Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 May 2004

Indian slate workers on strike for more than a month

Over 5,000 slate tile workers from 100 different factories in Markapur, in the Prakasam district of Andhra Pradesh, have been on strike since April 15, demanding a wage rise. The workers are seeking a 20 percent increase, while the company owners are offering only 6 percent.

So far, 10 tripartite and bi-partite meetings arranged by the Labour Officer at Markapur have not produced a settlement.

The strike has caused major losses. Cutting and designing activity has come to a standstill and exports have completely stopped. Exporters, who have failed to meet their overseas commitments, are putting pressure on both the management and the workers to come to an agreement.

Indian city workers fight for compensation

Hundreds of striking day-wage workers employed by the Gulbarga City Corporation (GCC) in Karnataka held a sit-in on May 22 in front of the mayoral City Office, demanding compensation for a worker who was injured by the mayor's vehicle.

The mayor's car ran over the man's legs as the workers were sleeping in front of the GCC office, as part of their campaign for a pay rise. After the incident, workers blocked the GCC's main gate and demanded an apology, compensation and payment by the mayor for the worker's medical treatment. They ended the protest after the GCC Commissioner and GCC members promised that their demands would be fulfilled.

Indian contract workers fight break-in-service clauses

Around 1,000 contract workers at the Public Works Department of Panaji, in the west coast state of Goa, launched a protest in front of the Labour Commissioner's office on May 19, to protest against break-in-service clauses in their employment agreement. Break-in-service provisions are used to prevent contract workers becoming permanent workers. Workers also protested against the low wages they receive, compared to permanent staff.

Sri Lankan bus workers on strike

State bus workers from 11 depots in the North Western Province, nine depots on the outskirts of Colombo and two depots in North Central province went on strike for 24 hours on May 21, demanding the withdrawal of a recently issued government circular that cancelled all promotions and appointments.

Transport workers from the Panadura Bus depot, 25 kilometres from Colombo, walked out on May 18, demanding the arrest of two people who assaulted a bus driver. Seventy buses were parked inside the depot due to the strike.

Sri Lankan postal workers on strike

Around 50 postal workers doing letter distribution and related work at the Kelaniya Post Office, on the outskirts of Colombo, went on strike on May 18 to demand the payment of outstanding overtime. Letter distribution in the Kelaniya area was halted by the strike. The overtime was for extra work done by the workers during the recent general elections.

Deaths of Filipino maids in Lebanon provoke anger

The deaths of three Filipino domestic helpers in the past three months in Beirut, Lebanon, all under the same suspicious circumstances, have drawn criticism from relatives back home. The three women died from injuries when they fell from apartment balconies while trying to escape from their employers. A fourth Filipino maid, who also fell from her employer's balcony while trying to escape, survived.

When one of the maids, Catherine Batista, sought refuge in the Philippines Embassy she was told to go back to her employer. She was found dead a few days later.

Under pressure from the victims' relatives, who are calling for the sacking of all Philippines embassy personnel in Lebanon, Senator Manuel Villar is pushing for a Senate inquiry into the deaths.

There are around 20,000 Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) in Lebanon and Syria. Most are employed as domestic helpers.

School teachers strike over wages in New South Wales

Sixty thousand New South Wales (NSW) state school and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers walked off the job for 24 hours on May 27, and are due to strike again next Wednesday. After attending a rally, thousands of

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teachers marched to Parliament House in Sydney to protest.

The industrial action is over the state Labor government's intervention in their pay claim for a 25 percent pay increase. The NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) last year awarded teachers an interim 5.5 percent pay rise, and was due to decide on the full claim next month. But the state government, which has offered only 6 percent, applied to the IRC to re-open the pay case.

Premier Bob Carr's government is arguing that a changed economic climate means that if teachers receive a significant wage increase it will affect the education budget. The government has already cut 1,000 education department administrative staff from its workforce and could use any decision to increase teachers' wages to reduce school funding or further cut staff levels.

Catholic teachers strike in support of state colleagues

Catholic school teachers in NSW stopped work for 24 hours on May 28 to support their government school colleagues. About 1,000 teachers protested outside state parliament at the Labor government's interference in the workings of the IRC.

Their union, the Independent Education Union, is concerned at Premier Carr's attempt to influence the decision of the industrial court. Catholic schools would be affected by any education spending cuts because independent schools receive a quarter of their funding from the state budget.

Three workers die at BHP sites in Western Australia

A gas explosion last week at the BHP-Billiton hot briquetted iron plant in Boodarie in Western Australia's north, killed James Wadley, a tradesman on the site.

Wadley received burns to up to 90 percent of his body and severe burning to his lungs. He was flown to Royal Perth Hospital last Wednesday night with three other injured men.

Wadley died on the same night that an apprentice, 20-year-old Ross McKinnon, was hit on the head by a falling torque wrench on a mine site outside Newman last Thursday.

This comes only three weeks after the death of a 26-year-old maintenance worker, Cory Bentley, at BHP-Billiton's iron ore processing facility at Nelson Point, Port Hedland, also in WA's north. He was hit on the head by a piece of machinery.

New Zealand nurses vote to bargain nationally over pay

More than 20,000 nurses and midwives have voted to bargain on a national basis over pay and staffing levels. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) ran the nationwide ballot over 11 days, concluding last week.

Each of the 21 district health board (DHB) areas voted nearly unanimously in favour of joining forces. The result was an average of 98 percent across the 21 areas, ranging from 94 percent in one DHB to 100 percent in another. The NZNO reported a strong turnout, particularly in Auckland, where some 70 percent of union members participated in the vote.

The union has announced no plans for an industrial campaign, but intends to steer nurses toward applying pressure on the Labour government. NZNO spokeswoman Laila Harre, a former Alliance Party MP, claimed the nurses and midwives had "the best opportunity in more than a generation" to win on pay issues. "The government supports pay equity in the state sector and is in a better financial position to fund fair pay than any previous government," she said. The pre-negotiation process between the NZNO and District Health Boards NZ begins next week.

Workers picket Auckland casino

About 100 workers from Sky City Casino staged a two-hour protest on May 20 outside the casino in downtown Auckland. Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) negotiators have been in pay talks with the company for the past three weeks. Negotiations are set to resume in the next fortnight, with a stop-work meeting planned for June 3. Besides the Auckland casino, Sky City owns the Adelaide casino in South Australia.

NZ university staff to strike

Non-academic staff at the Victoria University of Wellington will strike on May 31, after their claim for a 4 percent salary rise was rejected. The support staff voted to take industrial and protest action in response to the university's 2.2 percent pay offer. A spokesman for the Association of University Staff said the offer was the lowest made to any group of university staff in the country in the current wage round, and well below the national average salary increase.

Guam water utility workers to be made redundant

On May 25, the consolidated Commission on Utilities voted to fully privatise the Guam Waterworks Authority. The Commission is proposing that a private company operate the utility, provide its own funding for projects and employ its own workforce.

In an attempt to minimise the backlash from utility workers, the commission said it is discussing employee options, such as early retirement, severance packages and the possibility of giving employees right of first refusal so the private contractor can absorb them if they qualify. Putting a contractor in place will take at least 18 months.

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