Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 May 1999

The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to editor@wsws.org

Malaysian workers picket plant

More than 3,000 workers employed by Harris Advanced Technology (HAT) in the Ampang Free Trade Zone in Selangor, Malaysia, stopped work last Saturday and picketed the factory. The workers were protesting against the refusal of the company to negotiate an outstanding collective work agreement.

American multinational Harris Corp Melbourne Florida has announced it intends to sell off its semi-conductor division, including HAT. The workers fear that without a collective agreement the new owners will reduce conditions further.

Last year, in a drive to cut costs, HAT management reduced increment and bonus payments, deducted annual leave for a company shut-down and got rid of workers through voluntary redundancy. A union spokesman said the management was "leaving workers in the lurch after they had made serious sacrifices for the company".

Cambodian shoe workers strike

Over 700 workers at a shoe factory in Phnom Penh went on strike last week, demanding an end to forced overtime and illegal lay offs. The workers walked off the job after a female worker collapsed in the middle of her shift from exhaustion. One worker said it was a common practice for the company to fire anyone who refused to work overtime.

Cambodian Free Trade Union of Workers president Chea Vichea said: "Workers were often forced to work for more than 12 hours at a stretch, often without proper cash compensation." The normal paid shift is eight hours a day.

Shemberg workers defy order

Workers at the Shemberg Marketing Corporation, in Cebu City in the Philippines, have defied a permanent restraining order issued by the National Labor Relations Commission last week ordering them to end their sit-in at a water plant that supplies many of the company's workplaces.

More than 100 workers have occupied the Canduman Water Pump for over two weeks to demand the reinstatement of 15 union officials who were sacked after they initiated a go-slow at Shemberg last March to protest bad working conditions.

The Vice-Mayor of Cebu City held talks with the striking workers earlier this week in an attempt persuade them to end their protest. There are now reports that the region's catholic archbishop may also intervene to bring the dispute to an end. However, Ramil Cariage, a spokesman for the strikers, said the workers would maintain their occupation.

Philippines Airlines demands no-strike agreement

Philippines Airlines Limited (PAL) has demanded that its 8,000 employees sign a 10-year no-strike agreement and allow the company to scrap the employment agreement covering working conditions.

In a letter sent to all employees this week, the majority shareholder Lucio Tan threatened that unless the workers accept the demands the company would close.

PAL is looking for $200 million in fresh equity to recapitalise the ailing airline and potential investors are insisting on a guarantee that the company will be strike free. "We need to assure them with a no-strike pledge, and the suspension of your collective bargaining agreement for 10 years," Tan wrote.

The company will also implement a restructuring plan involving large reductions in staff and the selling off of aircraft. The president of PAL's ground crew union Alexander Barrientos, sent a letter to members stating he supported Tan's proposals even though other union officials did not.

Mongolian workers take action

The Confederation of Mongolian Trade Unions organised a demonstration outside Government House in Sukbaatar Square in Ulaanbaatar last week to demand a change in the country's labour laws. More than 1,000 workers joined the protest including teachers and rail workers.

A spokesman for the CMTU said that "the present law is biased against workers and reflects only the employers' interests. There are 36 employers in the State Ikh Hural (Parliament)."

In the same week over 600 teachers went on strike over the refusal of the government to pay wages owned to them since March this year.

University executive officers on strike in Sri Lanka

The executive officers at all universities in Sri Lanka launched an indefinite strike on May 20. Executive officers working in the University Grants Commission and allied institutions have also joined the strike action. The major demands are the removal of salary anomalies and the creation of a University Administrative Service. Before launching an indefinite strike the executive officers had engaged in three token strikes, but none of their demands were met. Non-academic staff at these universities are supporting the current strike action. An earlier strike by non-academic staff ended with a settlement between union leaders and the Labor Minister.

© World Socialist Web Site

Hospital staff fighting for 18 demands

About 22,000 staff at state hospitals in Sri Lanka, including attendants, sanitary workers and cooks, are refusing additional work and to wear uniforms to press for improved overtime payment, promised uniforms and 16 other demands. The rank-and-file unionists are wanting to take tougher action but the union leaders are holding them back.

'Milco' company workers refuse to work overtime

About 1,250 workers of the 'Milco' company in Sri Lanka are refusing overtime work in order to push for a salary increase of Rs.3000, an end to salary anomalies, the reinstatement of interdicted workers without disciplinary action, and the immediate confirmation of the workers who have completed their probation period. Management has told workers to accept a Rs.500 salary increase and a Rs.500 allowance or to be prepared to quit next January. Even these meagre offers are on the basis that workers agree to perform shift work in three shifts a day.

The company, which was previously owned by National Milk Board, has its headquarters and major factory at Narahenpita in Colombo City and two other factories at Ambewela in Nuwaraeliya district and Digana in Kandy district—both in Central Province. In 1986 it was transformed into a state-owned company called 'Milco' and then privatised under the present People's Alliance regime through the sale of 49 percent of shares to the Kiriya Company of India in April 1997. According to workers, management has failed to invest the Rs.500 million into Milco agreed as part of the sale and has used existing assets for machinery and working capital.

Union leaders end action by state bank employees

Leaders of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU) called off work-to-rule action by state bank employees on May 19 after the President Chandrika Kumaratunga told workers to return to work within 24 hours during a meeting in Hakmana on May 17 for the coming provincial elections in Southern Province. The ban had been in place for nearly two months. CBEU leaders claimed that the Labor Minister has promised to suspend the implementation of committee recommendations that, according to the union, were based on favours to government supporters. The union also said that management would consider demands for an 8 percent salary increase during the next collective agreement. Private bank workers are continuing with a struggle to increase their salaries by 35 percent.

Union does a deal at Port Pirie

Officials of the South Australian branch of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) announced on Wednesday that they had reached a settlement with the management at Pasminco's Port Pirie smelter over a new workplace agreement.

At the beginning of the week 550 AWU members walked off the job after negotiations on the agreement, including a 10 percent pay increase, broke down. A membership meeting endorsed a proposal for further stoppages to gain a "suitable outcome".

A union spokesman said agreement was reached after a five-and-a-half hour conference in the Industrial Relations Commission but declined to reveal the details of the settlement. Workers are expected to vote on the deal sometime within the next two weeks.

Australian miners impose work bans

Miners at the Pasminco-owned Rosebery mine in Tasmania voted to take industrial action because the company breached an agreement governing the working conditions of contractor workers. At a stop work meeting last Tuesday, members of the Australian Workers Union endorsed a campaign of work bans and stoppages to begin next week unless the company agreed to abide by the terms of the agreement.

A union spokesperson, Robert Flanagan, said 17 contract workers had been sacked in the last month for refusing to work outside of the terms of the agreement. The union has accused the company of attempting to change workplace conditions despite the fact that the present agreement has been in place for the last eight years.

Manufacturing workers threaten strike

Victorian unions will hold a 24-hour strike next month to protest the loss of more than 30,000 manufacturing jobs in the state since 1996. According to a union spokesman, thousands of workers from the metal, textile and other industries are expected to join a rally in Melbourne on June 3.

The Victorian Trades Hall Council, the peak union body organising the protest, issued a statement this week saying that the stopwork is not aimed at "hurting employers" but is only a protest to highlight the decline in manufacturing.

PNG communication workers threaten strike

The Communication Workers Union in Papua New Guinea this week threatened to strike if the government did not honour an agreement it made last November to pay employer contributions owed to the retirement fund covering workers at the state-owned Telikom, Post PNG Limited, Pangtel and National Broadcasting Corporation.

After the communication workers staged widespread industrial action last year the government promised to pay off over K15 million owed by November this year. Repeated demands by the union that the government pay a K6 million instalment that was due on May 6 have been ignored. A union spokesman said: "The only option available at this point in time is to protect our concerns and disappointments through the mass withdrawal of labour by our members."

Theiss Roche workers stage sit-in

Australian workers employed by Thiess Roche at the Lihir gold mine in Papua New Guinea are continuing the strike they began last week for improved working conditions.

This week the strikers staged a sit-in on the main road to the mine, blocking native Lihir workers from entering the mine for several hours. In a move calculated to divide the strikers, Thiess Roche offered special paid leave to "provide a cooling off period." A significant number of workers have reportedly taken up the offer and left the island.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site