

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 May 2002

Indonesian drivers strike against fuel price rises

Passenger minibus drivers across Indonesia struck on May 6 against the 14.5 percent fuel price rise announced by the government last week. All the major centres, including Makassar, Bandung, Purwokerto and routes on the outskirts of Jakarta were affected. In some areas, the police, the military and state-owned land transportation companies deployed scab vehicles in an attempt to undermine the strike. Even so, hundreds of passengers remained stranded. In Bandung, the police declared the strike illegal, claiming that some drivers had been forced to stop work. In Bogor, a 25-year-old driver was arrested and charged with “provoking a public transportation strike”.

The strike continued the next day in several towns including Yogyakarta, Batang in Central Java and the West Java town of Cirebon. Students supporting the drivers’ strike in Makassar blockaded roads and burnt rubber tires. Police fired shots into the air and clashed with students on a number of occasions.

Despite the massive increase, drivers have been prohibited from raising fares and the government has rejected calls for compensation. One driver, Dudi Sabil Sikandar, explained to media the consequences: “We used to bring home at least 30,000 rupiah (\$US3.22) a day, but since the price of fuel went up we can only take home 10,000 rupiah a day. How can we feed our families on that much money?”

Indonesian oil workers end 10-day strike

Some 200 workers at oil producer Devon Salawati in Sorong ended a 10-day strike on May 4 after the company agreed to negotiate their demands for improved working conditions and a bonus. The workers struck on April 24 and raised their demands after Chinese-owned Petrochina bought Devon’s assets. The strike disrupted crude oil supplies to the major Pertamina Kasim refinery in Sorong, bringing production to a standstill.

Strike ends over union rights in Malaysia

The Electrical Industry Workers’ Union (EIWU) called off a strike by 70 workers at Flextronics Technology in Shah Alam, Malaysia, on May 7. The workers had been picketing the plant since April 29 over the company’s refusal to recognise their union and to comply with the terms of a collective work agreement signed with the former employer, Ericsson Mobile Communication.

Flextronics Technology bought the Shah Alam plant from Ericsson two years ago. In February this year the management decided to cancel the previous work agreement and announced a total overhaul of working conditions. The company informed the

EIWU it would no longer negotiate with the union.

Flextronics then formed a company-controlled “joint consultative committee” that immediately agreed to lengthen the daily shift from 8 to 12 hours and impose compulsory overtime. Workers were forced to sign a logbook before going to the toilet and prayer time allotted to Muslim workers was cut.

The union recommended the return to work after Flextronics agreed to the government determining if the company had breached any of the conditions of the sale by scrapping the old agreement. The management also agreed to reinstate all workers suspended during the strike.

Indian teachers stage work stoppage

On May 7, college teachers employed in centres attached to the Kuvempu University in Shimoga, Andra Pradesh, held a two-hour stoppage to protest against the government banning remuneration for work performed for student examinations.

The University Grants Commission justified its refusal to pay the entitlements by claiming that the 1983 Education Act stipulates that examination work is part of the teachers’ normal duties. The teachers refute the claim. They are also demanding an increase across a number of allowances.

Mineral workers protest in India

Mineral workers at 64 work units owned by Mysore Mineral across the southern Indian state of Karnataka launched an indefinite dharna (sit-down strike) on May 6 in front of the company’s head office in Bangalore. The workers are demanding the company implement the last recommendation of the state’s fifth pay commission. Even though the recommendations were handed down when the commission was formed in 1998, the management has made no attempt to comply with them.

Canon technicians take Australia-wide action

Canon photocopier technicians in four Australian states struck for up to 48 hours on May 7 demanding a five percent pay increase and improved severance pay arrangements. Technicians in New South Wales held a 24-hour protest outside Canon’s Sydney headquarters to press their demands.

The company has only offered to pay a one percent increase and refused to discuss the technicians’ other demands. Workers condemned the offer as “miserable” and claimed that Canon “was treating its employees like second class citizens”.

A spokesman for the workers said: “We are not asking for the moon and the stars. Our claims at Canon are neither more nor less than that granted by their competitors.” Canon’s main rivals in the business equipment industry, OCE and Fuji Xerox, recently agreed

to pay an-across-the-board wage increase of \$2,000 a year and to improve redundancy provisions.

While Canon claims it cannot afford to pay a five percent increase, the company has just released a profit forecast for the coming fiscal year of more than \$1 billion. The company has assets of over \$20 billion.

Seamen occupy ship against layoffs

Some 17 seamen, supported by other workers and local residents, continued an occupation of CSL Yarra at Port Pirie in South Australia this week, protesting against their imminent dismissal and replacement with a Ukrainian crew.

The ship's owners, Canadian company CSL, sold the Yarra to a subsidiary, CSL Pacific, to be re-flagged in the Bahamas. The move allows CSL to avoid cabotage laws that direct companies trading exclusively on the Australian coast to employ local seamen. CSL Pacific plans to hire Ukrainian seafarers on inferior wages and conditions. The Yarra ships cement for Adelaide-based Brighton Cement to other Australian ports.

Several hundred people marched to the dock over the weekend to back the Yarra occupation and supporters have picketed daily at the dock. Even though CSL aims to slash seamen's wages and working conditions internationally, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has promoted the crudest nationalism. The MUA's central slogan has been "Aussie jobs for Aussie workers", not decent jobs and working conditions for all seamen. One recently issued union bulletin was entitled, "Yarra crew keeps Oz flag flying".

Qantas workers accept union deal to end pay dispute

Maintenance workers at Qantas airlines in Sydney and Melbourne voted this week to accept a union-brokered pay deal ending a 10-month long dispute. The deal negotiated by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union delivers a pay increase of 4.5 percent over 14 months.

Union officials claim the deal to be a victory because the pay rise "was not contingent on productivity gains" and a pay freeze agreed to by other unions last year. The increase, however, is far below the immediate 5 to 6 percent rise originally demanded by the unions. Maintenance workers have also been subjected an unofficial wage freeze for almost 12 months. Negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement and wage rise began in August last year and the dispute has dragged on ever since. Signalling that the unions will not make any further claims, AMWU national secretary said this week: "I'm confident that this now resolves this dispute for another 15 to 18 months."

Qantas CEO Geoff Dixon praised the agreement saying the outcome will "allow Qantas to be more competitive in the market" and that it was "consistent with the company's wages approach for all its employees".

Sugar workers seek action against layoffs

Workers at the Racecourse Sugar Mill in the Queensland town of Pleystowe are threatening to take industrial action if the company imposes forced redundancies. Workers are also angry that the company continually uses contract labour and undermines permanent jobs. Mackay Sugar, the owner of the mill, wants to axe over 60 jobs from its four mills in the Mackay district and to close

the Racecourse mill.

Union officials, however, are reluctant to organise strike action at Racecourse or the other affected mills. A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said the dispute would only lead to industrial action "if Mackay Sugar forces it". "We don't want to take the drastic action because in these circumstances and the environment we know that the growers and the harvesters are doing it just as bad," he said. Negotiations between the unions and Mackay Sugar are continuing.

Tasmanian nurses strike over pay

More than 100 nurses at the Royal Hobart Hospital in Tasmania went on strike on May 7 in protest against the state government's inaction over the payment of allowances. The one-hour work stoppage was staged to push for a \$40 a week allowance promised to nurses of all qualifications and categories. The state government is refusing the bonus to nurses with tertiary qualifications in specialist courses.

A spokesperson for the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) claimed that the government had reneged on an agreement it signed 14 months ago. A survey by the ANF of its members found more than 1,300 nurses had specialist qualifications but only 275 were being paid the allowance.

New Zealand food workers strike for sick leave

Workers at the New Zealand Food Industries have been maintaining a picket outside the company's Ponsonby plant since May 6 in support of a claim for two extra sick leave days a year. The workers are only allowed five sick days a year.

Site union delegate Paul Marshall said: "We're only asking for the same sick leave entitlement as other workers in our industry, in recognition that we have a life outside of work and obligations and responsibilities for our families."

NZ teachers protest over government slander

Teachers at Hutt Valley High School near Wellington in New Zealand walked off the job on May 8 in protest against a full-page advertisement placed in newspapers this week by the Education Ministry.

The advertisement, in the form of a letter addressed to "Dear Families" and signed by secretary of education Howard Fancy, called on parents to "blame" post-primary teachers for the "impasse" in a protracted dispute over wages and working conditions. The teachers are currently involved in an industrial campaign of work bans and stoppages after rejecting a government pay offer of 3.5 percent over two years. The Post Primary Teachers Association wants negotiations on a "compromise" proposal containing a national qualifications allowance of \$3,500 over three years in addition to the government's offer.



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