

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 April 2005

Thousands of miners strike for pay increase

Nearly 70,000 coal miners at the Singareni Collieries in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh went on strike for three days on April 25 halting operations at 12 locations across the coal belt districts of Khammam, Karimnagar, Adilabad and Warangal. The workers are demanding a salary increase promised in the seventh national coal wage agreement.

The state government responded by evoking the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) and used it to detain workers at some mines after the last shift just prior to the strike. Police were also deployed at mines to encourage strikebreakers.

According to a spokesman for the Singareni Collieries Company, production losses from the strike exceeded 800 million rupees (\$US16 million). The Singareni Karmika Samakhya, the Godavari Loya Boggukhani Karmika Sangam and the Shramika Shakti Godavari Valley Coal Workers Union called the strike jointly.

Management threaten to nurse lockout

Nurses at the 350-bed Sadhu Vaswani hospital complex at Koregaon Park, Pune, in the Indian state of Maharashtra began an indefinite strike on April 20. The nurses, who picketed the hospital, want a monthly salary increase of 1,500 rupees (\$US30). Despite some nurses having 16 years experience in the profession, they are only paid \$US80 per month.

Management, which has only offered a 600-rupee increase, has attempted to use contractors to maintain services at the hospital but was forced to reduce patient numbers from 150 to 20. A lockout is threatened on May 5.

Power workers oppose privatisation

Power workers at the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) in India struck for two days on April 19 over moves to break up the enterprise in preparation for privatisation. The striking employees held rallies outside workplaces as the strike brought the major Ropar, Lehra Mohabbat and Bhatinda thermal plants to a standstill.

Raj Kumar, a spokesman for PSEB Junior Engineers, said that “workers would not tolerate the attempt to privatise the board”. Nationwide strikes by power workers over this issue are scheduled for May 31 and June 11.

Indian textile workers strike over bonus

Around 4,000 textile workers from ten National Textile Corporation (NTC) mills in Coimbatore in the south Indian

state of Tamilnadu walked off the job on April 18. They were demanding that management not deduct a previously paid bonus from salaries or retirement benefits and want permanency for casual workers.

The strike ended on April 21 after union leaders brokered an agreement with NTC management and the Labour Commissioner. Details of the settlement are not yet public.

Pakistani health employees protest over jobs

Health workers at the Khyber Teaching Hospital in Peshawar struck on April 21 to demand the reintroduction of a scheme under which the jobs of deceased and retired employees are offered to their sons. Of 80 such vacant positions that were filled over the recent period only 25 were given to former employees’ sons. The Grade Four Employees Association, which covers the health workers, threatened to call a three-day strike if the issue is not resolved.

Female golf caddies win reinstatement

On April 16, the Korean Federation of Private Service Workers’ Union (KFSU) reached an agreement with the privately owned Hanwon Country Club ending a 283-day dispute. The dispute erupted last year when the employers decided to transfer 41 female caddies to a subcontractor breaching the conditions of their work agreement.

The caddies rejected the transfers and launched a campaign to oppose them. On August 21 last year, company thugs backed by riot police attacked workers on a peaceful protest march at the club. The company then sued individual employees for compensation claiming that the protest was responsible for riot police damaging golf course greens. During the dispute union leaders were jailed and 37 caddies dismissed, as were other permanent club workers.

Workers staged a 39-day sit-down protest outside the Hanwon corporate headquarters in Seoul and conducted a hunger strike. On April 15, the strikers—supported by other workers—occupied the club. Fearing further disruption to business management finally agreed to negotiate.

Under the resulting agreement management promised not to force any workers to leave the company or to change their employment status without prior agreement, to reinstate all sacked workers and pay them compensation for unfair dismissal. The company also agreed to drop its damages action and to meet the hospital and medical costs of workers injured

during the company-instigated violence.

Bank workers demand improved wages and conditions

Westpac bank employees in Launceston, Tasmania and in Adelaide, South Australia struck for one day on April 27 as part of a campaign for a new enterprise work agreement. According to a union spokesman the 100 workers that struck at the company's Launceston call centre were the "backbone of Westpac's service delivery for telephone banking".

The workers are demanding the company improve on its 4 percent pay offer and want various improvements to working conditions. These include, secure pay frameworks within the work agreement, work targets that are reasonable and achievable, staff increases to match workloads and a fair rostering system to allocate working over a public holiday.

They are also demanding guaranteed rights for union representatives to carry out union duties in the workplace. Prior to this week's strike, management at some centres had attempted to stop union representatives talking to workers about participating in the industrial action.

New Zealand bank staff strike over pay

National Bank staff held a one-day strike on April 22 making it the first work stoppage in almost 20 years. They joined ANZ Bank employees in a campaign for better pay for weekend and evening work. At least 2,000 bank staff participated in the strike with 250 marching through downtown Auckland. Workers at the two recently merged banks earlier voted to reject the company's new pay offer.

National Bank employees are demanding the same time-and-a-half pay rates as their counterparts in Australia for working weekends and nights. The employers' current offer excludes any improvement in the current rate. The strike by ANZ workers was their first since 1996.

New Zealand mine workers hold national strike

New Zealand Solid Energy miners held a 48-hour nationwide strike this week. Workers at the company's Westport's Stockton Mine, Huntly, the Ohai opencast in Southland and Rotowaro in the Waikato joined the strike. Miners at Spring Creek struck for 24 hours.

The strike action came after negotiations—in progress over the last six weeks—broke down. Solid Energy has offered a 2.8 percent pay increase but workers are demanding 6 percent. The miners are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU)

An EPMU spokesman said that cost of living increases had already eaten into a 6-percent claim filed three months ago by the union. He claimed that Solid Energy's business was going well and pointed out that when the company was struggling in previous years, workers did not receive any wage rises.

Auckland bus drivers continue action

Drivers at bus company Stagecoach in Auckland, New Zealand are set to continue rolling industrial action in the coming week and will refuse to do the last run of their shift if they are running behind time. They may also consider refusing

to collect fares for one day. The action is part of an ongoing campaign for \$2 an hour pay rise to bring up the drivers hourly base rate to \$16. They also want more rest breaks. The company had only offered a \$1 hourly increase.

Most Stagecoach buses were grounded between 9.30 a.m., and 2.30 p.m., on April 28 when drivers attended a stop-work meeting to discuss a new pay offer. Neither the union nor management would disclose details of the offer except to say it contained some "new components". Both sides have agreed to a "facilitation" meeting overseen by an Employment Relations Ministry mediator to try to resolve the dispute. If the talks fail, bus drivers will strike for six days from May 5.

Teachers to strike over non-payment of salaries

At least 760 Morobe province teachers in the Papua New Guinea (PNG) will strike on May 2 over the non-payment of salaries for the past six weeks. They are also owed 204,764 kina (\$US64,594) in fare assistance allowances for 2004.

The teachers' salaries have been held up due to a dispute between the PNG government and the Morobe provincial administration over who should pay them. The teachers are employed in newly established secondary and provincial high schools that the PNG Teaching Services Commission says it has not yet approved and therefore funds for wages were not available.

The teachers have blamed senior education officials in the province for their predicament and are demanding the provincial administration pay their salaries. PNG Teachers Association Mamose regional secretary Arnold Kondil said the union would now serve a strike notice.

Fiji garment factory closures throw thousands out of work

On April 22, Fiji's major garment manufacturer, Ghim Li Apparel closed its four factories in Ba, Nadi, Lautoka at the cost of over 3,000 jobs. The owner's claim that they were forced to close the plants because of sales losses in the US after World Trade Organisation rules ended Fiji's tax-free status in January.

Lautoka City Council town clerk, Rusp Raj, said the closures and layoffs would have a serious impact on many support industries, in particular those providing bus and taxi services to the plants. Many more job losses in the Fiji garment industry are expected in the future as the remaining manufacturers find it increasingly difficult to compete with China's garment industry. Figures show that returns for the industry in Fiji dwindled by 20 percent between 2001 and 2003. Many factories that once operated six days a week have cut back to just four days. More than 12,000 jobs are at risk.



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