

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

21 May 2005

## Indonesian textile workers rally for reinstatement

On May 11, 6,000 striking employees of the textile company PT Great River Indonesia in Bogor rallied in front of the local government building. The workers demanded that officials force the company to re-employ 700 workers who were laid off on May 9. The company also cut wages.

The textile producer makes shirts and lingerie for the American, Italian, Japanese and Australian markets. Company official Harun Hutapea denounced the strike, calling on workers to return to work and support the company's drive to attract fresh investment.

A Great River worker, Martanto, told the media: "We will continue the strike until we reach an agreement with the company. The company always claims losses, but production is still going on, we still receive a lot of orders.... Every time we ask the executives to show us the financial reports, they always refuse."

## Thai electricity workers protest against privatisation

Over 1,000 workers employed by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) held a rally this week in Bangkok to protest against a cabinet resolution that gives the go-ahead for the privatisation of the state utility.

Union officials representing EGAT workers presented Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra with a petition opposing the cabinet's decision of a public offering of EGAT shares. Workers disputed claims by EGAT management that workers all support the privatisation plan.

They also denounced a government announcement that all EGAT workers will get a 15 percent pay rise after the company goes public, as a ploy aimed at swaying workers who are against or undecided about the sale.

## Sri Lankan engineering workers walk out over wage rise

Over 2,300 State Engineering Corporation (SEC) workers launched a strike on May 17 and surrounded the management offices in central Colombo. SEC is a state-owned corporation involved mainly in engineering work for government projects.

Employees have not been paid a promised 2,500 rupee (\$US25) pay rise. While workers' payments for their Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and bank loans are being deducted from their wages, the company has not paid the money to the Central Bank. Workers claim at least 100 million rupees is missing.

Other grievances include the fact that two thirds of the workforce has not been given permanent status although they had been working at the corporation for more than five years.

## Sri Lankan health workers strike

Pharmacists, laboratory technicians, physiotherapists, attendants,

telephone operators, clerks and ambulance drivers at Polonnaruwa hospital in the North Central Province launched an indefinite strike on May 11. A 2,500 rupee (\$US25) salary increase promised in the last budget has been paid as an allowance instead, meaning the benchmark pay has not changed and future rises will be affected. Workers at other healthcare facilities in the Polonnaruwa district joined the striking workers.

## Indian farm workers on hunger strike

Farm workers in the southern Indian state of Kerala launched a hunger strike in front of the District Collectorate of Kozhikode on May 17 to demand the immediate release of their pension funds, which they claim have been blocked for last 25 months. According to workers, nearly 157,000 claims for payment are awaiting settlement. They also demanded an insurance scheme for workers engaged in risky work, such as plucking coconuts.

On May 11, workers held a hunger strike in front of the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, the state capital, and plan to go on strike from May 23.

## Indian transport workers demand pay rise

Transport workers in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated in front of the Transport Corporation depot in Tirunelveli on May 14 to demand a 2,000 rupee (\$US40) salary increase. Workers also demanded a pension scheme similar that paid by the Tamilnadu Electricity Board, the provision of medical assistance to retired workers and bus passes for the people who accompany former employees using a free travel benefit.

## Indian cooperative workers demonstrate

Cooperative workers in Tamilnadu protested in front of the office of the Cooperative Societies joint director's offices at Palyamkottai in Tirunelveli on May 13 to demand full-time positions for temporary staff who worked more than 480 days. Earlier, the protestors marched from Samathanapuram to the protest venue near the Loyola convent in Palayamkottai. The demonstration was organised by the Tamilnadu Cooperative Federation.

Similar protests would be conducted in Coimbatore, Madurai, Cuddalore, Tiruchi, Sivaganga and Chennai, workers said. The government is attempting to eliminate 23,728 positions from the Cooperative Societies. Some 7,000 workers have initiated legal action in the Madras High Court to prevent retrenchments.

## Plantation workers, unorganised labourers protest

Plantation workers from Madikeri, in the Indian state of Karnataka, demonstrated in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office on May 12 to demand a wage increase. Other demands

included a minimum wage for all plantation workers and an end to police interference in disputes with plantation owners. The demonstration also called for temporary and day workers to be given full-time positions, accommodation, water, electricity and food subsidies. Plantation workers in the Chikmagalur district demonstrated on the same demands.

The same day, hundreds of unorganised beedi (local cigarettes) workers, construction workers, daily paid telecom workers and childcare workers in Karnataka combined together to picket outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Mangalore. Protests were also held in Bantwal, Belthangady, Puttur and Sullia.

Their demands included a six-day week for beedi workers and a minimum wage, implementation of safety legislation in the construction industry, and pensions and a welfare scheme for unorganised workers.

#### **Australian maintenance workers stood down**

Forty-five aircraft engineers employed to maintain the Royal Australian Air Forces' (RAAF) FA-18 fighters were stood down on May 19 by Boeing at the Williamstown air base near Newcastle. The management justified the stand downs on the ground that the workers were refusing to fill-out time sheets. The engineers are conducting a campaign to have Boeing agree to employ them on collective, rather than individual, contracts. Some workers are being paid \$2 an hour less than others.

The engineers responded to the stand down by setting up a three-hour picket at the base's main gate. The dispute has been placed in the hands of the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

#### **Tasmanian health workers stop work**

Public health workers held stopwork meetings around Tasmania on May 19 to discuss industrial action over the staff shortages plaguing the island state's health system. A union representative told the media there were chronic shortages of occupational therapists and physiotherapists.

The wages and conditions for health workers in Tasmania are the worst in Australia, making it difficult to recruit and retain professional staff.

#### **New Zealand bank strikes continue**

A series of rolling stoppages by New Zealand employees of the recently-merged ANZ and National banks continued this week. Bank staff are pushing for overtime rates for weekend and evening work, as is paid to their counterparts in the company's Australian operation.

Industrial action and picketing took place at Manukau, Papakura, Manurewa and Dunedin, following strikes at branches in Waikato, Wellington, Taranaki and West Auckland. Workers who deal with credit card and EFTPOS transactions and staff at the processing centre in Wellington have also been on strike. Further industrial action is planned.

ANZ National has offered a 3.75 percent pay rise and other improvements to conditions, but refused to budge on the main issue. The bank claims that Australian employment conditions are not relevant to New Zealand.

#### **New Zealand health workers agree to pay deal**

Waikato District Health Board clerical and administrative staff will receive a 3 percent pay increase and a one-off payment of \$300 following agreement on a new employment contract. A

Public Service Association (PSA) spokesperson said more than 85 percent of the workers voted to accept the pay deal. The agreement brings to an end a long-running pay dispute, which led PSA members to strike for 48 hours last month. The increase will be backdated to October 1, 2004. Before industrial action and mediation, members were being offered a 1.5 percent wage increase over 12 months and a one-off payment of \$200.

#### **New Zealand miners consider new pay offer**

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said "some progress" had been made this week in pay talks with six New Zealand mining companies. More than 700 workers from opencast and underground mines in the North and South Islands have taken industrial action in recent weeks in protest over their employers' refusal to settle a national agreement.

The miners are seeking a 6 percent pay rise in line with the EPMU's campaign for a minimum across-the-board 5 percent pay increase, and want employers to work toward pay parity between mines. The mines involved are the Huntly East underground mine and the Rotowaro opencast mine in the North Island, the Stockton opencast mine and Spring Creek underground mine on the West Coast, and the Ohai opencast mine in Southland. All are owned by state-owned Solid Energy, but contractors operate on most sites.

Meanwhile, the EPMU has reached a settlement in the long-running Bridgestone tyre factory dispute. While the union is not releasing details, the union's negotiators recommended the deal. Some 25 workers went on strike for a month after the company offered them a 2.8 percent pay rise. The workers were seeking the same 5 percent rise as other claims in the manufacturing sector.

#### **PNG doctors threaten to walk off**

Doctors across Papua New Guinea have threatened to walk off their jobs over accommodation problems and the lack of drugs. More than 50 doctors met at the Port Moresby General Hospital on May 9 and handed a petition to Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann on their grievances.

National Doctors Association (NDA) president Dr Kauve Pomat said some doctors had been locked out of their homes and some had been issued with eviction notices because the Department of Health had failed to pay the rent for their accommodation.

The doctors also want an immediate investigation into the department's pharmaceutical division in view of the shortages of medicines at all public health centres. The petition states that patients who could be treated are dying because of the shortage of drugs and medical equipment.

Dr Pomat said the NDA is working with the Industrial Registrar's office to sort out the logistics for a secret ballot to take industrial action.



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