Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 June 2003

Pakistani government workers strike

More than 2.2 million government clerical workers in Pakistan staged a "pen-down" strike on May 21 to demand a 100 percent pay increase, special funds for the education of their children and the withdrawal of an employees' dismissal act. The action closed most government offices. The workers carried out a similar strike on May 8.

During the May 21 action, workers held meetings in their workplaces and demonstrations took place in Multan, Dera Ghazi Khan, Bahawalpur, and Sargodha. The campaign is being organised by the All-Pakistan Clerks Association. They are planning a countrywide series of protests if their demands are not met.

Sanitation workers demand pay arrears in Pakistan

Sanitation workers in Naushahro Feroze, in Pakistan's Sindh province, went on strike on May 21 and protested outside the local press club. The striking employees are demanding the payment of outstanding wages. They have not been paid their salaries and pensions for last three months.

Indian knitwear workers fight for pay increase

Up to 200,000 knitwear workers launched a 48-hour strike on May 21 to demand a 50 percent wage increase. Production was affected in almost all the 3,000 units located in and around Tirupur (known as cotton city) in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu. The industrial action was organised by the Joint Action Council, an alliance of knitwear workers' unions.

Indian health employees strike in 14 states

Over 7,000 health workers employed by the Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) in 14 Indian states began a series of three-hour daily rolling stoppages on May 26 to demand the reinstatement of a 690 rupee ($US35) patient care allowance that has been withdrawn from non-dispensary staff. Over the previous week they staged two-hour daily strikes and are threatening to an indefinite walkout from June 3 if the allowance is not restored.

Municipal workers strike in India for better conditions

Contract workers employed by the Municipal Council of Hyderabad, India, struck on May 26 to demand a 2,220 rupee (about $US115) minimum monthly wage. They are also seeking four one-day holidays per month, ex gratia compensation payments in the case of death or injuries, an employees provident fund and two sets of clean uniforms per month. The strikers marched through Hyderabad from Baghlingampally to Indira Park.

Widespread action by Sri Lankan rail workers for salary increase

More than 800 railway shunters, signal operators and pointsmen from 10 stations across Sri Lanka struck for 24 hours on May 26 to demand a salary increase. Other demands include speedy promotions, uniforms and the lifting of disciplinary actions against union leaders. Nawalapitiya, Anuradhapura, Maho, Potuhera, Kurunegala, Kandy, Kadugannawa, Badulla, Koppannaweediya and Maradana rail stations were affected.

Signal operators and shunters union president R. S. A. Jayasena warned that the rail system could by brought to a standstill if the demands are not met immediately.

Korean concrete haulers threaten protracted strike

On May 28, owner-drivers in South Korea who haul concrete for the construction industry threatened an indefinite strike beginning June 2 if their demands are not met. The drivers, who belong to the Korean Federation of Construction Trade Unions, want an improvement in working conditions and are demanding that the government lower fuel taxes and allow them to use bus-only lanes.

The drivers are threatening to mobilise about 1,500 trucks for a forthcoming protest rally in Kyonggi Province and thousands of drivers are planning to demonstrate outside government buildings in Kwachon.

There are about 21,000 concrete trucks in South Korea with at least 17,000 of these owner-driver operated. The owner-drivers sign yearly contracts with cement companies.

Workers in China demand unemployment benefits

On May 20, workers from the City Fire-Resistant Material factory in Guiyang City marched to demand back pay and unemployment insurance. Workers claim corrupt managerial practice led to the company's bankruptcy and the sacking of 1,000 workers.

Workers have petitioned the city government for five years to introduce unemployment benefits but have received no response. The Guiyang City government initially paid a small hardship allowance but stopped this in 2002.

The authorities have dealt harshly with past protests. On May 13, 100 police attacked and dispersed 200 workers who had blocked Guizhou provincial government offices.

Singapore Airlines push for pay cut

Singapore Airlines demanded that its pilots take pay cuts in negotiations this week with the Airline Pilots Association, Singapore (ALP-S). Management is proposing a 22.5 percent cut to captains' salaries and 15 percent for first officers. The company is also demanding pilots take 10 to 12 days compulsory unpaid leave every two months to cut costs.

While the airline said it would consider reducing the number of compulsory days off, it is insistent on the pay reductions. It claims to have suffered a $204 million profit loss because of the impact of SARS on air travel.

The ALP-S is worried that it will not be able get its members to accept the wage reduction on top of recent cuts to flight allowances. Instead of organising a united fight against the attacks, the ALP-S is attempting to make cost reductions by demanding that the airline shed its overseas-based pilots. ALP-S spokesman Captain Frank John said that the overseas-based pilots were not "part of the family".

Malaysian workers sacked for refusing night shift

Over half of the 120 employees of the government-owned air conditioner manufacturer OYL-Condair Industries, have signed a letter to management demanding the reinstatement of five employees who were sacked for refusing to move to night shift work. The dispute began when management decided to keep the factory operating 24 hours a day and nominated 13 workers for the nightshift. The 13 initially refused, but after pressure from management eight accepted.

The employees are members of the Electrical Industries Workers Union.

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One of those sacked is the union representative who has worked at the factory for 20 years. The workers are claiming the sackings are unfair because the company could have got volunteers to work the new shift.

The sacked workers have submitted a complaint to the Industrial Relations Department but were told it will take up to six weeks before their case can be heard. A spokesman said the Minister for Industrial Relations can refer the matter to the industrial court or simply close the case.

Australian metal workers continue 24-hour picket

Workers at metal manufacturer Morris McMahon are continuing around-the-clock picketing despite attempts by the management to break the 11-week strike. The workers went on strike on March 10 after negotiations broke down when the management refused to increase a two percent pay rise offer. The mainly female workers are paid about $12 an hour and claim that the company has been withholding tool and tea allowances for years.

Management is also demanding the introduction of afternoon shifts and abolition of an established four-day week. Employees currently work extended days, allowing them to take long weekends.

According to the workers, management prepared for industrial action by employing casuals from a company called Frontline and training them in all aspects of production. The casuals, and about 20 other workers who refused to join the strike, are bused through picket lines every day by the police. The owner Judith Beswick has gained a court injunction to prohibit strikers blocking the bus. Last week the bus was held up for two hours as pickets scuffled with the police.

A union delegate told the *World Socialist Web Site*: “We’ve got a guy here with 20 years service and he gets $12.80 an hour after all that time. Fourteen years ago in this place it was $10 an hour and now its $12. The pay rises are so small people are always behind the eight ball.” He said that staff inside the plant had signed individual work contracts on the employer’s demand and been bribed with $1,000 bonus.

Negotiations break down at Electrolux

About 1,000 workers at Electrolux’s electrical appliance plant in the NSW regional town Orange staged rolling stoppages on May 27 in support of a new work agreement and for an improved wage offer.

The company responded to the industrial action by ending negotiations with the Australian Workers Union on May 28. The two-month negotiations became bogged down over wage and holiday conditions. Details of these differences have not been made public.

The company accused the union of forcing employees to participate in the stoppages. Union delegates claim that managers had threatened to sack workers if they supported the action.

Electricians still on strike for a 36-hour week

A strike by contract electricians at Smorgans in Laverton, Melbourne, entered its third month this week. The workers went on strike over the refusal of labour hire company, ADECCO, to agree to a 36-hour week in a workplace agreement under negotiation with the Electrical Trades Union.

The workers claim that the company’s refusal to agree to a 36-hour week contradicts conditions for other contract electricians in the construction industry. The electricians initially imposed industrial bans but when the ADECCO attempted to bring in other contractors, the workers went on strike and established a picket line.

Deal ends New Zealand mill strike

An 88-day strike by 270 workers at the Kinleith pulp and paper mill was ended after a deal was signed this week between Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). It was the longest strike in the history of the mill. Production workers walked out on March 7 this year over attempts by CHH to impose new work practices and cut wages. Earlier, the company had sacked almost half the mill’s 700-strong workforce.

Settlement terms include a $1,000 cash payment to compensate workers for various work schedule changes; an immediate four percent pay rise with an additional three percent increase next year. The company also withdrew a plan to reduce its firefighting workforce and to force production workers to fight fires.

In return, the union has agreed to major concessions, including an all-up salary structure and new rosters of four 12-hour days followed by four days off. This will replace the present arrangement of six eight-hour days and two days off. Overtime payments will be abolished and the existing seniority-based promotion system will be overhauled to give the company a final say over senior appointments. Panels with management-union representation have been established to operate the system.

Senior EPMU delegate Whisky Hastie said the union had never challenged the company’s right “to manage its business” and had simply held out for the right to be “recognised as a union”.

New Zealand caregivers take action over pay

More than 2,000 caregivers for people with intellectual disabilities began industrial action on May 22. The action follows the breakdown of pay talks with care provider IHC. Members of the Service and Foodworkers Union (SFWU) voted unanimously to reject a 1.5 percent pay increase and reconfirmed their demand for a three percent rise.

The caregivers have imposed a ban on doing paperwork, including vehicle mileage and monthly health and safety sheets, reconciliation forms for trust accounts and personal diaries. The workers, whose hourly rates start at $11.65 and average $12.65, were granted pay rises of between 2.5 and 3.5 percent a year ago.

New Zealand nurses union calls off strike

The New Zealand Nurses’ Organisation (NZNO) has called off a nurses’ strike planned for June 4. The strike was cancelled on May 23, after three days of mediation between the NZNO and district health board (DHB) negotiators. The NZNO told 4,000 nurses that they had stopped the strike as a sign of “faith in the mediation process” and to allow talks to proceed. Strikes are still scheduled for June 10 and 12.

The nurses from the Waikato, Northland, Bay of Plenty, Lakes and Tairawhiti DHBs had voted by a 94 percent majority to strike over demands for pay parity with Auckland nurses. Auckland pay rates for nurses are 10-12 percent higher than elsewhere in the North Island. The boards have offered increases of between 7 and 9 percent. The DHBs claim they have been told to meet wage and salary increases within government funding constraints, and that Auckland pay rates are “not affordable”.

French Polynesian doctors end month-long strike

Private medical practitioners in French Polynesia ended a month-long strike this week and accepted government demands that they reduce their medical fees. In return, the government has agreed to delay the introduction of a nationwide database of patient’s medical history until patients’ and doctors’ privacy can be guaranteed.

The government has not stepped back from its proposal to reform the local social security fund, known as CPS. The reforms are aimed at reducing the cost of medical insurance by placing a ceiling on doctors’ fees and salaries. Public sector doctors, however, remain on strike while their union is negotiating with the health ministry. The government is threatening to import overseas doctors to force an end to the strike.

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