

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 May 2000

General strike in India

Many of India's factories, banks, rail and air facilities were closed or affected by a nationwide strike on Thursday, May 11 called by the National Platform of Mass Organisations (NPMO). The coalition is made up of 56 trade unions, youth and women's organisations and over a dozen political parties, including the Stalinist Communist Party of India (CPI) and Communist Party of India Marxist (CPI-M).

The NPMO organised the strike to protest the "retrograde economic, industrial and anti-poor policies of the NDA Government". It also called for the restoration of subsidies on essential items such as food grains and fertilisers and an end to privatisation.

Organisers claimed that over 200 million participated. According to the All India Trade Union Alliance the general strike call was widely supported in the states of Assam, West Bengal, Bihar, Tripura and Kerala where schools and colleges also closed, and was partially successful in other states.

More than 2,000 activists from political parties and trade unions were arrested in the state of Andhra Pradesh before the strike began and hundreds of protesters in Tamil Nadu were detained after they blocked road and rail traffic. In New Delhi, parliament adjourned and 100 opposition MPs staged a protest outside the parliament building in support of the strikers.

Sri Lankan metal workers threatened with emergency laws

The owner of the Amico metal packaging factory filed a court case on May 5 under the government's new emergency regulations to force workers to end their protests and allow finished goods to be removed from the premises. The regulations were proclaimed following a series of major military defeats inflicted on the Sri Lanka army in the country's long-running civil war. They include a complete ban on all industrial action, protests and public meetings. The court granted the company's demand on Friday.

Management closed the factory more than two months ago in retaliation for a strike by workers demanding the recognition of their union. Workers have also been fighting to improve their working conditions and wages. The factory lacks adequate toilets, female restrooms and drinking water. None of the 450 workers have been paid since the factory's closure.

Amico has used thugs and even bombs to intimidate workers who have been protesting in the vicinity of the closed factory. The protest leaders have received constant death threats. The workers are members of the Inter Company Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (People Liberation Front). The union has urged most workers to remain at home claiming that it will reach a settlement with the company.

Court orders Sri Lankan dock workers to end campaign

On May 5, Colombo Dockyard Ltd., a shipbuilding and repair company, secured an order from the Colombo district court to prevent the Independent Dockyard Workers Union (IDWU) from taking industrial action until the current collective agreement expires.

The company is a joint venture with the Japanese Onomichi Dockyard

Company, which agreed to train 50 Sri Lankan employees each year in Japan. Management is, however, proposing alternative training programs in Thailand and India. The IDWU opposed the change and took strike action on April 25.

The company claims that the union violated the collective agreement and that its action disrupted the building of naval vessels for the military's war effort.

Indonesian Reebok employees occupy government building

Sacked workers from PT Kong Tai, a producer of Reebok shoes, have pledged to continue their occupation of part of the legislative building in Jakarta after police evicted them on Tuesday night, May 9. They are demanding that the company give them severance pay.

The 4,760 workers were dismissed without any entitlements last October. They have staged a number of demonstrations, including a protest in February that disrupted traffic. Since February 21 workers have occupied the Nusantara II building compound at the legislative complex.

On Tuesday dozens of police forced protesters out of the building and onto the porch of a nearby Mosque. The following day workers returned to the building and re-established their temporary shelters in a corridor.

Protest over suspended Pakistani steelworkers

The families of 436 suspended Pakistani steelworkers staged a protest last week in front of the Karachi press club demanding their full reinstatement. Children held up placards saying: "We will not go to school from May 4. Restore services of our family heads soon."

The Pakistan Steel Mill, a government owned venture, suspended the workers last February. In early April the company chairman said the government had plans to cut 5,500 jobs in order to avoid bankruptcy and pay back outstanding loans. He told Lahore businessmen the measures would lead to eventual privatisation.

Bangladesh police kill protesting workers

On May 3 Bangladeshi police fired at workers in the Dhaka Economic Processing Zone (DEPZ), killing six and injuring about 300. Five of those injured are in hospital in a critical condition.

The incident began after a foreign firm sacked 25 workers. When they arrived at the factory, management closed the gate and called the police who then fired over 50 teargas shells injuring 50 female workers. Outraged employees from other DEPZ factories gathered to defend the sacked workers and were fired upon by police reinforcements.

Unemployed Macau workers demonstrate

Around 500 unemployed construction workers marched on Monday, May 8 to the government headquarters in Macau to protest the lack of jobs. Of the 6.7 percent of workers who are officially unemployed, 30 percent are in the construction industry. The demonstration was organised by the workers themselves.

The demonstrators tried to deliver a petition, but when no one except a civil servant came to accept it clashes broke out. Several workers were beaten by police. The protest only ended when one of those arrested was released from police custody three hours later.

Security attack picketing workers in Melbourne

Workers picketing at the Gordon & Gotch distribution warehouse in Melbourne were assaulted this week by security guards. On Wednesday, May 10 a female worker who has worked at the Burwood warehouse for over 20 years was thrown to the ground and her husband, who joined the picket to support his wife, was beaten when the guards tried to break the picket. The company is a major distributor of magazines, which has been operating for over 100 years, and has been recently sold by Murdoch's News Corporation.

About 80 workers have been on strike for over a week against the company's attempt to cut back working conditions as part of a new enterprise agreement. Last Friday the company was unsuccessful in trying to bring scabs through the picket lines. Workers are demanding an annual 5 percent pay rise for the next two years, maintenance of existing working conditions and the appointment of a number of casual workers who have worked there for over a year. An agreement with the unions that any worker employed for more than three months as a casual should be appointed full-time has been flouted by the company, which has been laying off casual workers for a week after three months and then re-employing them.

Workers at Gordon & Gotch facilities in all the state capitals except Sydney will be affected by the new agreement; 20 workers at the Albury warehouse are also on strike.

The company is seeking to cap redundancy payments at 39 weeks. Under the previous agreement workers receive four weeks pay for every year of service and are paid unused sick leave if they are made redundant. Workers currently work a 36-hour week made up of four nine-hour shifts and receive no penalty rates for hours worked between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m. In addition to a new rostering system, the company wants the period from 6 a.m. to midnight to be worked without penalty rates.

Workers are concerned that the company may be planning to sack the entire workforce, build a new more efficient facility staffed with casuals and close some of its smaller state distribution centres.

Australian dairy workers to lose jobs

Hundreds of jobs will be destroyed in the downsizing operations of Bonlac Foods, a dairy company with over \$A1 billion in annual sales. Bonlac plans to shut three of its milk processing plants in rural Victoria at Drouin, Camperdown and Toora as well as its Legerwood operations in Tasmania, destroying at least 300 jobs including around 40 jobs at its head office in Melbourne.

The National Union of Workers (NUW) responded to the pending closures by praising Bonlac for being "up-front" with the sackings and redundancy payments. The union has no plans to defend jobs and will "assist" workers by helping to look for new jobs.

Bonlac admitted more jobs will go: "Today we have 13 production sites compared with only 5 operated by a similar sized cooperative". The company is planning to slash overheads by 30 percent to remain competitive.

Australian child care workers protest against loss of conditions

Child care workers in Sydney will walk off the job on Monday, May 15 and demonstrate outside the Industrial Relations Court (IRC) to protest against an application by the Employers Federation to remove their paid meal break and rostered days off (RDO). The carers are also protesting over the possible introduction of temporary contracts. Childcare workers are amongst the lowest paid in Australia, earning less than \$A20, 000 a year. They have also not received a pay rise since 1996.

Sydney Caltex workers locked out

Caltex Oil Refinery workers at Kurnell in Sydney went on a 24-hour strike on Thursday, May 11 after negotiations between the union and management broke down over a wage claim. The strike comes less than three weeks after the refinery was shut down when the Australian Workers Union threatened strike action for 100 days but called a stopwork meeting for four hours instead.

Management threatened to lock out the 275 workers indefinitely unless the union agreed to take no further industrial action and to abide by Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) arbitration. The IRC intervened to order a return to work and imposed a ban on strikes for three months, which the union promptly accepted.

Australian tax office workers impose bans

Workers at taxation offices throughout Australia imposed bans and work limitations on Tuesday, May 9 in support of a 10 percent wage claim. The union is arguing for the wage increase to compensate workers for an increased workload due to the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax in July. Pickets were also held at tax offices for two hours on Thursday morning. A spokesperson said that the union has been trying to negotiate a wage increase since last August.

Rising numbers of New Zealand school students in part-time work

A New Zealand government report released last month has revealed for the first time the extent of youth labour. The statistics show large numbers of youth under the age of 15 in work—25 percent of boys and 20 percent of girls aged 12-17 years are forced to work part-time. Their average working week is just under 10 hours and many work late at night and on weekends. The proportion of 15-19 year olds working part-time jumped from 12 percent in the 1991 census to 28 percent in 1996.

The overwhelming majority are school students who are increasingly pushed to seek employment in order to supplement declining family incomes. A survey of eight high schools carried out last year by the secondary teachers' union found that 51 percent of all their students had part-time jobs during the school term. Studies have revealed a direct correlation between increasing hours of out-of-school employment and declining exam pass rates.

A major factor in the growing proportion of young people in jobs has been the destruction of the national award system following the introduction in 1991 of the Employment Contracts Act. Previous award restrictions on the ratio of junior to senior workers have been removed, allowing employers to replace older workers with teenagers.

The exploitation of youth labor is entrenched in the pay system. Children under 16 are not covered by the minimum wage, which is just \$NZ4.55 an hour for 16-19 year-olds, which in turn is 40 percent less than the adult minimum rate of \$7.55 per hour.



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