

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 May 2003

Millions strike across India against privatisation

Some 40 million Indian workers held a nationwide one-day strike on May 21 to oppose the ruling Bharathiya Janatha Party government's privatisation program and amendments to the country's labour laws. West Bengal, Kerala and Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka were particularly affected with major cities brought to a standstill.

The strike crippled services in the banking, transport, insurance and mining sectors. Services on the Eastern and South Eastern railway were disrupted when workers blocked the tracks at various locations. Jet Airways and Sahara Airlines, two private sector airlines, were also shut down by strike action.

Huge demonstrations were held in Bombay and Kolkata. Workers chanted anti-government and anti-privatisation slogans as they marched through the streets. They also expressed their anger over plans to allow state-run companies to fire workers and reduce the deposit rates for pension funds.

The media described the strike, called by the All India Trade Union Congress (ATUC), Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, as the country's biggest industrial protest in recent times. There is widespread opposition to the government decision to raise 132 billion rupees (\$US2.75 billion) by selling a number of state-owned enterprises by March 2004.

Indian doctors protest outsourcing of medical education

Doctors at government hospitals and health centres in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu held a one-day strike on May 14 against government moves to outsource medical education and training to private companies.

According to the Tamil Nadu Government Doctors Association (TNGDA), doctors from various parts of the state participated in the strike. In an attempt to counter the action, the health department sought the services of retired doctors.

University workers in Pakistan protest privatisation

Non-academic workers at Sindh Agricultural University in Hyderabad began sit-down demonstrations outside the university's administration building in Tando Jam on May 12. The workers are protesting against the appointment of retired army officers to the university, which they believe is being used to intimidate non-academic staff from pressing for work improvements.

Employees are also demanding financial assistance for the children of retired employees, an increase in uniform issue and improved promotions. They also want repairs to workers' residential quarters and an increase in drivers' allowances.

More deaths in Chinese mining accidents

According to official reports, 34 workers may have perished in two separate accidents at coalmines in north China. Nine miners remain missing, feared dead, from a flood at the Fudong coalmine near

Jinzhong City, in the country's Shanxi province. Water rushed into the mine on May 19, trapping 33 men underground. Twenty-four were pulled to safety the next day.

In the early hours of May 20, a massive gas explosion tore apart an illegal coalmine in Anze County, also in Shanxi province. Twenty-five miners are still missing. A spokesman for the State Administration for Work Safety said that rescue teams were still trying to locate the missing men but added, "There is little chance they have survived because it was a big gas explosion."

Mine deaths are almost a daily occurrence in China but many go unreported or are covered up by mine owners. The latest disasters follows a massive explosion on May 13 at the Luling mine in China's eastern Anhui province which claimed 86 lives. Following the Anhui incident, seven workers died in a gas blast at a mine in Liaoyang city in the northeast, while in April a total of 97 miners perished in two accidents.

South Korean truck drivers end week-long strike

South Korean truck drivers called off a weeklong strike and blockade of port facilities in Pusan on May 15 after the government agreed to meet their main demands. The port handles about 80 percent of the country's shipping.

The government declared the strike illegal last week and ordered the arrest of union leaders after strikers rejected a recommendation by the Korean Cargo Workers Federation that they end industrial action. On May 12, Prime Minister Goh Kun said army trucks would move stranded cargo at Pusan, but two days later declared that the government would agree to key demands, including improved discounts on expressway tolls for trucks and the provision of subsidies to offset a planned petrol tax increase.

Choi Jae-hwang, the chief spokesman of the Korea Employers' Federation, condemned the decision. He told Reuters: "It is worrying that the government accepted their (truck drivers) demands to produce an agreement and failed to show that illegal action gets punished."

Striking Australian metal workers clash with police

Striking workers clashed with police outside the Morris McMahon factory in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe in the early hours of May 19. The police were attempting to break up a 100-strong picket outside the factory. The confrontation lasted for two hours before police managed to escort a bus of non-striking workers into the plant at about 7 a.m.

The strike by 60 mainly female employees, about half of the workforce at the metal products factory, began on March 10 after wage negotiations with the company broke down. Workers claim that the company does not pay award penalty rates or allowances and they receive less than \$12 an hour. Management has attempted to force staff onto individual work contracts and exclude the Australian

Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) from negotiations.

The strikers are maintaining a 24-hour picket, which has been strengthened by supporters. Apart from some limited protests by the NSW Labor Council and the AMWU, the unions have not attempted to organise any substantial industrial support from other union members.

Following an appeal by the AMWU in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission on May 21 the company will have to submit its wage records for inspection. At the same time Judith Beswick, the factory owner and a solicitor, is taking legal action in the Supreme Court seeking \$70,000 damages from the union.

Australian auto-parts workers strike over new wages deal

Thousands of automotive parts workers struck for 24 hours on May 20 over the failure of employers to negotiate a new industry-wide workplace agreement. On the same day more than 500 members of the AMWU marched to the Australian Industry Group headquarters (AIG), an employers' advocacy group.

Unions claim that more than 100 companies had agreed to endorse demands for a 36-hour week, 18 percent pay increase, improved long service leave and a fund to protect workers' entitlements when companies go bankrupt.

But the AIG and the federal government are urging employers to resist signing any collective agreements on wages and conditions. They are calling for companies to only negotiate collectively on industry policy and apprentice employment.

Hotel cleaners strike over workload

Part-time and casual workers at the five-star Observation City resort in Scarborough, Western Australia, walked out on May 19 against what they claim is an unreasonable amount of time allocated to clean rooms.

Workers say that they have constantly raised the issue with management but been ignored. The dispute has festered since the resort hotel contracted the cleaning company AHS late last year. While the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union negotiated an agreement on working hours and a range of conditions, it has admitted that it left "many issues unresolved".

The cleaners returned to work after management agreed to cost a new proposal for cleaning rooms. Employees have established a workplace committee to meet weekly over the current dispute and discuss other work issues.

New Zealand meatworkers' union negotiates redundancies

The Richmond Meatworks in Dargaville will sack 70 workers in August as the company begins to upgrade its beef abattoir. Management claimed the job cuts were necessary for the "sustainable future" of the plant.

The Aotearoa Meatworkers' Union (AMU) has not opposed the layoffs and this week announced members had ratified a new employment agreement facilitating the plant's automation. AMU official Paul Wintringham said the three-month negotiations were "amicable" and "delivered what members expected".

The new automation will make the plant one of the most productive in New Zealand, intensifying competition and setting the scene for job shedding across the industry.

New Zealand doctors oppose 32-hour shifts

The New Zealand Resident Doctors' Association notified the Southland Hospital this week that it would begin legal action to stop management rostering junior doctors on 32-hour shifts. The move follows complaints by doctors throughout the country and an

unprecedented series of strikes by senior medical staff at Timaru Hospital over long hours and excessive workloads.

Southland Hospital will have to employ 10 more doctors and cut working hours by half in order to meet current employment contract requirements. The hospital's chief operating officer denied that junior doctors were working 32 hours but later admitted it was happening. "Our definition of a shift is if someone worked straight through [without sleep]," she said. Instead the hospital defined the 32-hour rosters as being "on-call".

New Zealand nurses vote to strike over pay

Strikes by 4,000 regional nurses are due to begin in 10 days. The Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has served notices of three strikes from June 4 by nurses in the Waikato, Bay of Plenty, Lakes (Rotorua), Northland and Tairāwhiti (Gisborne) district health boards (DHBs). The nurses also intend striking on June 10 and June 12, unless they receive improved pay offers.

The strikes will close all but essential services at 19 provincial hospitals and clinics. An NZNO spokesman said the parties remained "substantially apart" on the core issues of pay and sick leave. The union claims that nurses wages are 25 percent behind on international comparisons and when measured against similar professions. The union is currently seeking pay parity with Auckland nurses in what it claims will be a "first step" towards closing the gap. Central to the union's strategy is to join with the DHBs in appealing to the government for a funding boost in next year's budget.

Waterside worker's leg crushed in container accident

Work ceased at CentrePort in Wellington on May 20 while the Maritime Safety Authority and Occupational Safety and Health examined the cause of an accident in which a container crushed a waterside worker's leg. Investigators initially identified strong winds, which reached 97 kilometres an hour, as contributing to the accident.

The worker, a hatchman employed by Central Stevedoring, was overseeing the unloading of containers from a ship berthed at Aotea Quay. The container struck him as it was being lifted off the deck by a shipboard crane. The Maritime Union said workers want a review of operating procedures for unloading ships in high winds.

French Polynesia government threatens striking doctors

The government of French Polynesia has threatened to recruit overseas doctors to break an ongoing dispute between doctors and the CPS, the state health insurance scheme.

The doctors began an indefinite strike against CPS's plans to impose a ceiling on the yearly level of reimbursed care. The threat came even though renewed talks were underway with CPS management and doctors had suspended their strike for five days.

Last weekend, about 3,000 people marched in support of the doctors and against the CPS proposals. French doctors working in the territory have threatened to return to Europe if the dispute is not resolved.



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