

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 May 2003

Korean truck drivers continue strike

South Korean truck drivers voted on May 12 to continue industrial action over demands for an increase in contract rates and reductions in diesel fuel tax and highway tolls. The strikes, which erupted last week, have disrupted the movement of goods at major steel producers and at the country's gateway ports of Busan and Gwangyang. The ports handle nearly 80 percent of South Korea's total shipping and are losing \$US180 million daily. At a hastily convened cabinet meeting following the driver's vote, Prime Minister Goh Kun instructed law-enforcement authorities to arrest striking drivers if they attempted to block the movement of goods in or out of the Busan port.

The drivers, members of the Korean Cargo Workers Federations (KCWF), were asked by union officials to end the strike during negotiations with the government and cargo companies. While Pohang drivers ended their blockade of steel mills after steel companies agreed to a 13.5 percent increase in contract rates, drivers in Busan and Gwangyang chapters decided to continue the strike.

The KCWF claims to have made substantial headway in negotiations. According to media reports, however, many drivers expressed dissatisfaction with the union leadership's handling of the bargaining process, claiming it has concentrated on easier demands.

While the government has offered to extend highway toll discounts by two hours per day and hold cargo owners, rather than drivers, responsible for overloaded trucks, it only promised to "look into" multi-level subcontracting. The latter was one of the independent truckers' key grievances.

Multiply deaths in latest mine blast in China

At least 63 workers were killed in a coalmine gas explosion in eastern China on May 13. More than 100 workers were working 500 metres to 600 metres (1,600 to 2,000 ft) below the surface when the explosion ripped through a section of the Luling Coal Mine. The mine is located in the city of Huaibei 675 kilometres (420 miles) south of Beijing. According to mining officials, 28 men have been rescued but they believe the chance of survival for the 23 who remain missing "is very small".

About 40 to 50 professional rescue personnel have been sent to assist. The Luling Coal Mine is a large-scale operation that employs 5,000 and 6,000 workers. There has been a string of major coalmine accidents in China this year, many with double-digit fatalities.

Laid-off Chinese workers protest unpaid pensions

On May 9, about 100 workers from a drug factory closed down in 1999 staged a three-day protest in China's Datong City. The workers formed a human barricade across a three-lane highway outside the city government headquarters and demanded compensation.

The protestors held banners with slogans reading, "We want to survive", "We want to eat" and "We want to protect the legal rights of the workers". Dozens of police attacked the protestors and pulled down the banners.

A few days before the demonstration a private company from southern China bought the factory for its land, ruling out any chance of it

reopening. Most of the laid-off workers receive virtually no pension. One employee, who worked at the factory for about 20 years, now lives on unemployment benefits paying less than \$US25 a month.

Pakistani office workers fight for pay hike

More than 2.2 million office workers employed in federal and provincial government and semi-government organisations held a nationwide strike on May 8. They were demanding a salary increase, improved working conditions and housing assistance.

The strikers held protest meetings at their work places and demonstrated in cities such as Multan, Dera, Ghazi Khan, Bahawalpur and Sargodha.

According to the Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA), government workers' salaries have not changed in the last decade. Grade 1 to Grade 6 wages stand at 3,000 to 4,000 rupees per month (\$US50 to \$70), while Grade 16 employees are paid less than 1,200 rupees (\$US20). With utility bills and other living expenses continually on the rise, government workers are finding it increasingly hard to survive.

Pakistani mill workers protest against sackings

Workers at the Chilia paper mill in Chehto Chand, in Pakistan's Sindh province, blocked a major national highway on May 11 in an attempt to draw attention to their grievances. The mill's new management sacked 211 employees without paying compensation and other entitlements.

Indian rail workers strike over pay deductions

Some 600 rail workers from Thiruvananthapuram central station in the Indian state of Kerala went on strike on May 8. The workers were protesting a management decision to deduct 2,000 to 3,000 rupees (between \$US30 and \$US45) from salaries due on May 10. According to management, the deduction was to recover an excess amount mistakenly paid to workers.

The strike action ended later in the day when Southern Railway Mazdoor union officials reached an agreement with management.

Indian medical sales representatives conduct rolling strikes

Over 100,000 medical and sales representatives across India have been conducting rolling strikes since May 8. The action is expected to continue until June 25. As part of the campaign, representatives in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on strike for three days from May 12.

The sales staff, who are employed by various pharmaceutical firms, are demanding trade union rights for field workers, a guaranteed minimum wage and performance bonuses. They also want an inquiry into the sale of dubious medicines and alleged unfair and corrupt trade practices in the medical supply field.

Sri Lankan paramedics campaign for pay increase

Medical staff in Karapitiya and Maha Modera hospitals in southern Sri Lanka reported in sick on May 6 and 7. The protest was to demand salary increases in line with salary commission recommendations. Pharmacists, X-ray and medical laboratory technicians, counsellors and physiotherapists participated in the sick note protest.

Medical officers protest attack on colleagues

About 1,550 Assistant Medical Officers (AMO) and Registered Medical Officers (RMO) in Sri Lanka went on strike on May 13 and 14 to protest

against an assault on their colleagues in the Central Province.

The assault occurred on May 12, two days after 230 Central Province medical officers began an indefinite strike to demand the cancellation of unjust transfers. The striking doctors were hit with stones thrown from the Ministry of Health building while they were picketing the premises. Four doctors were admitted to the main hospital in Kandy after being struck by the rocks. The Central Province strike is continuing with medical officers demanding the immediate arrest of those responsible for the assault.

The Central Province health officials have threatened to sack the strikers and 80 doctors have already received dismissal letters. Medical officers are planning indefinite national strike action on May 21.

Bangladeshi doctors demand unpaid salaries

About 280 doctors from Barisal Sher-e-Bangla Medical College Hospital (SBMCH) in southern Bangladesh have been on indefinite strike since May 3. They are demanding immediate payment of salaries outstanding for three months. A team of 30 doctors is attending to emergency cases.

Australian manufacturing workers strike over pay dispute

Australian Workers Union members walked off the job for 24 hours on May 13 at the Electrolux plant in the regional town of Orange, central west New South Wales. They are demanding a wage increase and improved working conditions. The strike action followed a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement.

While the workers voted to return to work at a mass meeting the next day, the dispute remains unresolved and a series of rolling stoppages are planned. Management has indicated that it is willing to resume negotiations.

Canberra cleaners protest contracting out

Cleaners at Canberra College in the Australian Capital Territory walked off the job on May 14 over the contracting out of cleaning in the territory's schools. The stoppage came after the college accepted a private tender.

The cleaners, who were also protesting at having to work unpaid overtime, said the strike was indefinite. Even under old contract arrangements there were never enough funds to pay adequate wages and maintain an efficient school cleaning service.

Protracted strike at metal manufacturer continues

A strike by 60 employees at Morris MacMahon, a metal products manufacturer in the Sydney suburb of Arncliffe, has entered its tenth week. The strike began on March 10, after wage negotiations between the workers and management broke down. Management attempted to force the workers onto individual work contracts and exclude the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union from negotiations. The company has refused to pay award penalty rates or allowances and workers receive less than \$12 an hour.

The workers are maintaining a 24-hour picket line outside the factory. The company is using scab labour to maintain seven-day-a-week production. Union delegate Edith Rapana told the media last week that although strikers were "doing it tough" they would not return to work unless the company agrees to a collective agreement.

New Zealand miners strike over pay

Miners from the Solid Engineering-operated Strongman and Spring Creek underground collieries near Greymouth, on New Zealand's South Island, walked off the job at midnight on May 7 for three days.

Eighty-eight miners picketed mine entrances, Rapahoe coal loading centre and Stillwater railway junction. Train drivers refused to cross the miners' picket, stopping the movement of all export coal to the port of Lyttelton.

South Island miners are paid 20 percent less than those working at Huntly in the North Island. Talks between Solid Energy and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union began this week in an effort to settle the dispute. In the last financial year, the state-owned

company made a profit of \$38.1 million, more than six times the previous year's \$6 million profit.

New Zealand nurses' strike looming

More than 4,000 New Zealand nurses are likely to strike next month over stalled pay talks with five district health boards (DHBs). Nurses employed by Waikato, Northland, Bay of Plenty, Lakes and Tairāwhiti region DHBs, began voting on strike action last week after yearlong negotiations failed to produce an agreement.

The nurses want wage parity with Auckland nurses, who are paid 10-12 percent more. The DHBs have offered increases ranging from three to nine percent. Other conflicts revolve around penalty rates, overtime, sick leave and the length of any contract.

In 1999, 1,500 Waikato nurses struck for three days. The five DHBs operate 17 hospitals and provide health services to more than one million people.

Firefighters picket Auckland fire stations

Firefighters picketed two Auckland fire stations last week to prevent the reintegration of a group of workers who sided with management during the country's longest-running pay dispute. The dispute, which lasted seven years until 2000, culminated in moves by the Fire Service to sack 1,575 firefighters.

On May 6, 100 firefighters blocked the entrance to Remuera station to prevent one of the group being transferred from Silverdale, where the Fire Service has kept him and six others separate from the rest of the workforce. A similar action several days earlier blocked the transfer of another one of the group from Silverdale to St Helier's station. The officer was stood down after union members refused to work with him.

The Firefighters' Union stated that its members will not work with those who took financial incentives to accept an alternative work roster during the dispute.

Fresh talks in New Zealand mill dispute

A new set of talks to end the 10-week Kinleith pulp and paper strike began on May 13. The new round of negotiations for a collective employment agreement for 270 production workers was scheduled after an unannounced meeting between Carter Holt Harvey's new chief executive Peter Springford and Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union national secretary Andrew Little. The pair issued a joint statement this week saying that "obstacles to making progress" had been "cleared away".

Little said an agreement had been reached to negotiate a "third way" employment agreement that acknowledges "the existence of previous terms and conditions", but opens discussions on the company's new salary model.

The union is not opposed to workers being paid all-up salaries for four 12-hour days. It had rejected, however, company demands to allow staff to be called in for up to two of the following four days off without extra pay. The provision is back on the negotiating table. Little also confirmed negotiations on a promotion clause that would reduce priority accorded to seniority in making appointments. The strike is continuing while the talks are in progress.

Fiji food workers protest sacking

Workers from the Goodman Fielder food company in Fiji walked off the job on May 13 over the sacking of a union member. A spokesman for the employees, who are members of the National Union of Catering and Commercial Workers, said that the 75-strong workforce "had tolerated the [management's] poor work ethic for long enough". Management fired a sales representative on May 9, even though it had disciplined the employee with a two-week suspension and a warning.

Pension fund strike in New Caledonia

Public sector workers in Noumea, New Caledonia, began an indefinite strike on May 13 over pension entitlements. The strike has paralysed the city administration, the treasury and the main post office. High schools

were also hit as teachers joined the protest.

The industrial action follows weeks of unsuccessful negotiations over the workers' pension fund, which suffered a \$US30 million deficit last year. While the government has pledged it will safeguard workers' entitlements, no concrete action has been taken.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact