

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 May 2004

May Day rallies oppose Iraq occupation

May Day rallies across Asia focused on opposition to the US-led occupation of Iraq and the attack on social and working conditions.

In Japan, some 12,000 people rallied in Tokyo demanding that the government withdraw its 550 troops from Iraq. Over 40,000 demonstrated in other cities around the country. In South Korea, 20,000 workers rallied in Seoul and called on the government to reverse its pledge to the Bush administration to send 3,000 Korean troops to Iraq.

In Thailand, 20,000 workers, many of them state electricity employees, demonstrated in Bangkok for an increase in the basic wage and an end to the government's privatisation agenda. Demonstrators also demanded the withdrawal of Thai troops from Iraq. Thousands of workers rallied in cities across Indonesia demanding the end to repressive labour laws and protesting attacks on jobs and social conditions. Over 5,000 demonstrated in Jakarta.

Tens of thousands rallied in Manila and cities in the Philippines to demand an increase in the minimum wage and the withdrawal of the 96 Filipino troops in Iraq. More than 2,000 people, in hundreds of buses, trucks and cars, drove around the town of Mariveles to demand improved wages and conditions for workers at factories in the nearby Bataan Economic Zone. Some 50 transnationals have operations in Bataan, employing over 12,000 workers.

Crane operators strike in South Korea

Over 800 crane operators have been on strike since April 28 demanding that building contractors honour the agreements they made last year to increase wages, overtime allowances and retirement grants. On May 5, 480 tower crane operators held a sit-in on top of cranes at over 100 construction sites in Seoul and Kyonggi Province. On the same day another 300 crane workers rallied outside a Chugong apartment complex construction site in southern Seoul.

During the crane sit-ins, 10 workers were seized by the police and charged with trespass. More than 2,500 police have been deployed at various construction sites. Crane operators have threatened further protest action unless their demands are met.

Three Indonesian construction workers die

Three construction workers were killed on May 3 when a crane collapsed on the Sudirman Central Business Districts (SCBD) Suite project in South Jakarta, Indonesia. Those killed were Daniel Tusubu, 21, Aock Silrat, 22, and Sarkam, 40.

Witnesses said the three had jumped from the falling crane before it touched the ground. A survivor told the *Jakarta Post*: "The incident happened so fast... I can't remember the details. All I knew was we were falling so fast. I could only think of how to save my life, so I gripped tightly onto something like a rope that was within my reach."

The contractor carrying out construction on the SCBD project, Jakarta-based PT Perusahaan Pembangunan (PP), closed the site immediately after the accident and prevented the media talking further to construction workers and supervisors.

Journalists who visited the offices of the project management to speak to

company officials were turned away by security guards. A company security guard, accompanied by a man in army uniform, visited the pressroom at the Jakarta Police Headquarters and bluntly told journalists not to write stories on the accident.

To date there has been no official statement from the company or the police explaining the cause of the crane collapse.

Indian medical teachers and doctors end strike

Teachers and doctors at four teaching hospitals in the southern Indian state of Karnataka ended a 15 day strike on May 5 after the Hyderabad Karnataka Education Society agreed to their demands. The hospitals are the Mahadevappa Rampure Medical College, the Basaveshwara Teaching College, the General Hospital and the Sangameshwar Hospital in Gulbarga.

According to leading officials of the teachers association, management has agreed to pay an outstanding allowance in three equal installments before the end of the year. They also promised to cover staff under a Provident Fund scheme and promote all eligible staff immediately.

On May 2, the striking doctors and teachers had blocked the busy Gulbarga-Sedam state highway for 30 minutes. Some of the strikers also went on an indefinite hunger strike.

Pakistani doctors continue action for pay and improved facilities

An indefinite strike is continuing by 500 medical officers at the Lady Reading Hospital (LRH), Hayatabad Medical Complex (HMC) and Ayub Teaching Hospital in Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier province of Pakistan.

The doctors went on strike on April 26 to demand salary increases and better facilities. On April 30, four days into the strike, the President of the Democratic Doctors Forum (DDF) Dr Abdul Aziz told a press conference that medical officers have poor facilities even though they perform strenuous duties through morning, evening and night shifts. The monthly salary of 5,000 rupees (\$US100) is inadequate compensation.

The doctors are demanding a 2,000 rupee (\$US40) pay rise and the construction of a new hostel at LRH and bungalow accommodation at HMC.

Pakistani irrigation workers protest rising inflation

Irrigation workers in Pakistan's Punjab province protested in the industrial city of Sheikhpura on May 2 to demand immediate pay increases. Workers shouted slogans condemning the rise in the cost-of-living. They also called for medical cover, uniforms, and washing and cycle allowances. The rally was organised by the Punjab Irrigation Labour Union (PILU).

Western Australian nurses vote to strike

Nurses in southwestern Western Australia (WA) have voted to strike on May 18 and to rally outside State Parliament in Perth. Nurses throughout WA are seeking a 20 percent pay increase over two years and a reduction in workloads through improved nurse-to-patient ratios. Nurses are being forced to work up to 16-hour shifts without meal breaks. In some cases, nurses have been required to care for 20 patients by themselves.

The present work agreement covering wages and conditions expired

more than a week ago but the WA Labor government has refused to respond to the nurses' pay claim. Nurses are also demanding the restoration of a formal complaints process for staff who feel their workload is excessive.

A union spokesman said that WA nurses "did not want to take industrial action and close beds but could be forced to if the government continued to ignore their claim".

Nurses in two states fight for improved wages and conditions

Around 250 nurses marched to Parliament House in Hobart and held an hour-long protest on May 6. The rally was called to oppose the lack of progress in negotiating a new workplace agreement which nurses hope will deliver improved wages and working conditions. The nurses, members of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) are demanding that the government address a range of issues such as uniform and on-call allowances.

Nurses also rallied outside the Royal Hobart Hospital and voted to join staff from different regions in a 24-hour strike on May 12. They endorsed a number of work bans at hospitals throughout the state to begin on May 10.

In Victoria, 500 psychiatric nurses and mental health professionals held a statewide stop-work meeting on April 29 following the breakdown in negotiations between the Health and Community Services Union (HSUA) and the State Labor government. The union is demanding the provision of specialist psychiatric training for nurses, safe staff levels, manageable workloads and increases in wages.

Nurses are bitter that the government broke a promise to inject \$105 million into the mental healthcare system. It has only allocated \$30 million. A spokesperson for the HSUA said: "Acute inpatient units are understaffed, patients are banking up in emergency departments due to a lack of beds and some of Victoria's most vulnerable people, the mentally ill, are not getting the support they need due to a lack of resources."

Construction company faces fines over worker's death

Construction company Leighton Contractors pleaded guilty to four counts of failing to provide a safe workplace, leading to the death of crane operator Robert Sergi in October 2000. Sergi was killed at Leighton's Princes Freeway project between Melbourne and Geelong, when a temporary support holding up concrete girders over a rail line collapsed.

The load capacity of the supports used was 43 percent below what was required, and they had material deficiencies and were used incorrectly. Sergi, a married man with three young children, received fatal head injuries when a 35 metre concrete girder weighing more than 70 tonnes crashed down onto the rail line.

The company faces fines of up to \$1 million, with each separate charge carrying a maximum fine of \$250,000.

New Zealand nurses to vote on pay deal

New Zealand nurses will begin voting next week on a proposal to campaign for a national "fair pay" deal. The NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO), the main nursing union, will ballot its 20,000 members in 21 district health boards across the country from May 10. It is seeking a national collective agreement, the first such agreement for nurses since 1991.

Nurses are seeking pay parity with secondary school teachers and police. That will require 21 percent to 34 percent rises, depending on seniority. The median pay rates for registered nurses, including average penal rates, range from \$37,000 for new graduates to \$50,900. The rates would increase to \$44,800 and \$68,400. Nurses also want improved staff levels and mandated nurse-patient ratios.

Pay talks are likely to start in June with the possibility of nationwide strikes occurring in August. A nurses' union spokesperson said she hoped the government would "co-operate" before the five existing collective agreements expired. "This agreement won't be settled without the fair-pay objective being met. If that means backing the claim with industrial

action, (nurses) will take industrial action," she said.

New Zealand port workers return to work

Striking Lyttelton Port workers returned to work on May 3. The four-day strike by 240 port workers, initially set to last for six days, followed months of fruitless negotiations between unions and the company.

About 30 claims are being negotiated, with the company's use of permanent part-timers the major issue. An advocate for the joint unions said their position would be reviewed at the end of the week and did not rule out issuing more strike notices.

New Zealand Inland Revenue staff threatened over industrial action

Inland Revenue Department (IRD) staff imposed bans on doing any work that falls outside their job classifications after voting this week for a campaign of industrial action. The IRD management has retaliated with threats of suspension.

The workers, members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) are demanding an additional duties allowance for doing tasks outside of their normal work but the IRD has ruled this out. According to NUPE, one of three unions representing IRD workers, the bans are part of "an escalating plan of action" that will impact on IRD services.

Meanwhile, the Public Service Association (PSA), which represents over half of the department's 4,800 staff, has announced it has reached settlement with the department on a collective work agreement.

Strikes by New Zealand university staff cancelled

Unions involved in contract disputes at New Zealand's seven universities have cancelled planned strike action and deferred bargaining for new national collective employment agreements for the remainder of the year. The announcement came following last-minute negotiations last week to avert unprecedented national strike action scheduled to take place throughout May and June.

The decision marks a back-down by the university unions, which had begun the contract dispute with pay claims of up to 30 percent over 3 years and demands for a national collective contract to replace the current site agreements. The Association of University Staff general secretary Helen Kelly said the change was due to "the employers' refusal ...to engage with each other or the unions on a collective and cooperative basis".

With strike action cancelled and national bargaining deferred, the unions will attempt to reach site-by-site settlements. Current salary offers range between 2.6 and 4 percent. Staff at Auckland, Waikato, Victoria, Lincoln, and Canterbury will consider pay offers over the next fortnight. Staff at Massey and Otago have already rejected offers and will now determine whether to seek further negotiations or take separate industrial action.

Fijian gold miners await outcome of hearing into dismissals

About 370 workers sacked by the Emperor gold mine in Vatukoula, Fiji, in 1991 are waiting to hear the outcome of a weeklong hearing that began in the Lautoka High Court this week. The case is a judicial review of a government commission of inquiry in 1995 by Suva lawyer G P Lala, to determine the causes of the 13-year dispute.

About 700 miners walked off the job in February 1991 protesting over poor pay, inadequate safety, squalid housing and environmental issues. Emperor sought and won a court injunction declaring the strike illegal and in the following days progressively sacked 436 workers. Riot police—fed, housed and transported by the company—were bought in to evict the sacked workers from their homes. In the ensuing scuffles a court bailiff was killed.

The Lala report was never made public because the company filed legal proceedings claiming the inquiry had breached its terms of reference.

The Australian newspaper, the *Sunday Age*, obtained a copy of the report. The *Age* commented: "[The report] lays bare a disturbing catalogue of social and environmental neglect and a history of coercive management that it says was largely responsible for the strike. It recommends the establishment of a Social Justice Fund, compensation and

reinstatement for the strikers and a thorough review of Fiji's mining legislation."



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