

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 May 2005

Strike looming at Philippines' largest gold mine

Over 1,400 employees at the Lapanto Consolidated Mining Company, in the Philippines district of Benguet, have voted to strike after the company refused to negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement. Talks sponsored by the National Conciliation and Mediation Board broke down on April 30 when the company sent a team that was not authorised to reach an agreement with the union.

The Lapanto Employees Union (LEU) is seeking wage increases over the next three years of 133 pesos per day (\$US2.40). The amount is lower than the original claim of 148 pesos, but the company will not shift from its offer of just 53 pesos over three years.

A legal cooling-off period for the LEU notice ended on May 5 but another seven days must elapse before workers can finally go on strike on May 12 and set up picket lines.

Philippines government employees to protest corruption

Government employees in the Philippines region of Negros Occidental and the City of Bacolod announced on May 5 they will join a nationally coordinated protest action on May 31 against corruption in the Government Service Insurance System (GSIS).

The protests will include teachers and health workers and call for the resignation of GSIS president Winston Garcia. They will also highlight grievances over insufficient benefits and services at GSIS and the victimisation of GSIS members and employees who have spoken out against the government.

The union representing the workers, the Confederation for Unity and Recognition for Government Employees (Courage), has filed corruption and victimisation charges against GSIS to the government ombudsman and to the Quezon City regional trial court. A complaint has also been made to the Commission on Human Rights.

Health workers press for salary increase

The Alliance of Health Workers (AHW), which covers private and government health employees in the Philippines, is demanding the government grant a longstanding demand for a wage increase of 3,000 pesos per month. AHW spokesperson Jonathan Placido said health workers have not had a pay increase since 2001. Placido said: "For four years the monthly basic pay for ordinary health workers remained pegged at 5,082 pesos."

Placido accused the national government of violating its own charter for public health workers. Under the law, health workers had the right to benefits such as hazard pay amounting to 25 percent of the basic salary, subsistence allowances, overtime pay, night shift differential pay, holiday pay, and laundry allowances. Since 1992, however, the government has claimed there are insufficient funds to provide the benefits in full.

Retrenched garment workers demand entitlements

At least 600 garment workers once employed by Golbon Garments in the Philippines are campaigning for unpaid severance pay and other entitlements owed to them since the manufacturer went bankrupt and closed in mid-April. The company had operated in the country's Export Processing Zone. The workers are also demanding a Cost-of-Living

Adjustment (COLA) that the regional tripartite Wages Board granted in August 2004, but which Gobon failed to pay.

The workers are worried that the company may attempt to remove equipment. They have approached local Angeles City councilor Jay Sangil to represent them and make demands on the company. However, having agreed to take up the issue, Sangil is attempting to persuade workers to reduce their claim and meet the company "half way".

Sri Lankan power unions call off anti-privatisation strike

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers have called off a strike scheduled for May 10 to oppose the government's plans to "restructure" the board as a prelude to privatisation. The strike was abandoned after the unions met with several government ministers and officials on May 7. Although the government agreed not to confirm a cabinet paper of May 4 endorsing the CEB restructure, an alternative plan will be produced within a month with union participation.

Auto-rickshaw drivers protest city ban

Auto-rickshaw (three-wheeler) drivers in Vijayawada in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh protested in front of the city sub-collector's office on May 9. They are demanding the withdrawal of a ban imposed by the city police commissioner against three-wheelers plying for business on highways.

The police justified the ban by alleging that auto-rickshaws are a major cause of road accidents. The Vijayawada City Auto-rickshaw Workers Union denied this. The union claims that three-wheeler drivers already suffer from severe restrictions, including a limit on their field of operation to a 60-kilometre radius. The new ban will make it extremely difficult for drivers to make a living.

Headload workers blockade Kerala State Secretariat

On April 10, thousands of members of the Joint Action Council of Headload Workers blockaded roads and the entrances to the Secretariat Building in Thiruvananthapuram, the capital of the southern Indian state of Kerala. The workers—who perform backbreaking work unloading and carrying goods—are demanding the withdrawal of the Kerala Loading and Unloading (Regulation of Wages and Restriction of Unlawful Practices) Act introduced in 2002. Among other things, the Act gives the police extensive powers to interfere in labour disputes. The blockade continued for around eight hours.

Major Australian bank announces mass layoffs

The Finance Sector Union (FSU) said it is considering industrial action after the National Australian Bank (NAB) announced on May 11 that it would slash 2,000 jobs from its operations in Australia. Half of the job losses will be in the state of Victoria. Declaring that there "was no justification for the cuts," a union spokesman said the FSU would be reporting the details at membership meetings soon and industrial action could follow. He warned that more positions could be shifted offshore in the future.

While the union says it is "determined to save jobs," it has made clear that any industrial action would be only to allow bank workers "to express their concern". A union spokesman said the bank should have offered

voluntary redundancies first. The NAB, Australia's largest bank, announced the job cuts while reporting a half-year profit of \$2.54 billion. Some 4,200 positions to be axed globally over the next two years.

Train workers walk out over stand-down

About 300 workers at three train maintenance centres in Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on May 11, causing delays to some train services. The strike occurred when a worker at the Flemington centre was stood down after refusing to undergo random drug testing.

RailCorp has conducted random drug testing since February last year. A spokesman for Unions NSW said the workers—members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union—were not opposed to drug and alcohol testing, but wanted RailCorp to negotiate an official policy.

He said the Rail Safety Act guideline states “that prior to conducting any random testing, RailCorp and the unions should negotiate a procedure under which the random tests are to take place”.

Auckland bus drivers end strike but reject pay deal

More than 750 drivers for the bus company Stagecoach in Auckland have rejected a pay deal worked out by the company and the four unions involved. The rejection came after drivers returned to work on May 10 following a six-day strike.

In a secret ballot drivers, voted 13 to one to reject the deal, which did not improve on the company's offer to lift pay rates from \$13.94 to just \$15 an hour, with an increase to \$16 by May 2007. The drivers were demanding \$16 an hour immediately. Angered by the company's response, they have now upped the amount to \$17.

The unions have ruled out further industrial action until June 7, after the Queen's Birthday weekend. A combined unions' advocate said the hold on industrial action would “allow us to go back to mediation,” and “allow a bit of calm to come to the city”.

New Zealand radiographers prepare to strike

Radiographers at nine New Zealand district health boards (DHBs) gave notice this week of a four-day strike from May 23 in support of a pay claim. If the strike goes ahead it will close nine public hospitals and a number of auxiliary hospitals from Nelson to Auckland, and force a postponement of surgery and outpatient clinics. Radiation technologists—who perform procedures such as x-rays, scans, mammograms and ultra sound—are seeking a collective agreement across all the DHBs. The radiographers' union, Apex, declared that the strike was a “warning” to district health boards. Apex wants a minimum annual salary of \$40,000 and an increase on top of this for experienced staff. Currently the minimum varies from \$30,000 to \$35,000. The union has been seeking a resolution to the dispute for six months. Meanwhile, the New Zealand Nurses Organisation has launched a pay campaign for nurses employed in doctors' general practices. This follows the recent settlement covering 20,000 public hospital nurses, midwives and health care assistants. The campaign is to negotiate a Primary Health Care Multi-Employer Collective Agreement covering 5,000 nurses and 1,100 employers. A proposal will be voted on before the end of July and bargaining will begin in August.

New Zealand bank workers stage rolling strikes

Staff at the recently merged ANZ and National banks walked off the job on May 9 and May 10 over stalled collective agreement negotiations. The rolling strikes hit the banks' operations in Auckland, Wellington and Waikato.

Contract discussions broke down last week when the bank walked out on negotiations. The key issue in the dispute is the bank's refusal to agree to pay overtime for weekend and late evenings work. While the bank pays workers in its Australia operations for overtime, it is denying the same conditions to its New Zealand workforce.

Bed manufacturing workers continue pay strike

Workers from the Sleepyhead Beds factory in Auckland walked off the

job on May 6 in support of their claim for a 5 percent pay rise and time-and-a-half rates for overtime. Currently the average hourly pay rate is just \$12. The 180 members of Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) have been picketing the factory in Otahuhu.

Last week, the EPMU and the Employers and Manufacturers Association (EMA) settled the Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement, covering manufacturing workers employed by 73 companies. The EPMU claimed the outcome as a major victory, but the EMA said the agreement, providing a 5 percent pay rise over 15 months, was effectively the same as the employers' offer for an immediate 4 percent rise made at the start of the wage negotiations.

Up to 2,000 workers covered by the agreement went on strike last month to demand a better offer but the EMA refused to continue negotiations, leaving the union to bargain with individual employers directly.

The EPMU is now seeking to add more employers to the agreement. EPMU national secretary Andrew Little denied that the union—a major Labour Party affiliate—had worked to settle the dispute ahead of parliamentary elections in September so as to ensure that the Labour government was not embarrassed by further strikes in the metal industry.

GovGuam employees demand investigation

Public employees on the Pacific island of Guam this month demanded that Attorney General Douglas Moylan explain what had happened to the \$US1.5 million for public employee wage increases allocated under Public Law 27-206 last year. The Law provided for the restoration of salary increments due to public employees of GovGuam and to provide merit bonuses to eligible workers in all government branches, autonomous agencies and public corporations, as well as those employed in the council and mayoral offices. On May 9, Moylan announced he would begin an investigation into the workers' concerns.

Fiji's public servants issue strike notice

Workers at Fiji's Department of Immigration will strike on May 27 over the department's failure to pay overtime and shift allowances. Members of the Fiji Public Service Association voted unanimously to strike at their annual meeting at the end of April.

The association's general secretary Rajeshwar Singh said the workers had not been paid overtime, shift and meal allowances between January 1 and February 28 this year. Some shift allowances have been unpaid since 2003.

This is not the first time that government workers have had to take industrial action to extract overdue payments. On March 30, 1,300 Department of Public Works employees went on strike for three hours to demand unpaid overtime dating back to December 2002.



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