

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 May 2005

Power and oil workers protest against privatisation

About 14,000 power workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) went on strike from midday until 4 p.m. on May 4 against the government's plan to break up the board into eight separate divisions as a step towards privatisation. Despite rainy weather, strikers picketed the company's head office in central Colombo.

Although the government withdrew a cabinet paper on the restructuring of the CEB last March, following opposition by employees, according to a union spokesman for the Lanka Viduli Sevaka Sangamaya it has since attempted to re-introduce the plan. Workers are also demanding that Finance Minister Sarath Amunugama apologise for referring to CEB workers as "rogues" during a May Day speech.

Oil workers also picketed the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) head office in central Colombo and the company's storage facility and oil refinery in the suburbs of Kolonnawa and Sapugaskanda.

The oil workers were protesting against the sell-off of another third of CPC shares to Bharath Petroleum, an Indian oil company and want the government to reacquire shares previously sold to Indian Oil Company (IOC) by the previous United National Front government.

Locomotive drivers strike for pay rise

Locomotive drivers at Ceylon Government Railway (CGR) struck from May 4 in support of a salary increase and a night shift allowance. They also want the immediate replacement of unserviceable locomotive engines.

Almost 100 trains were cancelled due to the strike. The government has called for contract locomotive drivers to report to work in an attempt to break the strike.

Indian coir workers on indefinite strike

Coir factory workers in Alappuzha district in the south Indian state of Kerala, began an indefinite strike on May 3 that brought coir manufacturing in Ambalappuzha and Cherthala to a standstill. Coir is a coarse fibre obtained from coconut husks and used in the manufacture of rope and other products. The strike has affected small and large scale, private and public coir product makers across the district.

The workers want the present employment contract system in large coir factories abolished and fixed wage conditions introduced. Employees from smaller plants are demanding reasonable prices for coir products. Some manufacturers who sell their products direct to large exporters in order to avoid payments to middlemen are supporting the striking workers.

Indian power workers pledge to fight privatisation

Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) workers passed a resolution at a May Day meeting to fight privatisation of the board and demanded the government withdraw its plans. Other May Day demands included the reinstatement of victimised employees suspended from the board's operations at Birpal, Amritsar, and the withdrawal of police charges against them.

PSEB Employees Joint Forum secretary Jarnail Singh Chonda said that workers from all over the Punjab would stage protest rallies at the sub-

divisional level against the contracting out of in-house work. If contracting-out did not cease, he said, PSEB divisional level employees would join the protests.

Filipino plantation workers storm labor office

Hundreds of Filipino sugar workers from seven different hacienda associations in Negros Occidental staged an "office occupation protest action" at the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC) in Bacolod on April 29. They want the NLRC to apply decisions in cases that were resolved up to ten years ago. The cases lodged by sugar workers against Negros Occidental landowners, include illegal dismissal and unpaid wages and benefits amounting to between 3 million pesos (\$US5,454) and 5 million pesos.

A delegation of workers met with NLRC arbiter Wilma Kalaw and presented hundreds of documented cases that have been resolved but not executed. Kalaw's response revealed the unwillingness of the NLRC to act against the large landowners. While he acknowledged the NLRC delays, he claimed that one of the reasons was farm management refusal to acknowledge and cooperate with its decisions.

As a delaying tactic Kalaw urged the protesters to call off their action and wait for the return of Chief Labor Arbiter Danilo Acosta and to take up the issue with him. Acosta is away on business.

Rosendo Elola, a farm workers representative and national executive officer for Buklurang Manggagawang Pilipino-Negros, agreed, declaring: "We will give them the benefit of the doubt". He said that the workers, who were from La Castellana, Moises Padilla, Murcia, Talisay, Silay, Victorias and Bago, would "remain vigilant".

Thai workers demand rise in minimum wage

More than 7,000 workers attended rallies around Bangkok on May Day to demand an increase in the minimum wage and better working conditions. The Thai Labor Solidarity Committee called on the government to apply wage standards set by the United Nations, which require a minimum wage sufficient to support a worker and two family members. The current minimum daily wage is 175 baht (\$US4.40).

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has ruled out any improvement in the minimum wage claiming that any increase would scare away investors from Thailand. Addressing a May Day rally at Sanam Luang, Shinawatra threatened: "If the minimum wages are raised to 233 baht a day, I think investors will close down their factories and move to China or other low wage countries and Thai workers will lose jobs."

He promised that his government would look at measures to reduce work-related illnesses and diseases and increase training opportunities. But given the government's drive to remove all restrictions on the operations of employers and comply with investor demands, the pledge is an empty gesture.

Rallies across Indonesia demand improved wages and conditions

Thousands of workers across Indonesia joined May Day marches and rallies to demand improved wages and working conditions and the protection of workers' rights. Speakers also called on the government to declare May Day a public holiday.

About 4,000 people marched from the Hotel Indonesia in Central Jakarta to rally at the presidential palace where 300 police were deployed. The marchers carried banners demanding better paying jobs and the arrest of employers that pay below minimum wage. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono was not in the palace at the time of the demonstration.

Those workers that are paid the minimum monthly wage of between 600,000 rupiah (\$US63) and 700,000 rupiah, however, still have difficulty meeting the cost of living. They want a monthly salary of between 1 million and 2 million rupiah.

Workers rallying in Surabaya were joined by hundreds of students. Speakers at the rally condemned the government for supporting the employers and for failing to protect workers' rights. They demanded "a fair salary system", protection for migrant workers, and an end to "unfair" dismissals.

In Bandung, workers and students marched along the city's main thoroughfares demanding an end to oppressive working conditions and free education and health care. In Surakarta, Central Java, hundreds rallied outside the heavily guarded home of Mayor Loji Gandung. They carried banners condemning the government for failing to protect workers' rights.

Bus workers to strike against cuts to conditions

Bus workers in Seoul, South Korea, voted overwhelmingly to strike on May 9 against cuts to conditions and for the uniform implementation of a five-day working week. Of the 16,000 workers who participated in the ballot, 84.4 percent voted in favor of strike action. The bus workers belong to a federation of 63 unions with a total of more than 17,000 members.

Since last July, rest and meal breaks have been cut and overall wages reduced because of the suspension of many bus services by the Seoul city government. Whereas from July this year bus companies with more than 300 workers must implement a five-day working week, those with less are not obliged to do so. Workers are demanding the introduction of a five-day week for all employees without loss of pay and conditions.

Garment workers forced back to work

Local government officials in Shenzhen, China intervened to force 10,000 workers at the Japanese-owned Uniden Electronics Factory in Fuyong back to work last week. The workers had been on strike since April 17, demanding the right to establish their own union in the factory.

Local government officials called in police to attack employees. A number of strike leaders disappeared and workers' believe that they have been jailed. Workers were constantly harassed during the strike, including an attack on a peaceful protest by scores of baton-wielding police. One young woman striker claimed that Labor Bureau officials had warned workers to end the strike "or else investors might withdraw and move to other places" and "they would all get thrown out of work".

The vicious campaign against the Uniden strikers again illustrates Beijing's determination to implement foreign and local employer demands for measures to ensure a compliant and disciplined workforce. An official at the Bao An District Labor Bureau, which has jurisdiction over the Uniden complex, said that the government had intervened because the workers had tried to set up "their own union without instructions from the upper-levels of the official trade unions". This, she said, would be "an independent union, something China prohibits".

Car parts workers defend permanent jobs

Fifty workers at the Kemalex car component factory in Dandenong, Victoria, struck indefinitely this week over company moves to destroy permanent jobs and make employees individual contractors. Kemalex has already forced employees at its Adelaide factory in South Australia to become individual contractors.

Pauline Bright, who has worked at the plant for the last 10 years, told the media that Kemalex was trying to devolve a raft of employment costs onto ordinary employees. While the hourly rate would initially rise from \$12.60 to \$17.50, workers would have to pay their own superannuation

and provide for annual leave, sick leave, public holidays, insurance and tax. They would also be responsible for their own health and safety and Workcover premiums.

A National Union of Workers spokesperson said that the present unfair dismissal laws would not cover the workers and they could have their contracts terminated at any time without explanation.

University to slash 450 jobs

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) announced on May 4 that it would fight the destruction of 450 jobs at Newcastle University in New South Wales. The union covers over 1,500 staff at the institution.

The vicious restructuring followed the recent decision by the Federal government to no longer designate the University of Newcastle as a regional university, thus slashing funds to the institution by over \$3.5 million a year. The university's financial problems have been further exacerbated by the government's refusal to allocate new places at the Newcastle (Callaghan) campus for students under the HECS scheme.

A CPSU spokesman said that the magnitude of the proposed job cuts and time frame for their execution "are devastating" and would have a "crippling effect on the University of Newcastle and threatens its ability to continue as a competitive and viable educational institution".

While the CPSU has declared it will campaign against the job losses, it is already moving to accommodate itself to some form of cost cutting. CPSU senior industrial officer, Andrew Holland, said: "The university is legally obliged to consider all options to avoid job losses. We don't believe they are."

Engineering workers walk out over stall negotiations

About 30 mechanical engineers employed by the US-based Boeing aircraft manufacturer at Williamtown airport near Newcastle in New South Wales walked off the job on May 4. The strike occurred after the company refused to negotiate a new wages and conditions agreement with the Australian Workers Union (AWU) including a demand for the abolition of an anomaly where some employees are paid an allowance but others are not.

Strikes continues in New Zealand metals dispute

Manufacturing workers in the New Zealand metals industry went on strike on April 29 as part of a campaign for a new Metals and Manufacturing Agreement. Auckland workers picketed in Te Atatu and at least 12 companies were hit by the strike. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) national secretary Andrew Little said that the workers were determined to get the two-month-old dispute settled and that action would continue until it was.

The strike is for a 5 percent across-the-board pay rise. Manufacturing employers generally have offered less than 4 per cent. The EPMU has settled with a number of individual employers at 5 percent and has indicated it is prepared to "exempt" companies who can prove they can't "afford" to pay the full amount. The Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement sets going pay rates and conditions across the manufacturing sector.

Tensions mount in Auckland University dispute

Industrial tension at the University of Auckland is intensifying over the vice-chancellor's intention to award a 4.4 percent pay increase to non-union staff. This ignores an application by the Association of University Staff (AUS) to the Employment Court opposing the move.

The AUS is urgently seeking a ruling from the court that the university is acting unlawfully by refusing to enter national multi-employer negotiations and by denying union members a pay increase unless they engage in single-enterprise bargaining. A decision expected from the court by May 3 did not eventuate.

New Zealand bank dispute negotiations to continue

Negotiations between ANZ National Bank and union representatives over an employment agreement are to commence again over the next days. The workers want compensation for working late hours and

weekends similar to that paid to their Australian counterparts. The ANZ National Bank is the result of a recent merger between ANZ and the National Banks.

A breakdown in negotiations could see further industrial action in the next weeks. Some 2,000 staff walked off the job on April 22 after voting to reject the bank's employment pay and conditions offer. About 700 bank staff marched in Auckland, 350 in Wellington and 150 in Christchurch. There were pickets outside ANZ business centres in all three cities. Staff in other centres also took similar action. Bank staff have already endorsed a campaign of surprise rolling strikes if negotiations fail.

New Zealand teachers protest job cuts

About 50 teachers from New Zealand's Correspondence School marched on parliament on May 3. They presented a letter to the Labour government's associate education minister calling on him to stop the axing of 40 jobs at the school—the country's largest with 20,000 pupils and 500 staff. They also asked for increased funding and consultation with parents about any proposed restructuring.

The job cuts—part of a plan to reduce services in the wake of a \$6 million deficit—are being carried through with the connivance of the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) president Phil Smith. Near the conclusion of his two-year term of office in late 2004, PPTA president Smith was persuaded by the Correspondence School management to take up a principal's vacancy in order to help administer the cuts and minimise opposition from staff. While PPTA officials sit on one side of the negotiating table claiming to defend jobs, Smith sits on the other. Even so he is allowed to retain his position as the union's senior vice-president.

Bus drivers stop work in Auckland and Wellington

Stagecoach bus drivers in Auckland began a six-day strike starting before dawn on May 5 after rejecting an Employment Relations Authority (ERA) recommendation that they accept a company pay offer. The ERA earlier urged the 1,000 drivers to accept an initial wage rise to lifting the rate to \$15 an hour and a lump sum of \$600 each in place of back pay.

The ERA declared that the company was "commercially and financially justified" in refusing the drivers' demand for an immediate rise to bring hourly pay rates up from \$13.94 to \$16 an hour. Stagecoach, however, has made after-tax profits of \$38 million in the past three years from its Auckland operation and expects to reap between \$10 million and \$12 million this year.

Meanwhile, a stop-work meeting by Wellington Stagecoach drivers brought services in that city to a halt between 9:30 a.m. and 3 p.m., on April 4. The meeting was for drivers who are members of the Tramways Union to discuss forthcoming wage negotiations.

PNG teachers pay strike escalates

More than 1,000 teachers in Madang Province in Papua New Guinea refused to conduct any lessons after turning up to work on May 2. The protest, which is against the non-payment of leave entitlements and the suspension of over 760 teachers in March, will continue until both issues are resolved.

Madang provincial adviser John Bossi claimed that the teachers were part to blame for the situation because they followed incorrect procedures when claiming leave entitlements. He was forced to concede, however, that a "computer glitch" in a new computer system introduced in 2003 was continuing to cause delays in salary and entitlement payments throughout PNG. The "glitch" has still not been rectified. Bossi also claimed that the suspension of teachers from the payroll six weeks ago is "being resolved" and payments are "in the works".

Fiji Telecom fails to reach redundancy target

Only about 300 Fiji Telecom employees—mostly staff nearing retirement—accepted the redundancy package offered by the company. Telecom was hoping that of the 1,500 staff offered the package, between 500 and 700 would accept it. Telecom offered its permanent workers the equivalent nearly two years' wages and the balance of the contract period

for contracted workers would be bought out. The offer closed on the April 29.

Even though 300 positions will be slashed immediately, Fiji Posts and Telecommunications Employees Association (FPTEA) secretary Attar Singh, who had earlier described the offer as unjust and disappointing, claimed the outcome a victory because all those accepting the offer did so "voluntarily".

On April 18 Singh said the offer should be rejected because it was much less than the package offered to employees at Telecom's subsidiary Exceed earlier this year. He also pointed out that despite some contractual workers having been with the company for 30 years, they could end up with less than those with just six months service. Employees classified as casuals, even though they had worked for Telecom continuously, have been denied any package.

Telecom is restructuring in preparation for privatisation. A company spokesman said repeatedly that the redundancy package is a once-only offer. But with the low take up, a second offer may be in the pipeline.

Ex-garment workers fight for back wages

On April 29, nearly half of the 250 former garment workers of La Mode (Saipan) Incorporated walked out of a Department of Labor hearing. The hearing was to determine the back-pay entitlements for over 260 employees sacked when the company ceased operation on April 25. La Mode claims it has no remaining assets to pay its former employees the \$US340,000 they are owed.

Workers were not given any assurances during the hearing that they will receive all the back-wages they are entitled to before the 45-day employment transfer period expires on June 13. They fear that if they have not found another job in CNMI (Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) by the June deadline they will be sent home and not receive their entitlements. "We are losing hope that we will still get our money after they send us home," said Edna Malig, who was a commercial cleaner at La Mode.

After leaving the hearing, workers went to the office of the Governor on Capitol Hill calling for his intervention into the dispute. They have also sought assistance from the US Labor Ombudsman's Office in Puerto Rico. La Mode—the third largest garment factory on the island—started laying-off employees in January this year, after shutting down operations for a three-month period.

The Saipan daily paper *Marianas Variety* reported on May 4 that documents from the Department of Labor's Division of Labor investigation into the garment industry revealed that some migrant Chinese workers were made to pay between \$US4,500 and \$8,000 to get a position with La Mode (Saipan) Inc. Some were never provided copies of their employment contracts or permits during their employment at the garment factory.

The document also said that between October 2002 and October 2004 the Labor department received 30 complaints from La Mode employees about unpaid wages and bounced cheques. Labor director Dean Tenorio has recommended that La Mode and its officers award \$US500 to each of the 302 nonresident employees for contractual damage and be fined for labor law violations.



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