

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 May 2002

South Korean drivers rally in Seoul

Over 13,000 members of the Democratic Taxi Labor Union from 152 taxi firms rallied in Seoul on May 13 to demand an end to delays on the introduction of a five-day workweek and the introduction of a new payment system for the use of vehicles. Taxi drivers in Korea have to pay an up-front daily fee to their employer for the use of cars. The drivers are demanding an end to up-front fees and the introduction of a monthly salary system.

The driver voted to strike on May 24, one week before the opening of the World Cup Soccer finals. Medical workers and steel workers have also voted to strike for 48-hours on May 22. About 800 hotel workers are threatening to strike at the end of the month over demands for a shorter working week and a range of other issues.

The strike threats have emerged despite the efforts of both the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) to head off labour disputes during the World Cup. Major unions have signed agreements to avoid industrial action and the peak bodies directed their affiliates to finalise annual wage negotiations early this year.

Earlier this week, South Korea's president Kim Dae-jung urged unions to suppress strikes in the airlines, subways and other key industries during the games. "There should be no management-labor disputes during the World Cup for the interest of the nation and the companies," he said.

Indonesian workers demand company dismiss manager

About 400 workers at PT Mawar Nirwana, a plastic flower manufacturer in Tangerang, struck on May 13 to demand the dismissal of the company's production manager. Workers claim he has been "acting like a dictator". All production at the plant was halted as workers gathered outside.

The workers complained that the production manager transferred them from one section to another without consultation or consideration for their circumstances, cancelled bonuses for those who failed to reach stringent production targets and generally abused employees. One worker Alamsyah said the manager's decisions "always disadvantage us". Fajdri, another worker, said: "This manager always decides things as he likes without discussing it with our union."

Public transport strikes in Indonesia against fuel hike

Hundreds of public passenger minivan drivers in Padang, West Sumatra went on strike on May 13 against the 14.5 percent fuel price rises imposed by the central government earlier this month. The drivers, who have to pay for all gasoline or diesel, have not been compensated for the rise and prevented from raising fares. The price hike has led to a large drop in their earnings.

The striking drivers ply the routes from Padang's city terminal to Siteba, Kampung Kelawi, Simpang Haru, Teluk Bayur, Pengambiran and Nanggalo. According to the Nanggalo Transportation Cooperatives (Kopan), its 318 members will continue to strike until their demands are met by the city administration.

The strike follows industrial action by hundreds of public minibus

drivers in major centres across Indonesia last week. Most returned to work after local authorities agreed to allow fare increases. Drivers in Bogar, West Java, however, ceased work again on May 14, after the city council reneged on an agreement.

Sri Lankan plantation workers strike against privatisation

Some 500 plantation workers at the Oppalgala and Elagala estates in Rattota, in Sri Lanka's central district province of Matale, went on strike on May 11, against government plans to privatise the estates. Plantation union leader Arumugam Thondaman and local union officials had already agreed to the privatisation plans in an earlier meeting with the Minister of Estate Infrastructure and Livestock Development.

A spokesman for the striking workers said that they opposed the decision and warned: "If the state plantation cooperation goes ahead with the plan, we will call a district-wide strike against it." The two estates are among the few left in government hands after wholesale privatisation of the plantation sector by successive governments.

Plantation workers demand more teachers in Sri Lanka

About 700 workers at Linsted Estate in Bogawantalawa, in Sri Lanka's Nuwara-Eliya district, struck on May 13 to demand improvements at the Bogawantalawa Linsted Tamil School. According to the workers, there is only the head master and one teacher to provide for the needs of 140 students. Like most plantation schools, it only has resources for classes up to grade five levels.

Indian power engineers fight privatisation

Some 4,000 power engineers in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh held a two-hour work stoppage on May 13 to protest against the privatisation of the Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation. Engineers walked off the job at the Anpara, Obra, Panki, Parichcha, Harduagani and Rihand power stations and at stations in the districts of Bareilly, Agra, Moradabad, Saharanpur, Kanpur and Jansi. About 600 engineers held a demonstration in state capital Lucknow.

Teachers oppose cuts to education in southern India

College and university teachers in the southern state of Tamil Nadu have banned evaluations of examination papers since May 10. The teachers are protesting against legislation that will affiliate government colleges to universities. The move will increase the heavy financial burden on universities that are already suffering a shortage of funds. The changes also threaten the job security of college administrators.

The teachers are also opposing a government move to reduce grants to colleges and universities that will undermine the ability of students from poorer backgrounds to gain access to higher education. Teachers' organisations will meet on May 20 to decide on future actions.

Agreement ends Australian steel dispute

The Australian Workers Union has called an end to a long-running dispute involving thousands of steelworkers at BHP's Port Kembla plant in Wollongong. The dispute over a new enterprise agreement went on for about 12 months and included a series of 24-hour protest stoppages.

The Industrial Relations Commission recommended this week that BHP pay wage increases of 4 percent, backdated to December last year, with

another 4 per cent in December this year. It has also recommended the company commit to “job security” and that the union guarantee future industrial disputes will not interrupt production. There is also an increase in long-service entitlements from 8 to 13 weeks, after 10 years service.

The commitment to job security is an empty promise. BHP has already outsourced non-core work at Port Kembla and eliminated hundreds of maintenance, security and in-house ambulance jobs. Over the past decade it has axed thousands of steel jobs, including the closure of the integrated steel plant in Newcastle.

Queensland sugar workers to burn redundancy letters

Sugar mill workers in North Queensland voted unanimously this week to burn letters sent to them by Mackay Sugar offering a new “voluntary” redundancy package. The workers will burn the letters at a meeting next week to publicly protest the company’s decision to axe 60 jobs from its four mills in the Mackay district and close its Racecourse mill in Pleystowe.

Child protection workers strike over staff shortages

Child protection workers on the New South Wales north coast went on strike for 24 hours on May 15. The workers, who are employed by the Department of Community Services, were protesting over staff shortages. The dispute is still before the Industrial Commission and negotiations are continuing between the Department and Public Service Association, the union that covers the workers.

Waterside workers strike closes Papua New Guinea ports

Waterside workers in Papua New Guinea began an indefinite strike on May 11, bringing the ports of Port Moresby, Lae, Alotau, Madang, Wewak and Rabaul to a standstill. The strike has left three container ships—the *MV Niugini Coast*, *MV Kokopo Chief* and one carrying cargo for the Ok Tedi Mine—stranded with their cargo still on board. Some 300 administration and clerical staff at Lae dockyard and 600 casuals have been stood down.

The striking workers, members of the Maritime Workers Industrial Union, are demanding a 40 percent pay increase to offset PNG’s rampant inflation. Over the past months, prices have soared by 30 to 40 percent. There exists no mechanism to compensate for the price hikes because the system of wage adjustments was abolished in PNG in 1992 and replaced with a Labour Department minimum wage.

Despite the determination of rank and file members to stay on strike until they achieve their demand, the union has already indicated it is willing to accept a lower offer. Union president John Mahuk said on May 14 that the workers “want nothing less than 10 percent and the companies must compensate them”.

Port Services PNG and the Employer’s Federation of PNG are seeking a legal injunction in the court to force a return to work.

Union orders teachers to end industrial action

The Post Primary Teachers’ Association (PPTA) in New Zealand has ordered an end to all industrial action after it reached an agreement with the Labour government to end a dispute over wages and working conditions. The deal was put together on the eve of the Labour Party conference.

The wage component in the deal is \$NZ45 million less than the “compromise offer” put together by the union and voted on by teachers in a recently held ballot. The union’s compromise offer called for a 3.5 percent pay increase, an extra allowance of \$3,500 for teachers working on the National Certificate of Educational Achievement (NCEA) and guaranteed non-contact time to allow for marking and preparatory work.

The settlement accepted by the union provides for an immediate 2 percent pay increase backdated to last July, a further 1.5 percent in July 2002 and another 2 percent 12 months later. This is essentially the same pay deal offered by the government in March this year and rejected by teachers. The NCEA claim has been reduced to a three-stage bonus payment totaling \$3,500. Payments will not continue beyond 2004.

A government and union working party will be established to make recommendations on secondary teachers’ pay and conditions. Its unstated aim is to save the government money by removing current contractual links that provide for “pay parity” between 14,000 secondary teachers and their 40,000 colleagues in the primary schools.

There has been no improvement on the government’s earlier offer on “non-contact” time previously rejected as inadequate by PPTA members. The agreement will be put to teachers’ meetings in about two weeks time.

New Zealand postal workers consider pay rise

Details of a two-year collective work agreement struck between New Zealand Post and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) were sent out to postal workers this week with a union recommendation that it be accepted.

The settlement contains two 3 percent wage increases to July, followed by another 3 percent next year. The deal improves sick pay provisions, clarifies hours of work for retail workers and ensures staffing levels to reduce the times postal workers are asked to cover for absent colleagues. There has also been an agreement on an improved bonus scheme and NZ Post has agreed to “review” Easter Saturday working.

The EPMU is attempting to use the wage settlement to poach members from the smaller Postal Workers Union. It had insisted that the agreement only cover EPMU members, or those postal workers who join the union before July 1. The EPMU currently has 5,000 members at NZ Post.

New Zealand doctors seek collective contract

A ballot of 1,800 members of the Resident Doctors Association returned a 95 percent vote in favour of a campaign for the establishment of a national collective employment agreement. Resident medical officers are house surgeons and registrars who work in the public hospitals run by New Zealand’s 21 district health boards (DHBs). Currently all the DHBs have separate contracts with doctors and there is a 16 percent variance between the highest and lowest-paying boards. The highest salaries are paid in the provinces where there are difficulties attracting staff, while the lowest salaries are in the major city hospitals.



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