

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 May 2007

Strike by Indian auto workers continues

A strike by workers at Hindustan Motor's Uttarpara plant in the Hooghly district, West Bengal that began on March 13 is continuing. The workers are demanding an end to a freeze on Dearness Allowance payments, permanency for 242 casual employees and the unconditional reinstatement of several suspended workers. Dearness allowance arrears have not been paid since 2001.

Strikers have attempted to stop finished goods from leaving the factory but management called in police. On April 10, police wielding lathis (long bamboo rods) attacked pickets trying to prevent scab labour from entering the plant, injuring at least ten picketers.

Around 5,000 workers are employed at the plant, the country's oldest automobile factory, making the Ambassador Model car. The strikers are members of the Sangrami Shramik Karmachari Union (SSKU).

Plantation workers oppose slave-like conditions

A strike by 250 plantation workers employed on areca nut estates in Mettupalayam, in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, is continuing. The workers struck on April 16 for better wages and working conditions and have threatened a hunger strike if their demands are not met. Workers describe their wages and conditions as akin to "slavery".

The strikers, including women employed on plantation farms, marched on April 23 to press their demands. A spokesman for the strikers said: "So far, we have been very patient. Unfortunately, no owner has shown any sign of calling us for talks." He called for government intervention to "solve this problem".

Pakistani teachers take their demands to the streets

About 1,000 teachers from public schools across the Punjab province in Pakistan demonstrated on April 26 in Lahore's Data Darbar district against the government's failure to issue teaching allowances. Carrying placards and banners, they chanted anti-government slogans.

Teachers are also opposed to the monitoring of schools by retired army officials, the interference of non-government organisations in public educational institutions and inconsistent education policies. The teachers had planned to

march to the Punjab Assembly but were stopped short by police.

Protests are planned throughout May, including outside the government Islamia High School on May 10, in Rawalpindi on May 14, and in Multan the next day. A rally and march to the parliament house in Islamabad will take place on May 23.

Bangladeshi jute workers protest layoffs

Struggles by jute mill workers in Khalishpur are continuing. On April 20 mill workers marched to protest suspension of operations at four state-owned mills—the Peoples Jute Mill, Platinum Jute Mill, Crescent Jute Mill and Star Jute Mill. Over 14,000 workers have been laid off.

The Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation (BJMC) made the announcement on April 19 following agitation by workers for the payment of wage arrears and removal of alleged corrupt managerial officials. Large numbers of police mounted attacks on workers' protests between April 19 and April 21.

The BJMC claims it is facing a financial crisis and can no longer run the four state-owned mills. It has called on the Privatisation Board to intervene and to sell the mills. Workers have not even been paid severance entitlements, equivalent to 50 percent of the basic wage for 45 days.

There are now fears that a fresh round of intimidation is underway after police recently arrested 79 workers from the Khalishpur industrial belt in connection with charges of fighting with law enforcement officers and violating the national state of emergency. Many workers and their families have already fled, while others have gone into hiding to avoid arrest.

Management issued letters to workers' leaders demanding they show cause why legal action should not be taken against them for "inciting workers to stop work, hampering production and launching agitation violating emergency rules". Meanwhile, security forces are continuing a clamp down across the Khalishpur area.

Chinese riot police fire on May Day rally

Riot police, backed by water cannon, fired into a May Day rally in the former Portuguese enclave of Macau in southeast

China. The peaceful march of about 10,000 protesters turned violent when police tried to force them into side streets, away from a tourist area.

While police claimed they were firing blanks, one protester was hospitalised with a suspected bullet wound to the back of the head. Ten protesters were arrested but no further injuries were reported. The demonstrators were protesting the lack of jobs and exploitation of immigrant workers.

Pay deal stuck in Bridgestone dispute

About 500 production and maintenance workers at the Bridgestone tyre plant at Salisbury in South Australia voted by a slim majority at the end of last month to accept a new enterprise bargaining agreement. In March, the company locked workers out after they began a series of four-hour stoppages and placed bans on overtime.

Members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union were seeking a 12 percent pay rise over three years. LHMU organiser Jim Watson said the unions had agreed to accept the company's initial offer, a 2 percent annual rise and a range of productivity bonuses. For the past six years workers have received annual pay rises of just 3 percent, well below the inflation rate.

New Zealand senior doctors threaten national strike

Senior doctors are threatening a first-ever national strike as pay talks become increasingly acrimonious. They say current pay levels are impacting on the recruitment and retention of doctors. The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) states that 254 specialist jobs were vacant at the end of 2005, nearly 8 percent of the total positions. ASMS head Ian Powell said the figure was likely an underestimate.

Powell said national stop-work meetings were now "virtually certain" to discuss strike action and a postal ballot. The Pan Professional Medical Forum, which includes medical colleges and unions, said the recruitment and retention problem was "very serious" and approaching crisis levels in some provincial areas.

Strike preparations at New Zealand newspaper

Workers at the *Greymouth Evening Star* are preparing for industrial action as the company continues to refuse to offer a decent pay rise. The unions and management have been in bargaining since January, but so far the newspaper—owned by Allied Press, the *Otago Daily Times*' parent company—has offered a deal comprising 2.6 percent in the first year and 2.5 percent in the second.

A union spokesman said workers found the company's latest offer insulting. Journalists at the *Star* are presently paid well below the industry standard and the current offer

would only see them go backwards.

Fiji's nurses vote to strike against pay cuts

By an 82 percent majority, members of the Fiji Nurses Association (FNA) voted in favour of striking over a 5 percent pay cut imposed on civil servants by the country's military government. Public sector workers, members of various unions and associations have already voted overwhelming for industrial action, but a Confederation of Public Sector Unions spokesman said none of its affiliates had yet issued the required 28-days strike notice. The peak union body claims it is waiting for all unions to complete ballots so they can "sit and talk their strategies through".

Public Service Association members were the first to complete their voting, with 92 percent of members voting to strike, followed by an overwhelming endorsement by Teachers Union members. Airport Terminal Management Association members voted 98 percent in favour of industrial action.

Affiliates of the Council of Trade Unions, including the Fijian Teachers Association, Public Employees Union and the Viti Taukei Workers Unions, conducted secret ballots but are yet to finish counting votes.

Workers oppose Air Fiji cost cutting

Members of the Fiji Transport Workers Union voted at its annual general meeting last weekend to take action against Air Fiji if it fails to withdraw cost-cutting measures that breach the current collective agreement. The company, Fiji's largest domestic airline, has threatened to close or suspend operations, citing increasing costs.

Cuts have already been made to advertising and promotions, management benefits, tea and coffee allowances, overtime work, disrupted passengers' transport, meals and accommodation, refuelling and out-of-base allowances. The second phase, to be implemented if the situation "deteriorates further", includes wage cuts of 5 percent, reductions in working hours, cuts to air routes and sackings.

In a separate dispute, the Airport Terminal Management Association has threatened to strike unless the recently re-appointed chief executive officer of Airports Fiji Ltd is removed. The Fiji Trade Union Congress national council passed a resolution to strike on May 25 over the company's mismanagement.

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