Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 June 2001

Indonesian workers rally over cuts to entitlement rights

Thousands of workers staged a mass rally outside the Ministry of Manpower in Jakarta on May 28. The workers, who are members of the Indonesian Welfare Trade Unions and the All-Indonesian Labor Unions, voted for a nationwide strike on June 11 if a recent ministerial decree allowing employers to shed labour without paying severance and service entitlements was not revoked.

A spokesman for the unions said that new decree “did nothing for the welfare of labourers”. He said guaranteed service and severance pay “was seen as non-profitable for businessmen, who have pushed strongly to have it reviewed”.

South Korean nylon plant occupied

Over 300 workers from the Hyosung nylon manufacturing plant in Ulan, South Korea occupied the factory on May 28, following violent clashes with security guards and management personnel. The clashes left around 200 workers injured, some seriously.

The dispute began after management announced that 14 workers would be relocated after their jobs were automated. The company is one of the world's largest nylon producers and the biggest polyester tyre producer with sales of $US1 billion last year.

Ethylene plant strike escalates in South Korea

Workers at the Yeochun Naphtha Cracker Centre's No 1 cracker unit went on strike on May 30 after negotiations between the union and management over wages and conditions broke down. The No.1 cracker unit at the ethylene plant was running at 70 percent capacity due to a strike begun two weeks ago by a group of workers. The other two plant crackers are running at 90 percent capacity.

Filipino workers picket against social security system sell off

Members of the Philippines Social Security System (SSS) Employees Union picketed the SSS head office in Manila on May 30. The protest was organised by the union and other labour organisations to oppose a government plan to privatise the system, including the workers' pension fund.

The president of the 4,000 strong SSS Employees Union said that privatisation was “like robbing the poor for the benefit of the rich”. She said: “Privatising investments simply means putting workers' money in the hands of the big fund managers, stock brokers and security firms.”

Hong Kong unionists protest in support of sacked Indonesian workers

Members of the Catering & Hotels Industries Employees General Union and the Coca Cola Hong Kong Limited Staff Union protested last week in support of 900 Shangri-La hotel workers in Jakarta who were sacked last year after striking for improved wages and conditions. Jakarta management reopened the hotel using scab labour and contract workers.

The Hong Kong unionists marched to Shangri-La's head office on May 28 but were blocked by company security guards from presenting a protest letter to Giovanni Angelini, the hotel groups' chief executive officer. The demonstration ended after a management representative agreed to take the letter.

Strike against privatisation in India

Unions representing employees of India's central government and various state governments have voted to stage nationwide anti-privatisation rallies on July 18, followed by a one-day strike on July 25. The unions are demanding that the government negotiate on the privatisation and downsizing of the country's state-owned enterprises.

The campaign was endorsed at a joint convention of the All-India State Government Employees Federation and the Confederation of Central Government Employees and Workers on May 28. Union demands include reduction of contract labour in government enterprises and the withdrawal of amendments to labor laws allowing employers to shed labour at will.

The industrial action is not aimed at defending jobs or conditions but securing a guaranteed role for the unions in the sale of India's state-owned industries. This has been demonstrated during other recent anti-privatisation campaigns. The unions recently ended a protracted strike by aluminum workers at Bharath Aluminum (BALCO) against the sale of the Korba aluminum plant, even though hundreds of casual workers were denied reemployment. Privatisation of the plant is going ahead with the collaboration of the unions, who have been given consultation positions.

Pakistan bangle factory workers still locked out

Representatives of thousands of workers locked out by bangle manufacturers in Hyderabad, Pakistan, held a press conference on May 26 and threatened to launch widespread protests unless factory owners immediately resumed production.

Up to half a million workers from the bangle plants and associated industries are affected by the lockout which was initiated by employers on May 15 against alleged heavy government taxes. Workers' spokesmen told the press conference that the owners' demands were “ridiculous” because the taxes were not new but had been levied for a protracted period. “If they [the owners] refuse to resume production we will go onto streets to defend our jobs,” he said.

CSR threatens lockout in Australia

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CSR Sugar has threatened to lockout workers at its seven mills if 700 employees at three mills refuse to drop threats of industrial action. The workers, who are employed in mills at Burdekin, Herbert River, and Sarina, were given this ultimatum after a 48-hour strike over a new work contract.

The workers struck after the company claimed that a three percent wage rise claim was “totally unacceptable”. Sugar mill workers are also seeking assurances on job security and an end to redundancies.

Workers picket Electrolux factory in Melbourne

Female workers employed by white goods manufacturer Electrolux in Melbourne walked off the job and protested outside the factory office on May 23. The 66 women, together with the rest of the factory workforce, will loss their jobs later this year when the company relocates to South Australia.

Electrolux has offered employees a two-day computer course or the opportunity to get a forklift license. The workers are demanding the company increase redundancy packages and improve training to assist the workers find alternative employment. Many of those picketing were older migrant workers, who are long time employees and have limited English language skills. They are concerned that they will not find other jobs in the area.

Tasmanian academics vote to strike

Academic staff at the University of Tasmania called a stop work meeting on May 30 over a new enterprise agreement, including a 12 percent wage increase. Negotiations have dragged on for over 18 months. The meeting voted to call a 24-hour strike if university authorities do not immediately agree to the wage increase. The National Union of Students passed a resolution calling on students to support the academic's campaign.

Drivers strike in Papua New Guinea

Public Motorised Vehicle (PMV) owner-drivers struck on May 28 in Papua New Guinea's Mount Hagan province after the Land Transport Board declared illegal recent fare rises implemented by the workers.

The drivers say they were forced to increase fares by approximately 40 percent in response to steep rises in fuel, spare parts and insurance costs. Picket lines were established at a number of entry points into the province. PMV's carrying passengers were stopped and asked to off-load them. The provincial government agreed to meet with driver representatives to discuss the dispute.

Union calls off New Zealand journalists' action

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has called off the latest strike in a month-long campaign by journalists for new employment contracts. On May 25, 100 journalists from the country's biggest metropolitan daily, the *NZ Herald*, struck in opposition to moves by newspaper proprietors to erode conditions in existing contracts and force salaried workers off their collective employment contracts.

The *Herald* strike follows a series of walkouts by journalists and printers over the last three weeks. Employees at the NZ Press Association and its major shareholders, INL and Wilson and Horton, had stepped up stoppages and protests in other centres, including Wellington and Christchurch.

Herald journalists initially voted to stay out until May 29, but were ordered back to work a day earlier by the union. Engineering union official Tony Wilton admitted that the company had not backed away from its position on the collective agreement. Even so, the union called off the strike as a “sign of good faith” after *Herald* management put forward a new contract offer including a minor pay rise. After initially offering a 1.5 percent rise over one year, the company increased this to 2 percent over 3 years, plus a pre-tax lump-sum payment of $NZ500.

The union has admitted that *Herald* management was still insisting that more than 30 journalists be automatically excluded from the contract.

Labour government threatens New Zealand firefighters

Ministers in New Zealand's Labour-Alliance government have joined Fire Service management in threatening firefighters to settle their long-running contract dispute or face losing thousands of dollars in back pay. The threat has surfaced in the middle of contract negotiations between the Fire Service Commission and the Professional Firefighters Union.

Fire Service management threatened to axe provisions to backdate a pay rise unless a full settlement to the dispute is reached by the end of June. The average pay increase stands at 8 percent, meaning that individual firefighters could loose between $NZ2,000 and $5,000, depending on seniority, if the threat is carried out. Minister of State Services Trevor Mallard and Internal Affairs Minister George Hawkins said the pay offer, backdated to July 1 of last year, “could not continue past June 30”.

The Fire Service has also threatened legal action against the union if it does not put the revised pay offer to members and recommend they accept it. This ultimatum is being issued under the so-called “good faith” bargaining provisions of the government's Employment Relations Act, requiring all “reasonable” pay and contract offers be put before union members. In April, firefighters overwhelmingly rejected the Fire Service's pay offer and voted for further industrial action.

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