Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 May 2000

Unpaid Chinese steelworkers protest

Close to 3,000 Chinese steelworkers from a state-owned alloy metal factory in Liaoyang city, in the north-eastern Liaoning province, demonstrated last Monday over unpaid wages and pensions. Around 50 workers were injured and three protesters arrested when a squad of 900 police early on the morning of Tuesday, May 16 used clubs to disperse the demonstration that was blocking a major highway.

The steelworkers reassembled later on Tuesday and marched to the city hall to protest the police actions. The building was cordoned off by 1,000 police. The protesters held banners that read "Free our workers' delegates" and "Being owed wages is not a crime" and by mid-morning had completely surrounded the building. One government official said the demonstration was the largest the city of 1.7 million people had seen in decades.

An official from the Liaoyang Ferroalloy Factory, the fourth largest company in the city, admitted that around 2,000 workers still employed at the plant had not received wages for the last 16 months, while 2,000 dismissed workers and 1,000 retired workers had not received benefits for the previous three to six months.

A delegation of protesters met the deputy mayor later that day. Having secured a promise that all outstanding monies would be paid by October and those arrested released, the demonstrators dispersed. Workers were skeptical that they would receive their pay as similar promises had been broken previously.

In February, Liaoning province was the scene of a demonstration by 20,000 miners protesting against the bankruptcy of a state-run mine that turned into three days of clashes with police before the army stepped in.

Sri Lankan plantation workers defy emergency laws

Around 225 plantation workers at the Laccomb Private Estate in Maskeliya near Hatton held a wildcat strike on May 10 against wage cuts. Thirteen workers were later interrogated at length at Maskeliya police station.

Significantly the strike was held in defiance of the government's emergency powers promulgated on May 3 following a series of military defeats in the country's ongoing civil war. The regulations include a ban on all strikes and protests.

The four unions representing workers on the estate—the Ceylon Workers Congress, the UP Country Workers Union, the Ceylon National Workers Congress and the Lanka Jathika Estate Workers Union—all kept away from the strike.

Each worker is required to pick 16 kilograms of tea leaves every day. If they fail to reach the target, their daily wage is cut. Plantation workers complain that the target is very difficult to achieve. They have to walk 4 kilometres to reach the fields every morning and labour under harsh conditions.

Workers suspended after Sri Lankan union calls off strike

Fifty-seven workers at the International Gift Design plant in Kadawatha, 15 kilometres north of Colombo, have been suspended after returning to work. Their union, the All Ceylon Mercantile and Industrial Workers Union, called off a strike for the reinstatement of four previously suspended workers.

The union is an affiliate of the Lanka Sama Samaja Party (LSSP), a partner in the ruling Peoples Alliance government. It called off the strike after the government banned all strikes under its new emergency regulations. The workers had been on strike since March 30.

Management has accused the 57 workers of being engaged in an illegal strike causing a loss in profits. The workers' monthly income is between $46 and $59 (US) and most have been employed at the plant for over five years. Management has told the suspended workers not to return to work until a company reorganisation and restructuring program is completed. Fourteen workers were arrested and questioned by police following a management complaint.

Indonesian palace journalists strike against censorship

Around 150 Indonesian journalists with accreditation to the presidential palace began strike action on Wednesday, May 17 to protest the government's tightening of press restrictions. The strike took place when presidential guards evicted journalists from the front yard of the president's office, an area previously open to the press. Reporters had already been stopped from covering Cabinet meetings and from interviewing ministers at the entrance of the Cabinet room.

The strike forced the government to change its plans for the signing of a Letter of Intent with the IMF. Journalists had refused to cover the signing ceremony or any other presidential activity despite appeals for them to do so from the Cabinet Secretary. Government ministers, the Indonesian Bank Governor and an IMF official were forced to wait for 30 minutes as negotiations with the journalists took place. President Wahid did not attend the signing ceremony as was originally scheduled.

One journalist said; “This is the culmination of restrictions to the right of access to information. As soon as Abdurrahman Wahid took office the pressroom at the palace, which had existed for 50 years, was closed and turned into an adjutants' room.... We are very disappointed. Unless the government gives us full access, we'll continue the strike.”

The press restrictions come after the Defence Minister complained last month that press coverage of social conflicts in Aceh and other provinces had “inflamed and worsened the disputes”. He said that openness and freedom of the press were the cost of democracy but it was too high a price to pay.

Indonesian street workers strike

Four hundred temporary street workers from the Bogor sanitation agency went on strike Thursday demanding a wage increase to reach the official minimum wage. The strikers, who included truck drivers, street sweepers and garbage collectors, were also demanding an increase in their allowances and the upgrading of their status to civil servants so they would be eligible for government-sponsored subsidies.

The workers currently earn between Rp90,000 and Rp105,000 (about $US12) a month based on their educational background, well below the Bogor regional minimum wage of Rp270,000. The sanitation agency also takes Rp2,000 each month from each workers' wages to pay for workers' cooperatives. The agency's head said that the workers were not entitled to the minimum wage since they were not employees of a private company.

Indonesian Sony workers continue strike

Nine hundred workers from electronic manufacturer PT Sony Electronics are continuing their sit-in of the plant's export area, begun on April 26, to demand better conditions. Sony estimates that it has lost $US200 million since the strike began, in addition to $40 million lost in a three-day strike in February. The remaining 600 workers are producing 1,200 items per day, down from the 4,000 items produced when the plant is operating at full capacity. Sony has now been forced to transfer some of its orders to foreign distributors.

South Korean police refuse permits for union demonstrations

The Seoul Metropolitan Police Agency this week refused to grant the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) a permit to hold rallies in Taehangno and Seoul Station Plaza for May 31. The rallies were part of a planned general strike by the KCTU, which has also been refused a permit to rally in Kwangju to commemorate the 20-year anniversary of a brutal military massacre in that city.

The police agency wrote to the KCTU saying: “We decided to disapprove the planned rallies as they are obviously meant to threaten social order, given that the Korean Metal Workers Federation, a key member of the KCTU, obstructed traffic and wielded iron pipes at the last May Day rally.”

Following violent clashes between students and riot police on May Day, the police announced they would revise laws and prepare a bill to restrict or ban the right to assembly, demonstrations and rallies if the police determined they could “lead to public violence”. The bill is due to be debated by the National Assembly in September.

Nepal customs workers strike against suspension

Customs workers at Tribuvan International Airport in the Nepalese capital of Katmandu began a strike on May 12 demanding the reinstatement of 27 colleagues who were sacked following the hijacking of an Indian Airline passenger flight from Katmandu to New Delhi last December. The strike has virtually paralysed the airport.

After the hijacking 60 employees, including a high-ranking Civil Aviation Officer, and police officers were suspended. Thirty-three have been reinstated but the ban on the rest remains. According to an official inquiry, no employee at the Katmandu Airport could be held responsible for the hijacking, but the employees have still to be reinstated.

Fiji nurses strike

Nearly 1,300 Fijian nurses were forced back to work on May 15 after a four-day strike over pay increases, back pay and an improved grading structure. Most of the nurses in Fiji had walked off the job on May 11, including 300 nurses from Suva's main hospital. Skeleton staff had been left to manage the country's main hospitals; student nurses also joined the strike.

The government had passed a ministerial order declaring the strike illegal and threatened to have the matter passed on to the Police Commissioner and the Director of Public Prosecutions to initiate legal proceedings against the strikers.

The nurses decided to strike after the Labour Government failed to honor a previous agreement to grant an across-the-board pay rise by March 31. The Arbitration Commission ordered the return to work on May 15 after bringing down a decision, which Prime Minister Mahendra Chaudhry described as "almost the same" as the offer the government had made to the nurses union in March.

The nurses strike was bitterly denounced by Health Minister Isimeli Cokanasiga, who said it was a politically orchestrated move to bring down the government. He accused the opposition party, Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT), and a senior member of the former Fiji Intelligence Service as being behind the striking nurses.

The nurses' union denied that the strike was political. Some striking nurses complained, however, that the opposition SVT women's wing had taken over a march by striking nurses last Friday and tried to turn it into a political rally, shouting anti-Indian and racist remarks. While it is unlikely that the SVT organised the strike, it is attempting to exploit the grievances of nurses who have been affected by the austerity measures imposed by the government.

Yesterday George Speight, son of SVT MP Sam Speight, took over the parliament building and announced that he was suspending the constitution. He declared himself head of state and appointed an interim cabinet of six, including four SVT MPs.

Police violently disperse picket in Wollongong

The dispute at Joy Mining has escalated over the last week with 100 locked-out workers and their supporters occupying part of the company's Coniston depot last week and a 200-strong picket violently broken up by police on Tuesday.

The dispute began in early April when 70 workers were locked out of the company's Moss Vale plant when wage negotiations broke down. Shortly after the picketers were removed legal representatives from the company were granted a Supreme Court order that extended injunctions against those picketing. The company has now threatened to sue the union and the locked-out workers for damages for obstructing their operations.

The pickets were set up outside the company's Coniston plant in an attempt to stop the movement of equipment from Moss Vale and as a measure against nine unionised maintenance workers who are continuing to work in the plant.

Australian miners vote to strike

Around 330 miners from Upper Hunter near Newcastle have voted to strike from this Sunday evening after negotiations broke down over a new enterprise agreement and the planned retrenchment of 40 miners.

The miners at the Howick mine will strike for five days and those at Mt. Thorley for seven. Coal and Allied, which owns both mines, plans to amalgamate the Howick mine with the Hunter Valley Number One mine in six weeks time, eliminating 40 jobs. Negotiations for a new agreement at Mt. Thorley broke down six weeks ago.

Australian coal owner seeking legal ruling against pickets

Kestrel Coal, which now runs the former Gordonstone mine in Central Queensland, is seeking to obtain a permanent injunction in a Brisbane court to prevent picketers from blocking roads outside the mine.

Members of the CFMEU have picketed the mine since 300 workers were sacked in 1997. In March this year Kestral coal gained an interim injunction against the union.