

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 May 2003

Cable workers strike for improvements

Two thousand workers from PT EDS Manufacturing Indonesia, a cable producer in Jakarta's Balaraja district, are on strike for a new work agreement. They are demanding improvements to working conditions, including the introduction of transport and leave allowance.

On April 24, after being on strike for five days, the workers rallied outside the local manpower agency to demand authorities scrap the company's present labour contract system. They also want to be included in negotiations for any new work arrangement.

Management has threatened to sack the striking workers under company regulations that only permit employees to be absent for two days.

Immigrant workers in Thailand sue for unpaid wages

A group of undocumented Burmese immigrant workers began legal action this week in Tak, northern Thailand, to force Nut Knitting Partnership to pay 4.6 million baht (\$US108,000) in outstanding wages. The action by the 34 employees is the first of its type in Thailand by so-called illegal workers.

The MAP Foundation for the Health and Knowledge of Ethnic Labour will run the case. The company paid the workers far below the minimum wage and ignored Tak labor office orders to pay the outstanding amount, which has accumulated since 2000.

A Map Foundation representative said that eight of the men, including their spokesman Kyaw Oo, had been arrested for illegal entry and deported earlier this year. While the Foundation took the remaining 26 employees into its care in the Mae Sot district, the workers were arrested on April 21 and deported the next day.

Government revenue workers protest changes

Employees of the Sri Lanka Customs, Inland Revenue and Excise departments stayed away from work en-masse in a sick note campaign on April 23 against the government's proposed Revenue Act. The next day they began a work-to-rule in protest.

The Act, yet to go before parliament, will establish a new Revenue Authority, merging all three departments. Workers fear the move will lead to rationalisations, job losses and reduced opportunities for promotions.

They also believe that the new arrangement will encourage

tax avoidance by companies and reduce available government revenue for welfare and social programs. One of the campaign slogans is: "The beginning of the Revenue Authority is the death of welfare".

Indian pilots strike against suspensions

Air India pilots struck on April 26 after management suspended 45 of their colleagues. The suspensions came after pilots banned flying with cabin or cockpit crew who had been to SARS-affected countries in the previous 10 days.

In an attempt to intimidate the pilots and break the strike, Air India suspended official recognition of the Pilots Guild (IPG) on April 30 and used 159 executive pilots and retired pilots to fly planes. To assist the operation, the Indian government removed official restrictions and allowed Air India to increase pilots' workday to 10 hours.

Australian nurses impose work bans

On April 29, NSW Nurses Association members at Maitland Hospital in the Lower Hunter Valley voted for industrial action. The dispute is over hospital management's refusal to provide a full-time clerical assistant in the emergency and maternity departments between 11.00 p.m. and 6.00 a.m.

Starting on May 1, the nurses have refused to do any administrative duties during shift work. The bans are aimed at creating more time for patient care while disrupting management processes. The nurses will meet again on May 5 to discuss further industrial action if their demands are not met.

Brewery workers begin industrial action

Forklift drivers and other warehouse workers at two Foster's Group breweries in Melbourne imposed work bans on April 28, following a breakdown in pay negotiations.

The bans include limitations on overtime and restrictions on the use of steam equipment and the handling of the popular Victoria Bitter brand. The workers, members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), have threatened to strike if there is no satisfactory outcome.

Foster's Group management has responded by applying to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for a court order directing the CFMEU to lift the bans. The company claims that the notification of industrial action, issued by the union more than two weeks ago, did not contain enough detail about the proposed bans and was therefore invalid.

Wool workers locked out

On April 27, Geelong Wool Combing imposed a month-long lockout of 115 employees at its plant in Corio, Victoria. The lockout followed the workers' refusal to accept wage and shift allowance cuts resulting in a 26 percent pay reduction.

The company, owned by BWK Australasian, claims the cuts were justified by a downturn in the wool trade. A Textile, Clothing and Footwear Union spokesman said that most of the locked-out workers were young married men from single income households. He said the company had installed security cameras on site in preparation for the lockout.

Deal fails to end New Zealand doctors' dispute

A deal negotiated between the South Canterbury District Health Board and the Association of Salaried Medical Staff (ASMS) has failed to resolve a long-running dispute at Timaru Hospital. Thirty senior doctors took rolling strike action two months ago to protest over pay rates and working conditions.

This week, the ASMS admitted that while an agreement had been reached on pay, there was still a dispute over dangerous working conditions. Last week, junior doctors in Wellington registered a complaint with the Resident Doctors Association about excessive working hours. They claim present conditions threaten both their own and patients' safety. Hutt Hospital junior doctors employed in surgery, orthopedics and gynecology say they regularly work more than 16-hour days or 72-hour weeks, including on-call time.

The ASMS had expected the contract to be ratified by postal ballot but doctors were concerned that management would not honour recommendations made by an independent review of working conditions. An ASMS spokesman said that staff distrust of management was higher than in "any public hospital in New Zealand for many years".

Striking mill workers picket company AGM

Striking workers from the Kinleith pulp and paper mill picketed the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) Annual General Meeting in Auckland on April 30. About 270 production workers have been on strike since March 7 over repeated attempts by CHH to reduce conditions and pay following the sacking of almost half the mill's 700-strong workforce. The claw-backs include the removal of safety provisions, overtime pay and seniority processes. A previous collective agreement, which expired more than two years ago, has not been renewed.

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) claimed the shareholders needed to know "the real story behind the dispute". EPMU regional secretary Mike Sweeney said mill employees were "hardworking, reasonable people who just want a fair deal and a safe workplace." CHH has said it is determined to slash costs to make the mill "internationally competitive", or it will mothball the plant.

New Zealand fertiliser company fined over toxic emissions

The Ravensdown Fertiliser Cooperative was ordered by a Napier court this week to pay \$NZ16,000 in reparation costs to two workers who inhaled toxic fumes. The men, who were employed at Winstone Aggregates, which is situated across the

road from Ravensdown, became ill, one seriously, after they were exposed to silicon tetrafluoride emissions. One of the men has been diagnosed with Reactive Airways Disease Syndrome and cannot return to work.

The presiding judge expressed concern that the emissions occurred opposite a main highway and could have had "horrific" results. The company, he said, had failed to take all practicable steps to ensure that its plant did not cause harm to persons in the vicinity.

French Polynesian doctors strike over pay cut

Private doctors in French Polynesia went on indefinite strike on May 1. The strike was called to oppose payment cuts to doctors by the public health care insurance scheme. Public hospital doctors are also planning to walk off the job over the issue. If the action goes ahead, the territory will only have emergency care facilities.

In an attempt to turn public opinion against the doctors, territorial president Gaston Flosse addressed parliament this week condemning the strike and claiming that doctors' pay was excessive. The doctors' union dismissed his statement as "ridiculous and insulting".

PNG hospital staff demand sacking the board

Staff and management at Kundiawa General Hospital in Chimbu province, Papua New Guinea, are demanding the government take action against the hospital's board of directors. This week they presented a petition to the Health Minister calling for the hospital board to be sacked for using funds and facilities for their own gain. Health workers have said that the hospital is in danger of operational collapse.



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