

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 May 2004

Indonesian workers fight for reinstatement

On May 10, about 1,000 former employees of aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) picketed the gates of the company's plant at the Husein Satranegara Air Force base in Bandung, West Java. The workers were protesting the refusal of the company to reinstate thousands of employees it laid off last year. Clashes between picketers and working employees took place near and at the factory gates, leaving at least 24 people injured.

Only 3,400 of the 9,600 workers who were sacked have been reinstated, despite the dismissals being declared illegal in a series of court cases. PTDI directors have boycotted talks with the Communication Forum of Employees (FKK) to discuss rehiring the workers and the payment of outstanding salaries.

36 more workers killed in China's mines

At least 36 workers have been killed and dozens injured in three mine accidents in China's notoriously dangerous coal mining industry. The worst accident was at a mine near Luliang city in Shanxi province, where 21 workers died after a gas blast tore through the pit on May 18.

The death toll in the Shanxi disaster could rise. Dense carbon monoxide fumes have hampered rescue teams, and 12 men are still missing.

Another explosion on May 13 at a mine in Qitaihe, in the northeast Heilongjiang province, claimed the lives of 12 miners and injured three others. Sparks from falling rocks in an abandoned shaft adjacent to where 50 men were working ignited gases and caused a blast that breached the separating wall. On May 16, three workers died after inhaling fumes from a gas leak in the Jinjiangou mine in Gansu province.

Nearly a dozen Chinese workers injured in industrial accidents

Nearly a dozen workers were injured in two separate accidents in China. On May 17, five workers were injured when a giant filling machine collapsed at a foundry in Shanghai. Three other workers were buried but were not injured.

Six workers were injured in a steel factory in Yongning County in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region when a discarded bomb they were cutting up as part of steel reclamation exploded. The workers did not realise the object was bomb because it was covered in mud.

Filipino workers demand to be moved out of Iraq

After the deaths of two Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) in Iraq last month, up to 600 Filipinos employed at the US Camp Anaconda base in Balad, north of Baghdad, are demanding to be repatriated or transferred to employment in safer countries. Immediately following the latest death on May 18, 94 guest workers resigned and took a chartered plane out of Baghdad to Dubai.

On May 18, a mortar attack on Camp Anaconda killed 20-year-old Filipino old warehouse worker Raymond Natividad and wounded four other OFWs, one of them seriously. On April 28, 48 OFWs returned to Manila after mortars hit the US Camp Freedom Place base in Mosul. Shrapnel injured three workers in the compound and another was hospitalised after being hit by a bullet.

The first Filipino casualty in Iraq was Rodrigo Reyes, a truck driver for

private American catering firm Kellogg, Brown & Root. Reyes was in a convoy that was ambushed while on its way to Kuwait last month.

Over 4,000 Filipinos are currently working in Iraq and 1,364 work at Camp Anaconda. They are employed by the Dubai-based company Prime Projects International, which is contracted by the US military. After the first death, the Philippine government banned local employment agencies from recruiting Filipino nationals to work in Iraq.

Bangladeshi pilots strike for improved conditions

Pilots employed by Biman Bangladesh AirLines went on strike on May 12 to demand improved working conditions and the reinstatement of a sacked colleague.

The pilots have banned working extra hours until their demands are met. The extra hours are necessary to the airline's continued operation because of a shortage of pilots. The required number of pilots is 205, but presently there are only 163. Almost all the airline's international and national flights were suspended or delayed due to the strike.

Pakistani telecom workers demonstrate against privatisation

Former workers of Telephone Industries of Pakistan (TIP), a subsidiary of Pakistan Telecommunication, marched from Haripur Tehsil Municipal Hall to the city centre on May 12. The march was to protest against the abolition of pension rights of retired workers.

TIP was relocated from Haripur to Islamabad and combined with a department of Carrier Telephone Industry. It is now being privatised and the new company does not intend to continue paying former TIP employees' pensions. Most of the former TIP workers are either retired or working for other subsidiaries of the parent company.

Indian Air Lines ground staff protest police harassment

Ground staff at Indian Air Lines, working at the Indira Gandhi Airport in New Delhi, struck for two hours on May 14 to protest against the police harassment and the suspension of two of their colleagues. Police interrogated the workers after the alleged disappearance of 25 kilograms of gold last week.

Sri Lankan workers protest retrenchments

Around 200 workers sacked by the Foreign Employment Bureau in Sri Lanka protested at the bureau's offices over two days from May 12. The protest was timed to coincide with a visit to the Bureau by the newly appointed labour minister.

Security guards manhandled workers to remove them from the bureau premises. Some of the women workers say that guards grabbed them by the hair. Despite the attacks, about 20 workers remained inside the premises while others continued to protest outside the gate.

Workers at the protest blamed the newly elected UPFA government for the retrenchments. They also claimed that retrenched workers had not been given any notice of the terminations.

Health workers strike over delayed pay increase

Some 20,000 health workers at 250 health institutions and hospitals in the North West, Sabaragamuwa and North East provinces of Sri Lanka went on strike for two days on May 19. The action was over the provincial governments' delay in paying new health sector salaries that were

approved by the national government in February. Those on strike included clerical staff, drivers, planning and project officers, apothecaries and telephone operators.

The strike paralysed hospitals. A spokesman for the Health Sector Trade Union Alliance told the press said there would be further strikes at institutions in the Sabaragamuwa and North East provinces because the provincial authorities had failed to respond positively to workers' demands.

Hunger strike in Sri Lanka

A "fast unto death" by around 50 public sector training workers in Colombo's Independent Square, entered its tenth day on May 20. This week, a fifth hunger striker had to be hospitalised. The action is part of a campaign by around 500 clerks and typists. They are demanding the government reemploy them as permanent employees and that those already rehired be given appropriate wage rates.

The workers were recruited from state technical colleges as trainees. Some have been kept in that low-paid classification for as long as eight years.

In a statement to the press this week, the president of the All Ceylon Trainees General Union condemned the government's refusal to grant the workers' demands as a "great injustice". He claimed that the government had "embarked on a special drive to employ university graduates" and the workers were "getting second class treatment".

Protracted strike by tea estate workers continues

An indefinite strike by nearly 60 Sri Lankan tea estate workers in the Thothla estate near Maskeliya (approximately 200 kilometres from Colombo) has continued for more than 100 days. The workers are demanding the company repair the roofs on their houses, provide access to a vehicle to transport people to hospital when needed and assist them to engage in poultry farming.

The workers rejected a demand by the owner of the estate to be given three months to consider the requests. They have pledged to return to work only when their demands are met in full. The strikers are sustaining themselves by doing work in the town and nearby estates. The workers are members of the Up Country Peoples Front and the All Ceylon Workers Alliance.

Australian teachers threaten strike action

Teachers in New South Wales (NSW) public schools held stopwork meetings on May 14 in protest at the Labor government's decision to submit new evidence in the teachers' pay case in the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

The government's claim that it cannot afford the mooted pay rise angered teachers and sparked industrial action in many regional centres across the state, including Orange, Port Macquarie, Broken Hill and the Central Coast, and at schools in the outer western suburbs of Sydney.

Teachers across the state are threatening to strike for 48 hours if the government does not withdraw its submission to the IRC before May 24.

Construction workers demand improved medical services

Construction workers and sewage treatment plant workers went on strike in Wollongong on May 18. They are demanding that the government-run Illawarra Health Service provide a doctor in the region who would be available to attend emergencies with the Westpac rescue helicopter service. The 500 strikers marched to the Coniston helicopter base to protest the lack of action on the issue.

Western Australian nurses protest inside parliament

Over 100 nurses from Perth's public hospitals stopped work on May 18 and protested in the public gallery of parliament house to demand a reduction in workloads.

Since February, nurses have had their nurse-to-patient ratios increased from a limit of 4-5 patients up to 10 and sometimes 20. Nurses said the increased workloads threatened the well-being of patients.

Australian Nurses Federation secretary Mark Olsen said Western

Australia had gone from the "first state in the country to have a legally enforceable mechanism for nurses' workloads" to a situation where "none existed". Workloads were supposed to have been renegotiated in the enterprise agreements for the public sector in February.

Postal workers in WA strike over work agreement

Postal workers in Western Australia stopped work on May 21 as part of a national campaign against the excessive use by Australia Post of contract and casual workers and a government plan to franchise 150 post offices over the next two to three years to private concerns. Postal workers in three other states, New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, walked off the job for 24 hours on May 13 after negotiations over a new industry work agreement broke down.

Postal workers nationally have rejected an offer by Australia Post management of an 8 percent pay increase over 2 years, plus the provision of a \$400 performance bonus that will be linked to customer service achievements.

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbers Union WA branch said permanent employment and rates of pay were under threat.

New Zealand nurses and midwives vote over pay campaign

Over 20,000 New Zealand nurses and midwives from the country's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) began voting this week on whether to join a national campaign for a pay rise. If the resolution is carried, it will set in motion the first nationwide campaign by nurses and midwives in 13 years.

There is no proposal for industrial action by the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO), which is only seeking endorsement to enter negotiations. A NZNO spokesperson said members would vote for national bargaining and to endorse claims for "fair pay" and "safe staffing levels" in hospitals. The result will be announced on May 24.

Meanwhile, the country's senior doctors are continuing with year-long negotiations for a national work agreement. According to the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists, nursing and medical facilities face serious staff shortages as many personnel leave because of New Zealand's unfavourable working conditions.

This week, operations were cancelled at Palmerston North Hospital. It is short of 20 nurses in acute services and surgery lists have been cut because of a lack of staff to cover post-operative beds.

Boiler explosion at NZ meatworks kills worker

A boiler attendant at the CMP Kokiri meatworks, on the South Island's West Coast, died of severe burns about 12 hours after being injured in an explosion this week. Possent Dlanini, a 36-year-old Zimbabwe national who had been living in Greymouth, suffered extensive burns to most of his body after being engulfed by flames as he was lighting the boiler for the afternoon shift.

Another worker raised the alarm and drove the injured man to meet an ambulance part way to Greymouth Base Hospital. Dlanini was later flown by air ambulance to Christchurch Hospital where he died. Occupational Safety and Health inspectors closed the plant and it may be several days before work resumes. Police are investigating the incident.

Royal Tongan Airlines to retrench 200 staff

The government of the Kingdom of Tonga says it is seeking to permanently shut down its state airline's international services. The announcement came after the Boeing 757 passenger jet that Royal Tongan Airlines uses for international flights was repossessed and grounded at Auckland International Airport last month.

A spokesman for the Tonga government described the financial problems of the airline as severe. He is currently working out severance payments for 200 employees.

Fiji airline cabin crew retain meal and rest conditions

Fiji's Permanent Arbitrator, William Calinchini, on May 17 ruled that cabin crew employed by Air Pacific had the right to use Economy Class rest seats on Boeing 747 aircraft to take rest and meal breaks. Air Pacific had filed claims to relocate rest seats to the planes' loft, which is at the

rear of the aircraft and up toward the ceiling.

The Transport Workers Union claimed that the entry to the loft was unsafe because the stairs were steep and narrow and crew had difficulty taking meals up to the area. Calinchini ruled that the relocation would have represented a reduction in crew working conditions.



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