

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 May 2000

Indonesian students support teachers' demands

As the Indonesian teachers' dispute enters its fourth week, students across the country demonstrated during National Education Day on May 2 in support of teachers' demands for higher wages and more education funding. On Wednesday the government agreed to increase the functional allowance for teachers by 50 percent, in addition to a 100 percent increase announced in March. It still falls well below the 300 percent that teachers are demanding.

Planned strike action by teachers was called off by the union leadership, but hundreds of high school and university students marched from the State Palace in Jakarta to the Ministry of National Education in support of the teachers' cause. In Bandung hundreds of students from the city and neighbouring towns staged a protest in front of the provincial legislature building.

In Surabaya 200 students marched to the Grahadi building to protest over the government's education policies, and in Yogyakarta students and teachers marched together to demand lower education fees and higher wages. Other student demonstrations took place in Jayapura, Banda Aceh and Makassar. In Pekanbaru, hundreds of elementary school teacher demonstrated to demand higher wages and allowances.

The teachers are threatening to strike next week if their demands for a transportation allowance and overtime pay are not met.

Protests by Indonesian textile and electronics workers

Two separate protests by workers took place in Jakarta on April 26.

Sixty workers from PT Sony rallied in front of the UN representatives building in Central Jakarta where they distributed leaflets urging the public to boycott the company's products. According to the protest coordinator, Sony has attempted to intimidate workers by firing a local union leader and forcing another to resign.

Sony workers say that the company restricts union activity, bans workers from receiving phone calls, even from family members, and forces them to report to supervisors if they want to go the toilet. They commented that working conditions in the company were like those in forced labour camps during the Japanese wartime occupation of Indonesia.

Elsewhere 100 workers from the Texmaco Group rallied at

the House of Representatives in central Jakarta to push for a 30 percent pay rise. The protesters held up banners and staged a sit-in to draw attention to their demands.

Indonesian workers demonstrate on May 1

Workers took part in rallies across Indonesia on International Labor Day to make a number of demands including a 100 percent pay increase. In Jakarta 1,500 workers from different organisations grouped under the National Front Struggle for Indonesian Workers (FNPBI) demonstrated in front of the House of Representatives. In addition to the pay rise, they called on the government to abandon its planned fuel price increase and to reinstate Labor Day as a national holiday. They joined hundreds of dismissed workers from Reebok shoe producer PT Kong Tai Indonesia who have been protesting for weeks outside the building.

In a separate demonstration hundreds of workers from the Greater Jakarta Workers Union marched to the National Monument. Protests were also held in the major cities of Surabaya, Semarang, Bandung and Medan to demand better conditions and the right to form unions. Up to 3,000 workers from the Independent Workers Union gathered in Medan to press for a wage increase.

Cambodian garment workers demonstrate

Around 4,000 garment workers held a two-day protest this week in Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. On Tuesday, they marched five kilometers from the national stadium to the parliament to voice their demands for better working conditions and increased pay. It was the largest ever demonstration by Cambodian garment workers. The marchers were flanked by scores of police armed with electric shock batons.

There are over 100,000 workers in what is Cambodia's fastest growing manufacturing sector with a turnover last year of \$US600 million—the US market accounts for 70 percent of exports from the industry. Garment workers employed by international firms, including leading fashion retailer Gap, designers Ralph Lauren, sportswear label Lotto and Camel Trophy, receive an average wage of \$US30 per month.

Conditions inside the factories are cramped, hot and Dickensian. One shop steward explained that many workers have mysteriously died at work with no investigation and others complain of being sexually harassed by the company owners. One 33-year-old worker said: "We have tried to put up with

this situation for years, but this time we cannot control our anger any more”.

Labor Day rallies in the Philippines

Over 40,000 Filipino workers in 14 cities marked Labor Day with rallies calling for wage increases and demanding that the government of President Joseph Estrada resign. Workers in Manila marched to the American Embassy, the National Labour Relations Commission, the Office of the Urban Poor and the Manila Hotel where workers are on strike.

Their slogans included a P125 (\$US3) rise in the minimum wage, opposition to privatisation, an end to the recently introduced Road User's Tax and the Oil Deregulation Law, improved workers' rights in the export-processing zones, a P3,000 pay increase for government workers and the ousting of the Estrada administration.

Protestors burned effigies of Estrada including one depicting “Uncle Sam” chained to Estrada. In Mendiola, demonstrators clashed with police leaving six people injured. Earlier in the day seven protesters were arrested when 500 police attempted to disperse a rally using batons and water cannons.

South Korean car workers end strike

About 2,700 day-shift workers at the Daewoo car plant in Bupyong near Seoul returned to work on Wednesday after a weeklong strike. The walkout ended after management agreed to discuss their demands. The strike was triggered by last week's storming of the plant's union office by 100 riot police and the arrest of 20 union officials including the Daewoo union president. While 16 were released later that day, four, including the union president, were kept in detention.

Immigrants exploited in New Zealand sweatshops

The plight of Asian immigrant workers in New Zealand was highlighted by an Employment Tribunal case last month over pay and conditions in an Auckland garment factory. Factory owner Wiliwan Sivoravong was found to owe \$NZ256,000 to eight of her sewing workers, this amount being the shortfall between what they had been paid and the minimum wage of \$7 an hour. The shortfall was accumulated between 1997 and October last year.

The plight of the women was so severe that the tribunal adjudicator took the unheard of step of requiring the employer to pay the maximum penalty for 18 breaches of minimum wage and holiday legislation—a total of \$36,000. Costs were also awarded, bringing the full amount awarded against the employer to over \$300,000. Sivoravong has since declared herself bankrupt and closed the factory.

The Labour Department, which brought the case, claimed that the Thai women were paid just \$575 a month to sew garments for 12 hours a day, six days a week, and that up to 10 workers at a time shared three bedrooms in Sivoravong's home. It was also claimed that Sivoravong had made the women sign a wages book, confiscated their passports and verbally abused the workers.

The adjudicator said there was clear evidence that Sivoravong

had lured the women from Thailand by misrepresenting the conditions of their jobs and had promised free food and lodging. Despite the adjudicator's claims, New Zealand's labour “standards” are quickly becoming similar to those that prevail in many so-called “Third World” countries. Hundreds of other Asian women are believed to be virtually imprisoned in similar conditions in illegal clothing sweatshops.

Alcoa workers in Western Australia still locked out

Locked-out maintenance workers employed by contractors working for Alcoa are threatening wider industrial action unless a pay dispute over a 12 percent increase is not resolved by the end of this week. The 450 workers at Alcoa sites at Kwinana, Pinjarra and Wagerup were locked out in early March when they took industrial action over their wage claim.

Picket lines were set up outside the Kwinana site and many other Alcoa workers supported the locked out workers by refusing to cross. Alcoa is demanding the contractors cut costs by between 10-20 percent. As a result the contract companies are demanding workers give up existing conditions and agree to a lower wage increase.

Workers maintain picket at Moss Vale plant

Seventy workers are continuing their picket at the Joy Mining Manufacturing plant at Moss Vale in southern NSW after the company locked them out four weeks ago when negotiations broke down over a new enterprise agreement. The dispute has spread to nearby Wollongong where a picket has been set up to prevent the transfer of machinery from Moss Vale to a factory in Unanderra. The workers are concerned that the company, which suffered a \$40 million loss in 1998, will try to shut its Moss Vale operation. The locked-out workers and their supporters held a rally on Tuesday.



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