

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 May 2001

Workers demonstrate in Indonesian capital

Over 3,000 workers from the All-Indonesia Workers Union Federation (FSPSI) demonstrated in Jakarta on May 17 against plans to abolish severance pay and service fees for retired or dismissed workers. Traffic jams began to develop as protesting workers spread across the road in front of the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration.

Late in the afternoon the minister, Al-Hilal Hamdi, agreed to meet a delegation of workers headed by FSPSI chairman Jacob Nua and promised a “two-week grace period to review the decree”.

The changes being sought are a revision of a ministerial decree issued last year which stipulated that companies shedding workers, either through retirement or dismissal, were obliged to provide severance pay, along with financial support for transport, health and housing facilities.

The government moved to overturn the requirements after President Abdurrahman Wahid warned that any interference with the “right” of companies to sack workers would discourage domestic and overseas investors.

A spokesman for FSPSI workers in Malang, East Java, told the media on Thursday that union members would begin a three-day strike on Monday to oppose the new decree.

Adidas union organiser arrested in Indonesia

Indonesian police arrested Ngadinah Binti Abu Mawardi, secretary of the Footwear Workers Association (PERBUPAS), on April 20 for committing “displeasing acts”. The vague charge is based on an old Indonesian law often used to suppress strikes and political dissent.

The arrest comes after Mawardi's union organised a strike at PT Panarub, a contractor for Adidas in Indonesia, last September. Workers wanted the company to pay overtime and other allowances as required under government regulations and the introduction of unpaid menstrual leave. While PT Panarub management agreed they would not sack or intimidate anyone involved in the strike the company now claims that Mawardi's arrest is a police matter and outside their control.

Chemical workers strike in South Korea

Workers employed by South Korean chemical manufacturer Yochon NCC went on an indefinite strike this week, demanding that the company pay a promised performance bonus and a wage increase. The company had agreed to the workers' demands following a 20-day strike in August last year.

Yochon NCC was created through a merger with Daelim

Industrial and Hanwha Chemical in 1999. It produces 1.3 million tons of ethylene a year, or one quarter of the country's annual output, and supplies 14 downstream petrochemical plants in the Yochon Petrochemical Complex.

State medical officers continue protest in Sri Lanka

Registered Medical Officers (RMO) and Assistant Medical Officers (AMO) in Sri Lanka are continuing their work to rule and sick leave campaign. Negotiations with the Deputy Health Minister on May 15 failed to resolve the dispute, with the government accusing the health workers of being “unreasonable” and “unfair”.

The RMOs and AMOs began the campaign on May 10 to push for a log of claims including standard duty rosters in all hospitals, the introduction of a “disturbance” allowance and the removal of barriers to medical officers pursuing higher studies. The 1,550 officers work in 850 small public hospitals across the country.

Sri Lankan insurance workers protest against privatisation

Workers at the National Insurance Company (NIC) in Sri Lanka picketed in front of company offices all over the country on May 14 to oppose the privatisation plans of the Peoples Alliance government.

The government is selling 51 per cent of NIC to private insurer Janasakthi Seva for 458 million rupee (\$US5.1 million). The remaining 49 percent will be sold off in three years time. Unions covering NIC workers are not opposing the sale but have only asked the government to guarantee that jobs and working conditions will be maintained. It is estimated that 560 jobs are at risk.

Over 2,000 Indian aluminum workers denied reemployment

Despite assurances given Bharat Aluminum (BALCO) management on May 8 that it would re-instate all 7,000 workers who took part in the recent 67-day long strike, over 2,000 contract workers have been refused reemployment. The strike was called to oppose the Indian government's decision to privatise BALCO's Korba facility, one the country's largest aluminum producing plants.

The company justified its refusal to rehire the contract workers by claiming that their work agreements had expired. Unions claim that the dismissals are in breach of the deal they struck with the company to end the protracted dispute. One sacked worker told the press: “We have been told that there is no work currently. We may be re-instated after the company starts its production and it will take another two months.”

Australian unions accept Arnotts factory closure

On May 17, the union covering workers at the Arnotts biscuit factory in Burwood, Melbourne called off all action to oppose the plant's closure. Some 200 workers voted at a gate meeting for a union recommendation to accept the redundancy package offered by Arnotts parent company, Campbell.

Campbell announced on May 2 that it had decided to close the Melbourne plant and sack the entire 600 strong workforce as part of a major restructuring and cost cutting program. The union agreement enables this to proceed unchallenged.

The redundancy package offered included four weeks' pay for every year served, and age bonuses of between one and eight weeks' pay for employees over 40 years. The company also offered to extend the deal to casual and contract workers, reversing an earlier decision to exclude them from any severance arrangements.

Council workers strike over harsh disciplinary action

Over 200 workers employed by the Maitland City Council in New South Wales walked off the job on May 16 after management sacked one worker and suspended another for six months. The management accused the workers of removing material from the council tip to use as landfill.

The striking workers denounced the disciplinary action as too severe and pointed out that council employees had previously been allowed to take small amounts of fill for private purposes.

The Industrial Relations Commission has ordered the striking workers to return to work on the grounds that they had failed to follow dispute-settling procedures. A spokesman for the Municipal Employees Union said the action against the two employees was "not appropriate" but confirmed that the union would advise workers to end the strike at an upcoming mass meeting.

Truck drivers strike for higher payments

Owner-truck drivers who deliver beer to clubs and hotels in the NSW Lower Hunter Valley went on strike on May 16 to force Tooheys Brewery and Toll Transport to agree to a 12 percent increase in charges. The drivers' claim that the increase is needed to offset the rise in operating costs since the beginning of the year, including a leap in the price of fuel.

After months of negotiations the brewery has refused to offer anything to the drivers and Toll has said it would only agree to a 3 percent rise. A spokesman for the drivers said the offer was "far too little to pick up the cost increases".

Workers strike over layoffs

More than 700 workers employed by building products company Boral in NSW went on strike on May 17 after the company terminated the contracts of 70 owner-drivers.

A spokesman for the Transport Workers Union said the company had left the drivers with just six months to find alternative work and had not made "adequate provisions for redundancy". About 400 of the strikers returned to work the next day but the remainder had decided to stay out until May 22.

Industrial action blocks Coca Cola deliveries

Security workers at Coca-Cola's bottling plant in Melbourne went on strike on May 16 over the company's refusal to grant a \$1 an hour wage increase. More than 40 trucks carrying Coca-Cola products were prevented from leaving the depot after 11 security workers formed a picket line outside the main gate.

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers' Union said

that the pay rise was to compensate security workers for doing extra duties such as paper work and stock checks. The dispute is presently before the Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand journalists strike over contracts

Journalists in New Zealand are either on strike, or are planning walkouts over work contract negotiations. Journalists employed by the NZ Press Association (NZPA) have walked off the job four times in the past 10 days over company attempts to force many of them off the union agreement. The longest strike to date began on May 8 and went for nine hours.

Negotiations over the new collective contract broke down when the Press Association employers demanded that filing editors, desk editors, branch office staff and salaried workers be excluded from the collective agreement.

Journalists at five North Island newspapers owned by INL also plan industrial action, including strikes, over their new contract, and staff at four other INL sites on the South Island may do the same. INL is a major shareholder in NZPA.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union national secretary Andrew Little condemned the actions of the members of the Press Association as an "attempt at union breaking that flies in the face of the spirit of the Employment Relations Act".

The Employment Relations Act was introduced last year by the Labour-Alliance Government to protect the position of the union bureaucracy. It gives preference to collective contracts negotiated through the unions.

Union halts New Zealand waterfront action

The New Zealand Waterfront Workers Union (WWU) has suspended picketing to stop Mainland Stevedoring from loading log ships operated by timber company Carter Holt Harvey at South Island ports. The union has been involved in a five-month dispute with CHH over Mainland's use of non-union, casual workforce.

The move by CHH to avoid hiring local unionised labour was widely recognised as part of a broader drive by sections of the employers to casualise the country's waterfront industry. The union's decision to suspend industrial action comes in the wake of last week's ruling by the High Court which banned union members from doing anything that would disrupt log loading by Mainland or interfere with the company's "legitimate business".

The Nelson WWF Branch President Brian Callaghan said that because of the court order, the union had decided that protest action had probably "run its course". He said that after four months of protests, it was time to 'try something new', and that the union would now "try to have some dialogue with Carter Holt." Discussions will include ways to make Stevedoring Services (Nelson), the firm that previously loaded Carter Holt's ships in Nelson, competitive with the conditions offered by Mainland.



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