

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 May 2008

Asia

Two-day general strike in New Delhi industrial area

A two-day strike in New Delhi and neighboring towns, called by the Delhi State Committee of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) to protest serious labour law violations, ended on April 25. The strikers included organised public and private sector workers, and unorganised workers such as hawkers, rickshaw pullers and shop employees. The strike affected industrial areas of North Delhi, Wazirpur, G.T. Karnal Road, Badli and Narela. A large number of workers held processions in North-West Delhi and Mangolpuri Phase I and II.

Sudhir Kumar, president of CITU's Delhi State Committee, told a press conference that blatant violations had been going on for several years in Delhi. He said eight-hour shifts had become 12 hours, and employees' names not recorded in attendance registers. The Provident Fund and Employees State Insurance were not being implemented and the official minimum wage was not being paid to workers.

CITU is demanding the government enforce labour laws, implement a minimum wage of 8,500 rupees (\$US210) and provide health insurance, pension and provident fund for unorganised sector workers. But the organisers have given the government six months to implement the demands before they organise "bigger action".

Indian highway workers demonstrate for conditions

On April 27, highway road workers in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu staged a rally in the city of Madurai. Members of the Tamil Nadu Highways Road Employees Association are pressing for a charter of demands that includes promotion for qualified road employees as road inspectors and appointment on compassionate grounds for the legal heirs of road workers.

Tamil Nadu horticulture workers demand back wages

Temporary horticulture workers employed by the Tamil Nadu Government's Department of Agriculture staged a demonstration in front of the offices of the District Collectorate in Salem on April 28, demanding payment of wages owing. The workers, mainly local women, at Anna Park and Rose Garden in the hill station of Yercaud, have not been paid wages for five weeks.

V.K. Nallamuthu, general secretary of the Neelamalai Plantations Workers Union said many of the workers had fallen prey to usury lenders. He said the workers' plight was previously presented to the District Collectorate but there had been no reply.

Sri Lankan industrial rubber workers protest

Hundreds of Sri Lankan industrial rubber workers at two Swedish-owned factories on the outskirts of Colombo launched a protest movement on April 29, demanding higher wages. The workers at Hexagon Polymers' Elastomeric factories in the Horana Industrial Zone and Bokundara are wearing black bans on their heads as the first stage of their protest.

They are demanding 3,000-rupee (\$US27) monthly salary increases in 2008 and 3,500-rupee increases in 2009. Workers said negotiations with the management over seven months had not produced any results, and

they would launch a continuous strike if their demands were not met soon. Management is holding firm, threatening to transfer production to newly-built facilities in China.

SriLankan Airlines pilots take action over broken promises

SriLankan Airlines was forced to cancel many flights to the Indian subcontinent on April 25 when more than a dozen pilots booked in sick. The pilots' union is not saying what the action is over but a source at the airport said they were protesting over broken promises by President Mahindra Rajapakse and his brother, Aviation Services Minister Chamal Rajapakse. Another source said the action was over wages.

Until March this year, the airline was managed by the Dubai-based airline Emirates, which owns 43 percent of SriLankan Airlines. Since Emirates handed the management over to the government, 35 pilots have left.

Indonesian workers rally against rising prices

An estimated 40,000 workers took to the streets of Jakarta on May 1 to protest against rising food and fuel prices. Many carried banners saying, "Lower food prices now" and "More pay for workers and farmers".

Over 10,000 Jakarta police were deployed to the city streets and another 50,000 were put on standby. No incidents were reported.

Garment factory worker Yuningsih said: "We want the price of kerosene to come down. Food is getting expensive." Rising food and fuel prices pushed the annual inflation rate to 8.17 percent in March, the highest since October 2006. Prices are expected to keep rising, with the government considering hiking subsidised fuel prices in June by almost 30 percent to minimise the impact of record oil prices on the national budget.

Australia and the Pacific

Melbourne taxi drivers protest after colleague stabbed

Melbourne's CBD was brought to a standstill for 22 hours on April 29-30 when more than 1,000 angry taxi drivers rallied on the corner of Swanston and Flinders Streets following the near fatal stabbing of fellow taxi driver Jalvinder Singh 23, early in the morning. Not long after the stabbing, protesting drivers began blocking the city's busiest intersection, demanding improved security in taxis.

The drivers used the opportunity to level complaints of racism at police. One demand circulated by drivers said, "All the complaints by migrants [drivers] should be seriously adhered to by police."

Victorian state Public Transport Minister Lynne Kosky initially refused to meet a delegation until the blockade was ended. The next day, however, when it was obvious the drivers were not going to give up their protest without a commitment from the government, she met a delegation organised by the Transport Workers Union. Kosky agreed to pay just half the cost of installing safety screens in taxis and to permit prepayment of fares between 10pm and 5am.

The protest followed a previous protest in the city in 2006 after a driver was killed, and there has been a string of violent assaults since. The Labor state government and taxi owners had promised to look into protection for drivers, but nothing was done. Many of the drivers claim they are being

treated as second-class citizens because they are of Indian background. On average, taxi drivers work 12-hour days for as little as \$8 an hour.

Tasmanian public servants to stop work

Some 18,000 public servants in Tasmania are expected to attend stopwork meetings in Hobart, Launceston and Burnie commencing May 5. The meetings will include officials, administrative staff, dental technicians, cleaners, hospital aides, and parks and wildlife personnel. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Health and Community Services Union called the meetings after reaching a deadlock in negotiations with the state government for a new wage agreement.

CPSU state secretary Tom Lynch said the government's latest offer failed to address any of the six issues the unions had highlighted. The CPSU has been negotiating for almost two years to have Tasmanian public servants paid the same as their interstate counterparts. The government is holding firm on its initial offer of 3 percent over four years.

Northern Territory teachers strike for better pay

On April 28, about 500 public school teachers met at Darwin's Marrara Indoor Stadium for a Northern Territory-wide stopwork meeting, their third strike in the past month. Around 70 teachers met in Alice Springs. The meetings rejected the territory Labor government's latest pay offer of 11 percent and issued a warning that if there were "no movement" before May 6 they would strike again. The teachers are seeking a 15 percent increase over two and a half years.

The Australian Education Union has won a number of concessions in negotiations with the government but the teachers are determined to secure a decent wage increase.

Queensland remote teachers demand better housing

Queensland state school teachers throughout the Torres Strait, Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria voted overwhelmingly on April 26 in favour of action against the state government's "woeful neglect of teacher accommodation" in the region. Around 500 teachers are expected to hold one-hour stopwork meetings before May 2 to discuss further action, including rolling 24-hour stoppages.

Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) president Steve Ryan said teachers had been left with no choice but to take action after decades of government neglect had led to living conditions that were often unsafe and unhealthy. Ryan said the QTU had identified a \$50 million (\$US46.7 million) shortfall in annual government spending on teachers' accommodation.

Queensland power workers step up action

On April 29, 400 electricity workers employed in regional areas by Queensland state-owned electricity distributor Ergon Energy walked off the job for 24 hours, along with workers of transmission company Powerlink in Brisbane and Cairns. Their action is part of a campaign of rolling strikes launched on April 22. Workers at south-east Queensland's electricity distributor Energex voted this week to join the industrial action.

Among other claims, members of the Electrical Trades Union and Australian Services Union are seeking a \$1.50 per hour pay increase plus increased spending on network maintenance to improve safety. The unions called for industrial action after negotiations on April 17 failed to deliver a new collective agreement.

New Zealand chemical workers' strike enters fourth week

Fifteen striking workers at the US-based chemicals company, Ecolab, in Hamilton, New Zealand, are maintaining their picket outside the factory. Members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) struck in March after management refused to negotiate a new agreement within the Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA) for the Metals Industry. MECA is an industry-wide collective agreement that provides minimum pay and conditions for workers at more than 100 general manufacturing firms nationwide.

Striking worker Phillip Strawbridge said the dispute was starting to bite. "I've gone through my savings and this is the first week I'm going to

struggle to pay my mortgage and the loan we took out for our wedding. It's worse for the guys with young families, they signed on to the union for protection from the company's tactics and now they are in this fight for some pretty basic conditions."

The union has given no indication of widening the industrial action and calling for support from other sections of workers.

Auckland food distribution workers strike

About 90 warehouse pick-and-pack workers at Foodstuffs distribution centre in Auckland, New Zealand began indefinite lunch-time strikes on April 28, demanding a \$2.50 partial pay rise. The distribution centre supplies food items to Foodstuffs' franchises, Pak 'n Save, New World and Four Square. The National Distribution Union is demanding the minimum hourly rate, an increase from \$14.59 (\$US11.67) to \$17.00—50 cents below the standard rate at other warehouses—and a minimum 5 percent increase for higher paid staff. The company has offered \$15.50 an hour.

A union spokesman said Foodstuffs, New Zealand's 2nd biggest company, made \$7.2 billion revenue off the back of its low-paid workers. Equivalent workers at Progressive—Foodstuffs' only competitor—who were locked out several years ago during their own pay parity dispute, are on \$17.74 an hour and will go up to \$18.34 an hour in August.

Strike looms at New Zealand wharves

Workers at the Lyttelton Port of Christchurch (LPC) look set to strike after 16 days of union negotiations for an 11.7 percent pay increase reached a deadlock. LPC management has refused to budge from its offer of 4.5 percent based on what was "happening in the market generally".

Although talks are continuing, the rail and maritime unions, representing 280 members at LPC, have issued a notice to management of an overtime ban to commence on April 30. The collective employment agreement expired on April 17.

Air New Zealand engineers plan to strike over pay

About 1,500 Air New Zealand engineers are threatening to strike after rejecting the company's latest pay offer of 3.73 percent. The engineers are demanding an increase of 5.8 percent.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Aviation and Marine Engineers Association have given notice to management of two weeks of industrial action to commence on May 9. It will include overtime bans and safety checks on planes. The airline and unions are continuing negotiations.

Another strike by NZ junior doctors imminent

Talks between District Hospital Boards (DHBs) and the junior doctors union, the Resident Doctors Association, broke down on April 30, meaning industrial action planned for May 7 and 8 is likely to go ahead. The doctors' employment contract expired in June 2007 and the two parties have failed to reach any agreement.

Over 2,000 junior doctors struck for 48 hours on April 22, demanding a 10 percent per year pay increase for the next three years but the eleven DHBs are holding out, offering only 3.4 percent.

The junior doctors are getting no support from the leadership of the NZ Council of Trade Unions (CTU). CTU president Helen Kelly publicly criticised the doctors for striking saying, "I hope it doesn't give unions a bad name." The CTU has worked closely over the years with the Labor government to restrict pay rises to 5 percent per year.

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