot of support from people in the town.

Costs awarded against Otago University

The New Zealand Employment Court has directed University of Otago management to pay more than \$15,500 in costs and disbursements to the Association of University Staff (AUS) arising out of a legal action it took against the union. The decision follows an earlier finding against the university when it sought an injunction alleging union members were involved in "secret" strikes when they took part in rolling stoppages during a pay dispute.

The court declared there was no legal requirement for AUS to supply the university with the information it had demanded of the union such as when each strike would occur and who would participate. Determining costs, the judge said the AUS was put to "unnecessary expense" after the university pursued the issue even after its earlier injunction had failed.

Despite the attempts of punitive action against union members, AUS Otago branch president Mark Peters said he looked forward to "maintaining a good working relationship" with management in future.

Cheated guest workers return to China

About 220 Chinese factory workers stranded in Palau for three months after being sacked by garment manufacturer Orientex flew back to mainland China on April 21. Their return home was organised after a group of former employees staged a 20-hour occupation of a restaurant on April 10 that they suspected was owned by a major Orientex investor. In the course of the action a police officer was held hostage. The occupation ended when a squad of police attacked the mainly women workers and charged them with criminal offenses.

The Taiwanese management of Orientex Palau closed the plant and fled the island in January to avoid facing liquidation proceedings. The workers, who were left without promised tickets home and unpaid wages totalling \$600,000, continued protests outside the closed plant for three months.

Palau officials offered to drop the charges arising from the occupation if the former employees agreed to be flown home and leave the matter of unpaid wages and entitlements to be settled through the Palau courts. An official delegation from China arrived in Palau this week and chartered two planes to fly the workers out.

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