

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Thai workers demand payment

A number of workers have filed a law suit with the Thailand Labour Court to reclaim 70,000 baht commissions they each paid to Asia International Contracting, a local employment agency, to find them construction jobs in Qatar.

The 380 workers were placed with Arabian Gulf Co [Thailand] to carry out construction work on a housing estate project in Qatar but many returned to Thailand when they received no payment for their work. None of the workers have yet been paid.

Cathay pilots reject new offer

Pilots employed by the Hong Kong-based airline Cathay Pacific have threatened to strike over the company's demand that they accept pay cuts in exchange for stock options.

This week half of the airline's 1,300 pilots were given a June 11 deadline to accept one of three options—a revised salary deal, early retirement or dismissal. In mid-March the pilots overwhelmingly rejected a company plan to cut wages by 27 percent in return for stock options.

The new offer will see salaries slashed by 22 percent to save the company \$US.5 billion over 10 years. Those mainly affected are those pilots hired before 1993, which includes all of the airline's captains.

A union spokesman condemned the company's move as "colonial arrogance at its worse." However, the union still put forward its own cost cutting plan that it claims will save Cathay more than \$US540 million within five years. The airline posted a loss of \$542 million last year, its first in 35 years.

Philippine port workers strike

More than 1,700 dockworkers went on strike at the Cebu Port Authority in the Philippines on Monday, protesting against the "unfair labour practices" employed by some shipping companies.

On Wednesday there was a clash between the striking port workers and a number of seamen who had been organised by the ship owners. The confrontation occurred when the strikers attempted to block ships leaving the port.

The strike has affected nearly all shipping companies and has halted the movement of most traffic in and out of the port, except for fresh goods and passengers.

The recent action follows a series of industrial disputes at the port this year. In March, workers at two stevedores went on strike and set up picket lines.

The national government has intervened in the latest dispute following a request from the Cebu Chamber of Commerce. On Wednesday the Secretary of Labor ordered the workers to return to work within 24-hours.

Thousands of Sri Lankan tea plantation workers on "go-slow"

Thousands of tea plantation workers in more than 40 estates, in areas such as Nuwaraeliya, Haputale, Hatton and Agarapathana, are engaged in a go-slow campaign to demand the "price bonus" promised by the

management.

This bonus is supposed to be paid to workers in relation to the average floor price level of Sri Lankan tea. Plantation companies argue that they cannot pay the price bonuses as tea prices have fallen by 50 Rupees per kilogram.

The Planters Association of Ceylon has complained about heavy losses due to the go-slow. The plucking rate of tea leaves has dropped to 9 kg per day from the target of 20 kg per day, according to the Association. Since the factory workers began to leave the factories after eight hours of work according to the go-slow campaign, semi-manufactured tealeaves are left as is. Some plantation owners have estimated their losses as exceeding one million Rupees.

Price bonuses were agreed in last year's collective agreement between the plantation companies and the major union in the plantations, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC) led by cabinet minister S. Thondaman. Plantation workers all over the island had been engaged in strike action demanding higher wages. The CWC intervened to cut the workers' demands to the level offered by the plantation companies. In order to pacify the wrath of the workers and tie their wages to the prices of tea, rubber and coconut products in the world market, the union introduced a price bonus system, claiming it would increase wages.

Agarapathana Torrington estate workers on continuous token strikes

Thousand workers attached to five divisions of Torrington estate in Agarapathana went on strike on May 22 to press their demands for bonus payments.

These workers engaged in similar strikes on the same demand earlier on February 22 and April 27. Last year workers got Rs.1500 each as a bonus payment by March. Even though bonuses were curtailed this year, estate management has raised the targets of the workers for plucking tealeaves from 16kg to 20kg per day.

A police team led by Officer in Charge (OIC) of the Agarapathana Police Station intervened against the strike and assaulted the striking workers. Three female workers were injured and two male workers—Alagan and Pani Chelvan—were taken into custody. When the wives of these workers went to police station to get them released, the police asked all female workers of the estate to come to the police station to consider the request.

Police aggression on unarmed civilians in Colombo neighborhood

About 3,000 city dwellers at Maligawatte in the eastern part of the Sri Lankan capital Colombo demonstrated in their neighborhood on May 15 against police-military violence.

After the body of a murdered policeman was found left at the Maligawatte Bridge, police used it as a pretext to launch a terror campaign in the area, which is predominantly inhabited by Muslims. Police in civilian clothes came to the neighborhood several times within two weeks of the incident and arrested more than 30 youths in the age group of 18-20. The police even assaulted people who questioned them about the arbitrary arrests.

The protest campaign started on May 7 and reached its climax on May 15 with 3,000 people pouring into the streets. They burned tyres and picketed throughout the night. Police and military contingents of Maligawatte Police, Riot Police, Special Investigation Branch and the army Rapid Deployment Force were deployed to "combat" the unarmed demonstrators. They fired into air to terrorize the demonstrators and destroyed shops and houses. Sixteen cars and vans along with 25 three wheeler taxis were damaged. Maligawatte Jumma Masjid Mosque was also damaged.

As tear gas was used extensively, at least 10 infants who were inside houses had to be hospitalized into emergency wards. According to the reported incidents, one passer-by got his arm broken and military motor bikes ran over women.

Later the police had to release some arrested youths but six were still in the custody. Police justified this detention by declaring that two of them were known "criminals".

Pakistan clerks protest sackings

Over 30,000 members of the All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) across 28 government departments in Rawalpindi, in the Punjab, staged a 24-hour strike on Wednesday to oppose job losses. The government plans to shed jobs in the Departments of Agriculture, Building and Roads. The clerks are also protesting the sudden increase in the cost of petroleum and other government price hikes.

In a statement issued on Monday, APCA president Syed Hidayat Yar Bukhari said the striking clerks would hold a demonstration outside government offices and organise a sit-in at a government centre in Kutchery Chowk.

The statement warned, "that the prime minister Nawaz Sharif should take serious notice of the resentment being felt in the low salaried class". If workers' concerns were not immediately addressed, clerks outside the Rawalpindi Division would be called on to take industrial action.

NCDC union threatens to strike

Members of the NCDC Workers Union, involved in the provision of essential services to the Papua New Guinea capital of Port Moresby, this week threatened to strike over an outstanding log of claims

Union president Jackson Sarea said union members were angry because there had not been any progress towards a satisfactory solution since the union called off strike action last month. The log of claims includes a 22 percent wage increase, school fee assistance and an increased housing allowance.

PNG Telikom victimises strikers

Papua New Guinea Telikom workers who went on strike this week have been threatened with "disciplinary action" by the company's managing director Thomas Tulin. He warned that investigations were under way to identify those workers who did not turn up for work and said "appropriate" action would be taken against them.

The workers went on strike on Wednesday to protest the government's refusal to pay outstanding contributions to their retirement fund. On Tuesday a Telikom spokesman warned workers to report to work at the required time or face the consequences. Despite the company's attempt to intimidate them, more than 500 workers attended a rally organised by the Communication Workers Union.

Sacked Fiji workers reinstated

The newly-elected Labour government in Fiji has ordered the re-employment of airport workers who lost their jobs during the recent restructure of the country's Civil Aviation Authority.

The reinstatement of the 358 sacked members of the Fiji Public Service Association follows talks between government ministers and the Nadi airport management on Saturday.

Airports Fiji Limited, the private contractor that took over airport services when they were privatised earlier this year, will take 283 workers and CAAF the other 75.

While the new Minister for Civil Aviation Meli Bogileka ordered the reinstatement, the Labour government has not moved to scrap the previous government's privatisation arrangements.

Esso refinery workers return to work

Striking contract workers at the Esso Longford oil and gas refinery in Victoria returned to work on Tuesday after the management agreed to address a series of safety issues. The workers had gone on strike the previous week when they detected a serious gas leak at the plant.

The strikers demanded that the management install warning lights and a safety siren to provide time for workers to clear the area in the case of future gas leaks and other unsafe situations.

A spokesman for the Australian Workers Union said that at least two contract workers had been unaware of the safety problem last week and had continued to work in the area near the gas leak even after it had been evacuated. The Longford refinery was the site of a massive gas explosion last year that killed two workers and left the state without gas.

Nurses launch industrial action

Nurses at the Royal Melbourne Hospital in Victoria have begun a campaign of industrial action against the management's decision to appoint a non-nurse to a senior nursing position. A union spokesperson said it was the second time in 18 months that this had happened. "The hospital seems intent on keeping nurses out of senior positions," she said.

Miner loses legs

A medical team had to amputate the legs of a contract miner this week after he became entangled in a continuous conveyer operating in an underground mine at South Blackwater in central Queensland. A senior union official said there had already been four accidents involving amputations and serious back injuries in mines in the region within the last 12 months.

University staff stop work in Perth

Around 150 administrative and support staff employed at Edith Cowan University in Perth stopped work this week to attend meetings to protest and raise their concerns over plans by management to outsource their jobs to private contractors.

At a stopwork meeting the workers, members of the Community and Public Sector Union, voted to take further industrial action if any staff were made redundant. Edith Cowan University management is considering recommendations made in a review by consultants Ernst and Young to outsource 150 jobs and cut a further 50 in corporate and support services.

Workers voted to reject the recommendations and any further plans to downsize staffing levels, which have been cut over the past few years as a result of federal budget cuts.

Bus drivers carry out rolling strikes

Over 1,000 bus drivers employed by private bus companies—Perth Bus, Path Transit and Southern Coast Transit— carried out a series of rolling strikes affecting all parts of the metropolitan area this week in a dispute over a wage increase and working conditions. Further strikes are being planned for next week.

Since the privatisation of the Transperth Bus Service, which saw the elimination of 500 public sector positions, there has been a deterioration in working conditions, including increased shifts and unrealistic trip schedules, along with dangerous conditions of the buses themselves. The bus drivers have raised objections to the increasing time span of shifts. They are now required to work 12- and 15-hour shifts, with breaks of four to five hours.

Transport Workers union officials have indicated that bans would be placed on unsafe buses and drivers would rigidly stick to speed limits.

At the same time, 294 former government-employed drivers are being threatened with the sack as they await redeployment into other public sector jobs that do not exist due to government budget cuts.

Premier Richard Court stated this week that the bus drivers' skills were

no longer required following the sell off of the state-run services. The state Liberal government will approach the Federal Court to seek arbitration in removing the former drivers from the public sector payroll.



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