

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 May 2001

South Korean workers march against restructuring

Over 20,000 workers rallied on May Day and defied a government ban on marching into the Kwanghwamun district of Seoul where government buildings and foreign embassies are located. South Korean laws prohibit any outdoor rally within 100 metres of a foreign diplomatic mission.

Marchers pushed aside barriers manned by 300 police at the crossroads leading to the district but another barricade was erected about 50 metres further down the road. In all, 15,000 security forces were placed on alert by the government.

Workers marched behind banners calling for the removal of the “Kim Dae-jung Regime” and an end to economic restructuring which has led to the widespread destruction of jobs and plant closures. Another rally of over 4,000 was held outside Seoul's main railway station.

Following widespread public anger over the violence last month against laid-off Daewoo workers as they attempted to enter the union office inside the company's main Pupyong plant, the police were ordered to exercise restraint at the May Day demonstrations. Baton-wielding riot police were absent with the government relying on policewomen and traffic police to control the marchers. However, a spokesman for the National Police Agency said that the police had been authorised to use water cannon on the demonstrators if they deemed it necessary.

Bangladeshi garment workers strike over conditions

Up to one and a half million women garment workers in Bangladesh went on strike on May 1, after employers refused to allow them to take the May Day holiday. The workers also demanded improved pay and working conditions. A spokesman for the strikers said that it was “unacceptable that the women should be made to work on a day when government officials and many public sector workers are off”.

While the garment industry in Bangladesh is one of the country's highest foreign exchange earners the conditions and pay of workers is extremely poor.

Indonesian truck drivers strike against extortion racket

Truck drivers in Banda Aceh went on strike this week to protest against police and government security officials setting up roadblocks along the highway that connects the city with Medan. Police stop the drivers and force them to pay a fee before they are allowed to proceed.

The drivers ended a protracted strike action in January after they received assurances from leading police officials that the authorities would clamp down on the extortion racket. Despite promises that action would be taken against the police officers involved, little has changed and the drivers face daily harassment.

The strike has affected the flow of goods to Medan and the price of food items such as soybeans and peanuts has increased dramatically.

Telecom workers rally oppose privatisation in Indonesia

Over 500 employees of the state telecommunications company PT Telkom staged a rally outside the company's main offices in Jakarta on May 1 against privatisation. The workers are opposing the takeover of PT Telecom by PT Indosat.

The workers fear that the new management will cut jobs and force early retirements. A spokesman for the protestors said: “We will stage more protests until the acquisition is canceled.”

Sacked Filipino public servants protest outside Supreme Court

Over 3,000 casual and part-time public servants previously employed at the Lapu Lapu City Hall are protesting outside the Philippines Supreme Court against their dismissal and unpaid wages. The workers were sacked after the Regional Trial Court ruled on March 16 that funding allocations in the 2000 budget only permitted the Council to pay the salary and wages of its permanent workers.

This week authorities ordered the protestors to move from outside the Supreme Court but a spokesman for the sacked workers said they would not leave. “We will continue to protest until the issues are resolved,” he said.

Police attack striking salt workers in Sri Lanka

Police attacked striking workers picketing the Lanka Salt

company in Hambanthota on April 30. Police tear-gassed and baton charged the workers who were opposing company strikebreakers. Twenty-one workers, including nine women, were hospitalised. Twenty-three were arrested and will be remanded until May 19.

The former state-owned Lanka Salt, which was privatised in 1997, has a workforce of 1,100. The workers launched a strike on March 29 for 32 demands, including a 2,000 rupee (US\$11.60) pay rise. The company refused the pay demand in talks held on April 17. The workers have accused Peoples Alliance politicians of colluding to break their strike.

Sri Lankan bus assembly workers locked out

Over 2,000 employees of WESCO, a bus assembly plant in Werahara, about 15 kilometres south of Colombo, have been locked out since April 26. Employees reported to work to find a notice on the main gate saying that they had been placed on “leave” from April 27 to May 9. The company has given no explanation for its action.

Workers fear that the move could be a prelude to sackings or the plant's closure. Last year, the company attempted to introduce a “voluntary” retirement scheme to cut jobs but abandoned it due to lack of funds. WESCO workers were not paid last month.

Australian workers seek to defend jobs at Arnotts

Arnotts Biscuits, owned by US food giant Campbells, announced this week that it will shut down its factory in the Melbourne suburb of Burwood by September next year and axe over 600 jobs.

Workers voted to launch an “industrial and community campaign” against the closure. A rally will be held at the site on May 12, followed by a community rally on May 20.

Union leaders, however, have already indicated that they are prepared to accept the company restructuring. Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Leigh Hubbard said that although workers had “indicated they wanted to fight for their jobs”, Arnott's decision “would be hard to reverse”.

Arnott's managing director John Domain confirmed this week that while 434 full-time workers employed at the plant would receive a redundancy payment, 180 contract workers would not. Although Snack Foods, an Australian-based food manufacturer, has expressed interest in the Melbourne factory it has said that it would not reemploy all former employees.

Tasmanian doctors continue campaign for pay rise

Doctors employed at major public hospitals in Tasmania, including the Royal Hobart Hospital, re-imposed work bans this week after rejecting a government pay increase offer of 14 percent. The doctors want a 19 percent rise.

The bans on elective surgery and outpatient appointments were lifted last week after the Industrial Relation Commission ordered that all action cease to allow

negotiations between the union and the government. The doctors say they will defy another IRC order.

Bank union agrees to job cuts in Fiji

The Fiji Bank and Finance Sector Employees Union called off a proposed strike this week after arranging a deal with the management of the Australia and New Zealand Bank. In exchange for a three percent pay increase, the union has accepted the destruction of full time jobs. Over 90 percent of the bank's 402 workers had voted for strike action in a secret ballot last week.

The union deal will allow the bank to introduce “work time flexibility” to suit its peak trading time and convert around 120 full-time jobs to part time, increasing the number of staff on part-time employment to 300.

New Zealand wharf dispute taken to court

New Zealand forestry company Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) and Mainland Stevedoring sought a court injunction this week to stop protesting waterfront workers disrupting operations at South Island ports. The application was lodged with the High Court in Wellington on Wednesday.

CHH and Mainland took the action after government-sponsored mediation talks with the Waterfront Workers Union (WWU) broke down. The talks had been called to resolve the five-month long dispute following CHH's decision to contract its log-loading operations to Mainland, which operates a mobile on-call workforce. The company was bypassing local full-time wharf workers.

The WWU claims that Mainland is working to casualise the waterfront industry and break down established working conditions. Since November last year waterfront workers and their supporters have mounted pickets at the ports of Nelson, Bluff, Port Chalmers and Timaru in an attempt to block Mainland crews working CHH ships.

The mediator's report made a number of recommendations, including the establishment of a government inquiry involving the union and other stevedoring companies to discuss casualisation in the waterfront industry and ways to “reduce hostilities” at the ports.

Mainland's director Greg Dickson said that his company was not interested in such discussions claiming that the waterfront should be “no different” from other sectors of the economy which are “constantly open to competition between firms”. The WWU had promised to call off all pickets if agreement was reached on the mediator's proposals.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact