

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 May 2004

Union attempts to call off Thai anti-privatisation protests

Some 10,000 public sector workers marched to the royal palace in Bangkok this week to petition the Thai king to oppose government plans to sell off state enterprises.

Led by various state enterprise union leaders, the demonstration was dominated by nationalism and subservience to the powers-that-be—in sharp contrast to earlier militant protests that shook the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Workers were first taken to a ceremony to pay respect to the royal family before proceeding to the palace. They carried national flags, posters of the king and were asked to dress in yellow, the Thai national colour. Since mass demonstrations by state enterprise workers in March forced the government to temporarily shelve its plan to privatise large sections of the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat), the unions have worked to contain protests.

Following the march to the palace, Egat union leader Sirichai Maingarm recommended that all anti-privatisation protests planned in the following 79 days be suspended because of the petition to the king. Egat workers rejected his proposal.

Past privatisations in Thailand include Thai Airways, Airports of Thailand and energy concern PTT. The government is currently moving to sell Egat, the railways, waterworks and telecommunications companies.

Indonesian hotel workers lose out in severance deal

At least 50 of the 1,115 employees sacked by Hotel Indonesia and Hotel Inna Wisata last month are refusing to accept the severance package that was worked out between their union and the hotels' new management on May 10.

Under the agreement, the workers will receive severance pay equivalent to one-and-a-half times the provision required by law, plus a religious holiday bonus and pensions. Maman Resmana, one of the sacked employees, argued that the package is smaller than that offered by the previous management. He claimed he would only get 44.8 million rupiah (\$US5,270) in severance pay, plus 9.8 million rupiah (\$US1,130) as a lump sum payment in lieu of his pension for 20 years service. He was expecting at least 100 million rupiah (\$US11,570).

The two hotels ceased operations on April 30. Hotel Indonesia is being renovated, while Inna Wisata Hotel is being turned into a shopping mall. PT Hotel Indonesia Natour now owns the hotels.

The majority of the workers agreed to the severance agreement only after the management gave a guarantee that they would have first claim on jobs at Hotel Indonesia when the renovations are completed. A report in the *Jakarta Post*, however, noted that most of the employees have been working at the hotel for 15 to 20 years and due to their age are unlikely to be reemployed by the hotel's new management.

In a separate dispute, 217 hospitality workers at Hotel Nikko in Jakarta have refused to accept dismissal by the hotel's new owner. The decision to sack the workers came after the government sold its shares in the hotel, formerly known as the President Hotel, to PT Guthrie Logistic Private.

The new management claims the sackings are necessary because the hotel is suffering financial losses. Hotel workers' union chairman Nurbukhori Effendi refuted the management claim. He said the hotel has an occupancy rate of over 70 percent and an income of at least 8 billion rupiah (\$US909,090).

Indonesian bus company slashes severance pay

Around 700 employees of state-run bus operator Djakarta Transportation Bus Company (PPD) are demanding the full severance pay that was agreed to in a meeting between employees, company management and the House of Representatives earlier this year. Since then, the Ministry for State Enterprises has given the go-ahead for the company to cut employees' severance pay from 50 times their monthly salary to 34 times.

Over 2,000 employees will eventually be affected by the decision. PPD currently has about 350 buses and employs 5,149 workers, including bus drivers, crews and administrative staff. To render the company profitable, PPD wants to reduce the number of workers to 3,000.

Workers are alleging that the company's financial crisis has been caused by corruption involving officials from PPD management and the state minister's office.

Industrial accidents in China kill 30 workers

At least 20 workers were killed this week when scaffolding collapsed at a construction site in Anyang city in China's central Henan province. The Xinhua news agency reported that an unspecified number of workers were injured.

The collapse occurred as workers were attempting to remove a 63-metre tall scaffolding from around a chimney being built for a local company. Investigations into the cause of the accident are still underway.

Ten workers were also killed, and six others injured, when an ethanol cylinder exploded in a fermentation plant in the eastern province of Shandong.

Pakistani clerks demonstrate for pay

Hundreds of clerks from across Pakistan marched to the Press Club in Hyderabad on May 6 to demand a pay rise. The president of the All Pakistan Clerks Association called for the salaries of government employees and workers at semi-government organisations to be increased to match the rise in the price of consumer goods.

Sri Lankan shoe workers fight against sackings

Around 1,000 workers at the state-owned Bata footwear plant in Sri

Lanka went on strike for two hours on May 6 and protested in front of the busy Fort railway station in Central Colombo. They are opposing the company's attempt to retrench 145 workers.

Workers accused the recently-formed government of continuing with previous plans to retrench the workers. The protesters also condemned a contract labour system brought in by management that is leading to an increase in workloads and hours.

Sri Lankan Airlines hit by strike

Cabin crew workers at Sri Lankan Airlines went on strike on May 7 to demand the removal of the Head of Service Delivery, Walter J. Riggans, over his handling of negotiations on a new collective bargaining agreement. Workers claimed that Riggans has disregarded normal procedures. The Flight Attendants Union has been denied the opportunity to meet with the airline's CEO to discuss issues since 2002.

The strike caused a number of flights to be cancelled. It ended after 26 hours when the CEO agreed to meet with the union.

Sri Lankan plantation workers condemn arrests

More than 400 workers at the Pedro and Lover's Leap estates in the central hill district of Nuwara Eliya, 180 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on May 11 over the arrest of five estate youth. The youth were charged with attacking army personnel in the nearby town of Boralanda. According to reports, the army personnel were not wearing uniforms and have been intimidating youth in the area over the past month.

Australia Post workers strike in three states

Postal workers in New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland walked off the job for 24 hours on May 13 after negotiations on a new work agreement broke down. Workers in the other states and territories will strike next week. Some 30,000 workers are involved in the dispute.

The workers, members of the Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), have rejected an offer by Australia Post management of an 8 percent pay increase over two years, plus a \$400 performance bonus linked to customer service achievements. They are also opposed to the federal government's move to franchise out 150 more post offices over the next two to three years.

The CEPU has expressed concerns at Australia Post plans to increase the number of casual workers and divide present jobs into part-time sorting and part-time delivery work.

Transfield workers strike for new work agreement

Several hundred workers employed by Transfield Services at the Bluescope Steel plant in Port Kembla (formerly BHP) went on strike on May 11 over proposed changes to their sick pay entitlements. An Australian Workers Union (AWU) spokesman has accused Bluescope of "interfering" in the negotiations between the union and Transfield. Workers decided to take further strike action if the issues are not resolved.

Industrial court upholds sacking of printing workers

This week, the full bench of the Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) overturned an earlier court order preventing the *Age* newspaper from sacking 86 printers at its Spencer Street plant in Melbourne. In March, AIRC commissioner Dominica Whelan ruled that the sackings amounted to "illegitimate industrial action" because they breached provisions in an enterprise work agreement that guaranteed there would be no "forced redundancies".

Upholding an appeal by the *Age*, the AIRC full bench claimed that the sackings did not constitute a lockout or industrial action by the employer or breach the Workplace Relations Act. Since the original

court order, the workers have been stood down on full pay. They are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

The sackings in early February provoked strikes and picketing by print workers at both the company's Spencer Street and Tullamarine plants. The company has refused to relocate the Spencer Street workers to the other site, despite workers at Tullamarine having to do 20 to 30 hours of overtime each week.

New Zealand health workers issue strike notice

Members of the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and the Service and Food Workers Union employed by health provider Richmond Fellowship will strike for 48 hours on May 19. NUPE issued "intention to strike" notices this week.

The strike is part of a campaign, which began last month, for a collective work agreement. A NUPE spokesman said the agreement was to ensure "fair pay and conditions" for workers who look after some of "the most vulnerable members of our society". Workers are paid as little as \$NZ11 an hour and do not receive penalty rates "for working shifts in a 24-hour, seven-day-a-week operation".

The unions have been in negotiations with Richmond Fellowship since December. The company offered a collective agreement that did not include any improvement in wage rates and ignored workers' demands on other conditions. A union spokesman said workers were "stunned" by "what was in effect, a zero pay offer".

PNG doctors fear for their lives

Doctors employed at the Mount Hagen General Hospital in Papua New Guinea have petitioned the government over staff shortages and failed services. The conditions have led to specialists being attacked by the families of patients, angry over the quality of treatment. Three doctors have fled the area.

The petition said: "We (doctors and specialists) will move out and we have the ultimate right to do so if we feel we have been threatened or assaulted and if we continue to live in fear of our lives." The few new specialist doctors assigned to the hospital are refusing to take up their posts because of the prevailing unsafe conditions.

French Pacific radio and television staff walk off

The television and radio station in the French territory of Wallis and Futuna in the Pacific ceased transmissions on May 11, when 30 of the 50 staff walked off the job. The workers are demanding the dismissal of the regional management and changes to a reorganisation of technical and administrative services. The strikers are refusing to negotiate with the regional manager.



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