

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 June 2002

Chinese authorities bar French labour delegation

Authorities in China's northeast province of Liaoning barred a five-member mission from the Paris-based International Labour Solidarity Alliance from visiting Liaoyang city, where laid-off workers have been engaged in months of protests against unemployment and official corruption.

Public Security Bureau officers detained the delegation on May 26, as they were making their way to the Liaoyang Ferroalloy factory. Workers from the Ferroalloy plant were at the forefront of militant anti-government demonstrations during March. Four of their leaders were arrested and are now being tried by the Chinese government for "illegal assembly".

After being seized by police, the four French delegates were bundled into a van. Three days later they were forced to return to Beijing and then leave China for Hong Kong.

Indonesian plantation workers hold two day protest

Thousands of workers from the state-owned plantation company PT Perkebunan Nusantara II in North Sumatra, Indonesia demonstrated for two days this week outside the regional governor's office in Medan.

The workers demanded a pay rise and the dismissal of Suhairi Lubis, the company president, for refusing to negotiate over their employment conditions. While the workers won a pay rise of 30,000 rupiah in January, this only brought their monthly salary to 310,000 rupiah, well below the provincial minimum monthly wage of 464,000 rupiah (just over \$US55).

Indonesian cigarette workers strike for pay

About 15,000 workers employed by Gudang Garam Cigarettes, near Kedin in East Java, launched an indefinite strike on May 30 to demand a wage rise and improved working conditions. The workers receive just 400,000 rupiah per month (about \$US50).

The company owns 208 hectares of land in Kediri, where it has tobacco warehouses, as well as machine-made and hand-rolled cigarette operations. Gudang Garam's other interests include banking, investments and polyester film companies. It also operates a wholly-owned subsidiary that produces folding boxboard for use in cigarette packaging.

Workers in Thailand demonstrate over safety

On May 8, over 400 workers, including many afflicted by work-related injuries, demonstrated outside the Queen Sirikit Convention Hall in Bangkok to demand the government pass draft legislation governing health and safety in the workplace.

Over 50,000 people have endorsed the draft, which was authored several years ago by a workers' committee. It calls for the establishment of a democratically-elected panel, including patients and experts, to be responsible for the provision of medical treatment to

injured workers, the enforcement of workplace safety, and distribution of compensation and severance payments.

In addition, the demonstrators demanded the government provide immediate compensation to workers affected by a number of recent major industrial accidents, including the Longan fruit factory explosion and the Klongtoey chemical explosion.

Deputy Minister of Labour and Social Welfare Ladawan Wongsriwong met with a delegation from the protest and promised the government would consider their demands at the next cabinet meeting. The government has previously promised to consider the draft but failed to honour its commitment.

Sri Lankan tea estate workers fight for improved conditions

Workers at the Labookelle tea estate in Nuwaraeliya began an indefinite strike on May 30. The strikers surrounded the estate superintendent's bungalow, blocking his movements for three days.

The 2,000 workers are demanding the working day end at 4.30pm, improved housing, transport and health facilities and the upgrading of the Labookelle hospital's maternity ward. They also demanded the company provide job opportunities for youth on the estate.

In a separate dispute, 1,300 estate workers at Rockwood estate in Hewaheta, Hanguranketta, 140 kilometres from Colombo, demonstrated at the estate offices on June 3. The workers are demanding the company repair living quarters, provide health and other basic facilities, and pay salary arrears. The workers have given the company until June 17 to resolve the dispute or they will extend the protest to include joint action with other estate workers.

Sri Lankan police called against council workers

About 300 workers at the Jaffna Municipal Council in the north of Sri Lanka have been on strike since June 3, demanding permanency for a number of casual employees. Council officials called police to break up a demonstration of workers outside the council building this week. Workers were threatened with arrest if they did not remain 100 metres from the entrance.

Voluntary teachers call for permanency in Sri Lanka's north and east

On May 29, Sinhala voluntary teachers working in the war-ravaged north and east of Sri Lanka struck took strike action and began an indefinite sit-down protest outside the Education Ministry head office in Colombo. The teachers are demanding permanent full-time jobs.

According to a spokesman for the Combined North-East Voluntary Teachers Association, many of the teachers have worked in a voluntary capacity for more than 10 years, and all of them have served between two and 10 years in remote locations.

Pakistan irrigation workers defend jobs

On June 3, workers from the Irrigation Department in Kotri Barrage, Hyderabad, marched from the company's district office though the

main streets of the town. The workers demanded the department abandon plans to relocate its offices from Hyderabad to another city and cut jobs. Workers have threatened to disrupt the irrigation system if their demands are not met.

Australian steel workers remain on strike despite legal action

Maintenance workers at BHP Billiton's Western Port steel mill in Hastings, Victoria, are continuing to strike in defiance of legal action by the company. The 280 workers struck and began picketing the plant on May 21, after negotiations broke down between unions and the management over a new workplace agreement.

On May 23, BHP obtained a court injunction ordering the unions to end the picket that has impeded deliveries of supplies and the shipment of finished steel product. Last weekend the company served notice on 59 employees and a number of individual union officials, threatening to include them in an extended court order.

On June 4, the Australian Industrial Relations Commission issued a certificate allowing BHP Steel to begin legal proceedings against two unions and 56 workers for damages. The management also threatened to stand down 700 production workers if the dispute continued.

The same day, a number of Western Port strikers travelled to Geelong after learning that a cargo of finished steel products from Hastings was being shipped from there for delivery in Victoria and South Australia. They established a picket at the Geelong shipping terminal, preventing two-thirds of the shipment being dispatched.

The strike comes as BHP is preparing for the sale of its steel division. The company wants to lower costs and increase productivity at the mill so it is more attractive to potential buyers.

Tasmanian nurses demand training allowance

As part of a long-running dispute over staffing levels and training allowances, members of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) in Tasmanian hospitals began to close down beds this week. Over 30 beds were closed at the Royal Hobart Hospital and Launceston General, and 12 beds at the North West Regional Hospital. The Health and Community Services Union, which also has members in hospitals, has ruled out joining the nurses.

Queensland nurses reject Labor government pay offer

Nurses throughout Queensland rejected the Labor government's latest offer on pay and working conditions at stop-work meetings this week. They also voted to ban non-nursing duties.

The nurses are demanding a six percent pay rise and an increase in staffing to overcome shortages and increasing workloads. The bans have affected 32 hospitals across the state, including in regional and rural centres such as Cairns, Innisfail and the Torres Strait.

The nurses say that elective surgery has been cut dramatically and all-round patient care is being jeopardised by the lack of fully qualified staff. A total of 2,500 shifts in hospitals across the state were understaffed for a week in February. So far over 20,000 people have signed a petition in support of the nurses.

New Zealand teachers continue action against pay deal

A series of stop-work meetings were called this week by the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA), in an attempt to push through the deal it has struck with the Labour-Alliance government to end the 14-month dispute over teachers' pay and working conditions.

This is the second settlement package that has been met with overwhelming hostility from PPTA members. After signing off on the latest deal, the union called off all industrial action before teachers even had a chance to discuss it. Over the past three weeks, 50 schools—over 10 percent of the country's secondary colleges—have

been hit by strikes carried out in defiance of the PPTA leadership.

Even before this week's stop-work meetings got underway, South Island teachers, supported by school students, marched through Christchurch and Blenheim on May 31 in opposition to the proposed settlement.

On June 5, student teachers at the Wellington College of Education walked out of classes when teachers attended the scheduled stop work meeting. A spokesperson for the 100 students involved said they wanted to demonstrate their support for teachers' concerns. It is expected that overall ballot results will be announced on June 10.

Young New Zealand father killed in industrial accident

A 30-year-old father was killed in a steel factory accident on May 6 in Christchurch, New Zealand. The man was operating a heavy industrial grinder when the wheel disintegrated and he was struck by flying fragments. He was rushed to a nearby hospital but died from severe injuries. Occupational Safety and Health Service inspectors and the police are presently investigating the accident.

The death is the latest in a string of workplace fatalities in New Zealand. In the six months to January 2002 there were 12 industrial deaths in Auckland alone. A spokesman for the New Zealand Council of Trade Unions said New Zealand's record on deaths caused by direct industrial accidents was "one of the worst in the world". He commented that if this figure was added to the number of workers who die through work-related injuries and illnesses, more than 500 New Zealanders were being killed a year.

Teachers demand PNG government pay salaries

Teachers in Papua New Guinea's (PNG) West Sepik province voted to boycott classes next term if the government continues to refuse to pay outstanding salaries. Meetings were held in Aitape, Nuku, Lumi, Telefomin, Green River and Vanimo.

According to the Sandaun Secondary School Headmasters Association, the teachers have not been paid for five consecutive fortnights. Teachers' allowances for multi-grade teaching, performing higher duties and boarding expenses and have not been paid since 1998, and in some cases since 1994.

Education Secretary Peter Baki had promised that the payment would be paid when accurate lists of teachers serving in the province were obtained. Authorities, however, have reneged on the commitment.



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