

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 June 2004

Indian port workers' strike continues

A strike by 300 port workers employed by Chennai Container Terminal Ltd (CCTL) entered its tenth day on June 1. The workers walked out on May 23, demanding the reinstatement of four suspended colleagues, as well as improved wages and working conditions.

CCTL is a privatised venture owned by P&O Ports. The strike held up the movement of 6,000 containers and the company used contract workers from Mumbai in an attempt to clear cargo.

Under pressure from exporters who are facing commercial commitments, the Union Shipping Minister T.R. Baalu has appealed to the CCTL management to settle the strike.

Indian nurses' strike ends after nine days

Over 350 nurses at the Patna Medical College and Hospital in the Indian state of Bihar returned to work on May 29 after being on strike for nine days. The decision to end the strike followed an assurance by state Health Education Minister Sheetal Ram that the accommodation problems at the centre of the dispute would be settled within a fortnight.

The nurses went on strike on May 20 after being deprived of their hostel accommodation to make way for junior doctors. Ram promised that the junior doctors would be moved within 15 days, after suitable accommodation is found for them.

Indian teachers protest government aid cut

Teachers at the Gulbarga University in the southern Indian state of Karnataka protested on May 29 against the state government's proposal to cut grant-in-aid to colleges by 15 percent. The teachers boycotted evaluating exam papers for about two hours and demonstrated in front of the Pariksha Bhavan at the university, condemning the government.

Gulbarga University Private College Teachers Association general secretary Professor B.S. Makal said that the aid cut, due to start this month, would have a direct impact on the salaries of teaching staff. Makal pledged that private college teachers would oppose any reduction in salaries and would continue their agitation, including an indefinite strike, if the government did not reverse its decision.

The union is also demanding that the government amend the Karnataka University Act to enable the representation of teachers and academics on university bodies and the restoration of the remuneration paid to the teachers involved in evaluation work.

The Federation of University College Teachers Associations has decided to hold a one-day dharna (sit-in protest) in front of the Directorate of Collegiate Education over the same issues.

Pakistani hydro workers demonstrate for pay increase

Pakistani workers at the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) demonstrated on June 1 in Quetta, the capital of the province of Baluchistan. They are demanding a salary increase before the coming budget is brought down and are opposing the privatisation of the enterprise.

As part of the campaign, a rally was held in front of the Khurshid Labour Hall and was addressed by several leaders of the WAPDA Hydro Electric Central Labour Union.

Pakistani workers left destitute

On May 26, 20 workers from the Northern Areas Traders Corporation Ltd (NATCL) began a hunger strike outside the company's office in the northern hill town of Gilgit to demand the payment of wages owing over the past four years. The desperate and destitute workers have threatened street demonstrations involving their wives and children, and even to resort to self-immolation if the issue is not resolved.

Workers' spokesmen Manzoor Hussain, Liaquat Ali Khan and Abdul Majeed told the media that the non-payment of the salary arrears had impoverished the workers and their families. "(W)e have sold our goats, cows and other household articles to make ends meet," they said. Because of dire financial hardship, the workers had been forced to withdraw their children from schools. They blamed NATCL management for the corporation's insolvency.

Pakistani public works employees demand pay rise

Hundreds of Public Works Department (PWD) workers demonstrated at the Lakshmi Chowk in Lahore on May 29, demanding a 40 percent pay rise and condemning the government's failure to control the price of essential commodities.

Workers arrived in procession after a meeting of the All Pakistan PWD Workers Union at the Bakhti Labour Hall. Some workers hung pieces of bread around their necks to symbolise the unbearable rise in the cost of living. Workers also called for the restoration of benefits and the full payment of their house rent and overtime pay. They also demanded that the government fix a minimum wage of 500,000 rupees (\$US100) and enhance pensions.

Sri Lankan health workers protest against intimidation

Around 200 workers, mostly from the health sector, picketed at the Kantale junction in the Eastern Province of Sri Lanka on May 25. They were protesting against the behaviour of Jayantha Wijesekara, a minister of the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government.

Wijesekara, a member of the Janatha Vikukthi Peramuna (JVP), who is the elected representative from Trincomalee district, reportedly used harsh language when addressing two public health inspectors and regional health medical officer Rohitha de Silva during a public works campaign on May 22. Public sector workers in the area also participated in the May 25 picket.

Indigenous Medicine Ministry workers on hunger strike

On May 24, 149 workers at the Sri Lankan Ministry of Indigenous (ayurvedic) Medicine in Kandy began a hunger strike, demanding reinstatement and the payment of all salary arrears. The workers were recruited by the ministry in February on a probationary basis and assigned to duties in the Pallekelle, North Matale and Handaganava Ayurvedic Centres.

Their employment was terminated on May 13 when they received "discontinue in service" letters from the ministry secretary.

Korean unions pledge to minimise strike action

At a media conference on May 31, a spokesman for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) said the peak union body was

planning to call “large-scale” strikes in June in support of a 10-point log of claims.

The claims include the scrapping of the part-time working system, the implementation of the five-day workweek plan, an increase in jobs and an improved minimum wage system. The union is also calling on the government to withdraw troops dispatched to Iraq, and to increase the budget allocation for social welfare. Health and medical labour unions will strike on June 10, while the taxi drivers’ union and other KCTU affiliates such as the metalworkers will strike on June 16.

Even as it was making the campaign announcement, the KCTU made clear it was anxious to avoid industrial conflict and would work to ensure strike action was minimal and low-key. KCTU secretary-general Lee Soo-ho said it was time to “normalise” the devastating relationship between employers and the unions. “Unions will do their best not to go on strike,” he added.

Chinese workers driven to suicide over unpaid wages

In recent months, a number of desperate rural migrant workers employed on construction projects in Beijing have committed suicide by jumping from buildings. They were protesting the non-payment of wages. The workers were mainly peasants who have been dispossessed of their land and forced to go to major cities to find work.

Lacking any organisation to defend their interests, the workers have resorted to such drastic action in an attempt to force companies to pay up. As one worker went to the top of a building and jumped off others rang for emergency medical assistance.

There are now millions of migrant workers in major centres all over China and the non-payment of wages is rife, including in cash-strapped state-owned industries. The authorities do nothing to force employers to meet their obligations and workers have no course of redress.

Australian ambulance officers threaten to strike

Ambulance officers in the Illawarra region of New South Wales are threatening to take industrial action over inadequate emergency and medical services at Wollongong Hospital. On June 1, a representative for the officers met with Illawarra Health to discuss the problem and warned of a possible walkout if the issue was not addressed.

The strike threat follows continuous complaints from ambulance officers that they are sometimes forced to wait up to four hours to transfer patients from ambulance stretchers to a hospital bed.

A spokesman for the Health Services Union, which represents ambulance officers, revealed this week that overcrowding at emergency departments was common, not only in large regional areas such as Wollongong and Newcastle, but also in Sydney. Ambulance officers in all NSW regions are considering statewide industrial action.

Building company fined a pittance over worker’s death

Construction company Baulderstone Hornibrook was fined only \$375,000 last week over unsafe conditions on a Melbourne building site that caused the death of 54-year-old building worker Frederick Smith on August 5, 2001.

Smith died instantly when a 20-tonne counterweight fell from a tower crane, crushing him to death. The company pleaded guilty to three counts of failing to provide a safe workplace. It admitted that it had not conducted adequate hazard identification, had failed to adequately supervise employees and should not have attempted to raise the crane in the excessively windy conditions on the day.

Each of the charges could have incurred a maximum penalty of \$250,000. A spokesperson for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union said that the \$375,000 fine was extremely lenient, considering that Baulderstone Hornibrook is a \$10 billion company. He warned that the small fine would not be a deterrent.

New Zealand university staff strike over pay

Academic staff at the University of Otago walked out on June 3. Earlier, members of the Association of Union Staff (AUS) at the university’s

Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington campuses voted 408 to 93 to strike in a pay dispute. The staff also voted to empower the union negotiating committee to call rolling industrial action and to withhold the return of first-semester examination marks.

An AUS branch spokesman said staff had been frustrated by the deadlock in pay talks that began last October. The university has offered an increase of 3.5 percent to academic staff at lecturer level and above and a 3 percent rise for general staff and lower-level academics. Union members are not only discontented with the increase on offer but also the pay differential between staff and to the proposal that any pay increase be backdated only to May 1. This is only the second time that Otago University staff have voted for a university-wide strike.

Earlier in the week, 250 non-academic staff at the Victoria University of Wellington held a one-day strike and picket in a bid to get a 4 percent pay rise. Their action forced the cancellation of science laboratories and the scaling back of library services. Support staff had earlier rejected a 2.2 percent offer, the lowest made in the present wage round, and less than the 4 percent recently won by the university’s academic staff.

Unions have signed site-based pay settlements at six of the country’s eight universities, backing down on their demand for national collective agreements across all universities.

Strike by NZ ferry crews called off

Talks between the New Zealand Maritime Union and Tranz Rail on June 3 resulted in the cancellation of a wildcat strike on the Cook Strait ferry service over the June 6-7 national holiday. Ferry crews were ready to strike after being told earlier in the week they would have to accept cuts to pay and conditions or be made redundant. The union entered discussion with the management following an early morning meeting of the 50 affected crewmembers. Union officials told the gathering that they thought the company’s approach was “more conciliatory” than it had been.

Toll Holdings, the new Australian owners of Tranz Rail and its subsidiary the Interisland Line, had declared they intended to roster the *Arahura’s* cooks and stewards on shorter shifts, increase the number of days they worked and make them report for work daily at the Wellington terminal rather than live on the ship. The changes would result in a 30 percent, or about \$NZ6,000, reduction in wages. The other rail ferry, the *Aratere*, and the *Lynx* fast ferry already have similar rosters. Tranz Rail has asked the Employment Relations Authority for an urgent hearing to approve the plan.

The current employment contract still has four months to run. A union spokesman said Toll’s ultimatum breached the Employment Relations Act because the contract had not expired. “Nothing like this has happened in 15 years... it’s the company taking action against the crew without discussing it first”, he said. He said the union was “happy” to discuss a new roster but “within the context of contract negotiations”.

PNG teachers to walk off the job over unpaid wages

All 219 teachers in primary schools and tertiary institutions in the Western Highlands district of Papua New Guinea (PNG) have threatened to walk off the job if they don’t receive back pay owed to them by June 8. The teachers have not been paid since the beginning of 2004, and have been forced to live off the generosity of friends and teachers in other provinces.

The teachers met with the Highlands branch of the PNG Teachers Association and resolved that if salaries owing were not paid by the specified date they would instigate legal action and withdraw their services. Over 3,000 students will be affected.

PNG medical officers protest

Port Moresby-based medical officers, who have not been paid in the past six months, converged on the national health conference being held at the Holiday Inn in Port Moresby on June 2, demanding the payment of their salaries. Waving placards and chanting, “We are not slaves,” about

20 health workers, representing 121 residential medical officers (RMOs) around the country, protested as Health Department executives met inside.

Enterprises and Information Minister Dr Tuka Temu addressed the group, claiming the problem was due to a new computerised payroll concept and assuring them the issue would be addressed before the end of the week. In an attempt to play down the dispute, Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann and his deputy Dr Isaac Ake later told a press conference they were fully aware of the plight of the RMOs and had sent each officer a 1,000 kina (\$US312) cheque as an advance payment. They said the medical officers would receive free meals at the hospital mess.

RMO spokesman Dr Tony Sanson said the RMOs would boycott work on June 7 if the problem remained unresolved. The officers affected include laboratory technicians, health extension officers, pharmacists, pharmacy technicians, dentists and radiographers.

Fiji port workers to strike

Sixty government employees at the Maritime and Ports Authority of Fiji (MPAF) plan to go on strike on June 11. All 60 workers are on individual contracts with the MPAF and have not received a pay rise or cost of living adjustment for five years.

Fiji Public Service Association general secretary Rajeshwar Singh said the union is seeking a 12 percent pay increase. He said the dispute and negotiations had reached a deadlock, so workers were forced to take industrial action.

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