

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

28 May 2005

Indian Coca-Cola workers demand re-opening of closed plant

Hundreds of laid-off workers began a hunger strike outside district government offices on May 23 to demand the reopening of the Plachimada unit of Hindustan Coca-Cola Beverages at Palakkad in the south Indian state of Kerala.

The Kerala government ordered the plant's closure from March 10 to June 15, 2004, when the district faced drought and an acute water shortage. Operations, however, were never resumed following a dispute between the company and the Perumatty Grama Panchayat (Village Council) over water usage.

The protest was organised by the Coca-Cola Employment Protection Committee, which presented the district government with a memorandum explaining what had happened and demanding state intervention to settle the dispute.

Indian childcare workers protest over wages

Childcare workers in Kerala protested outside local government offices in Kollam on May 19 to demand wage increases and improved conditions.

There are more than 55,000 childcare workers in the state and their union wants them to be given "Class IV" employees' conditions, which includes higher pay and retirement benefits. According to the union, a commission recommended that workers' demands be agreed to five months ago but the government has done nothing. The childcare employees are now planning to organise protest marches.

Indian corporation workers demonstrate

Workers for the Punjab Small Industries and Export Corporation (PSIEC) demonstrated on May 20 against plans to cut the number of employees from 1,500 to 500. They intend to intensify the protest campaign if the lay-off threat is not removed within 15 days.

Employees are also demanding that vacant positions be filled, casual staff be given regular employment, and previously abolished house rent and conveyance allowances be restored.

Sri Lankan development officers demand tsunami allowance

Development officers employed by the Balapitiya Divisional Secretariat launched a hunger strike on May 19 to demand the payment of a "tsunami allowance" previously promised by the government. While employees have been involved in long periods of additional work following the December 26 tsunami, they have not received any extra pay. The government claims that it does not have the funds to do so.

The entire Divisional Secretariat workforce walked out on May 20 in solidarity with the development officers' demands.

Sri Lankan transport authority workers launch wages campaign

Around 750 Transport Authority employees in the western province reported in sick on May 17 to demand payment of a 2,500-rupee (\$US25) salary increase previously promised in the government's November 2004 budget. Workers gathered at the main private bus stand in central Colombo, Sri Lanka's capital, and marched to the prime minister's office. They have threatened to intensify protests if their demand is not met.

Chinese workers imprisoned over protest

Two workers from Yantai in China's Shandong province were jailed on

May 11 for five- and two-year terms, over their appeals to the local government and Bureau of Labor about their employer's failure to pay wages and insurance. According to a report by *China Labor Watch*, Li Xantao, 52, and Kong Jun, 42, were convicted for "disturbing government institutions" and "disturbing social order".

The two were among 40 employees of the state-owned Huamei Garment Company who protested against the non-payment of wages. The company had also stopped paying their unemployment insurance 18 months before it filed for bankruptcy in August 2002, leaving the workers without any income when the factory closed.

Police detained Li and Kong in November 2004. Kong was later released after she deposited her housing documents as a bond. Li Xantao, leader of the protest, was denied parole. *China Labor Watch* reported that the families of both workers plan to appeal the sentences in a higher court but local lawyers are afraid to take up the case.

Filipino hotel workers picket

Associated Labor Union (ALU) members picketed the Holiday Plaza Hotel in the Philippines city of Cebu on May 20. ALU members said the protest was in support of the hotel union's demand for management to sign a collective bargaining agreement (CBA). Union members working at the hotel did not join the picket out of fear of losing their jobs.

ALU spokesman Arnold Arcipe said management had been harassing union members, causing 40 out of 66 to withdraw their membership. The union has made a formal complaint to the Labor Department.

Hotel management has not signed the CBA, claiming that the case before the harassment hearing should be resolved before negotiations resume.

University staff and students rally to save 600 jobs

Over 450 staff and students rallied on May 18 at the University of Newcastle over a cost-cutting plan that will destroy hundreds of jobs. The restructure followed the Howard government's recent decision to not designate the tertiary establishment as a regional university, thus slashing funds to the institution by over \$3.5 million a year.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) warned that as many as 600 jobs could be destroyed.

It said the university management's claims that 450 jobs would be axed referred to full-time equivalent positions.

The NTEU has filed a dispute in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) with a hearing due on May 26.

BHP charged over fatal blast

Australian mining giant BHP-Billiton was served with four charges this week arising from a fatal explosion at its Boodarie hot-briquette iron plant in Port Hedland. The blast, which occurred on May 19 last year at the \$3 billion HBI plant, killed one maintenance worker and left three others with serious burns.

The charges were brought by the Department of Industry and Resources under the Mines Safety and Inspection Act and carry a maximum penalty on each charge of just \$200,000, an insignificant amount for BHP.

In a separate legal action stemming from another industrial accident, the

fiancée of a worker killed at the same plant on May 2, 2004, is suing BHP for negligence. Corey Bentley, a 26-year-old maintenance worker and deputy convener of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, died when he was struck in the head by an ore separator whilst undertaking maintenance work.

Stock Exchange to cut its workforce

The Australian Stock Exchange (ASE) announced on May 26 that it would slash approximately 10 percent of its workforce, about 55 jobs, by July 2005. The ASE wants to cut costs by \$20 million despite the fact that its \$50 million half-yearly profit represented a 19 percent increase. The ASE has not ruled out further job cuts.

New Zealand bank workers' strikes enter third week

Nationwide rolling strikes at the ANZ National Bank entered their third week on May 23, following a bank management walkout from employment negotiations on May 6. Employees want overtime rates for weekends and evenings and assurances that the bank will give equal treatment to staff from the two merging banks, the ANZ and National.

Workers at many branches around the country have now been on strike at least once in the past fortnight and are collecting signatures for a petition calling on the bank to treat workers equitably.

Finsec, the union representing ANZ National staff, has asked the bank to attend mediated negotiations. They are still waiting for a response. A Finsec spokeswoman said integration of the two banks was resulting in "lowest common denominator" business practices and downward pressure on working conditions.

New Zealand radiographers' strike called off

A strike by New Zealand radiographers, potentially forcing the cancellation of about 4,000 operations and outpatient and x-ray services in public hospitals between Nelson and Auckland, was averted this week following the withdrawal of a strike threat by the Association of Professional and Executive Employees (Apex). The 375 radiographers at nine district health boards were to strike for five days starting on May 23 over a pay dispute.

A separate strike, planned for May 31 by 50 radiographers in the Nurses Organisation at the Counties Manukau health board, has also been called off.

The lifting of the strike notices followed a day of talks between the health boards and the union, but neither side would give details of the employers' offer. Apex said the offer was sufficient to call off the industrial action.

The union wanted a minimum starting salary of about \$40,000 for new graduates and an increase for experienced staff. Graduates now start on \$30,000 to \$35,000. Further talks were being held to finalise the pay proposal before it is put to Apex members. The Nurses Organisation also withheld details of the Counties Manukau board's improved offer, which is to be put to a membership vote, but said it was more than the annualised 2 percent rise within which previous offers had been constrained.

Wellington psychologists to challenge pay cut

Clinical psychologists in Wellington, New Zealand, have reacted strongly after their pay was cut 40 percent because they took industrial action. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) said this week it would challenge the cuts made by Capital Coast and Hutt Valley District Health Boards. Psychologists took low-level industrial action as part of their campaign to gain 30 percent catch-up pay similar to recent agreements with doctors and nurses. After nine months of negotiations, the boards made a 2 percent pay offer last week, which was rejected.

Union secretary Nadine Marshall said some clinical psychologists had been docked 40 percent of their pay from the date they began the action. The union said this was "disproportionate" and illegal and warned it could escalate the dispute. NUPE lodged an injunction with the Employment Relations Authority to stop the boards making any further deductions.

The 60 or more psychologists have decided to continue their action

while awaiting the outcome of the injunction application. They are continuing to attend work but only undertaking core clinical tasks.

New Zealand metal workers offered 5 percent pay rise

Striking workers at the Robinhood factory in Auckland have been offered a 5 percent pay rise. Seventy-five workers walked off the job last week when the company made a 4.2 percent offer.

Robinhood is traditionally part of the Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement, which was settled earlier this month with a 5 percent pay rise. The company had been refusing to sign the agreement, saying that negotiations were still underway. The company upped its offer to 5 percent after the strike action.

PNG teachers paid to avert industrial action

Most of the 36,000 Papua New Guinea primary and high school teachers denied the salaries for up to 14 weeks were finally paid on May 13. The teachers were removed from the payroll list when a new computer system failed to process their salary claim forms.

The education department, which blamed the teachers claiming they had not correctly filled in the forms, was forced to act after 1,000 teachers in the Morobe district walked off the job for 24 hours on May 2.

Over 600 teachers, however, are still waiting for their pay. The Morobe branch of the PNG Teachers Association has given the provincial administration 14 days to pay or they will strike on June 9.

Fijian power workers threaten to strike

The Fiji Electrical Workers Association (FEWA) and the Fiji Electricity and Allied Workers Union said on May 21 they intend to give 21 days notice to the Ministry of Labour to conduct a secret ballot for strike action. The unions are in conflict with the Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) over the payment of a 1 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) outstanding for 2003-2004.

FEA management is refusing to negotiate a 2004-2005 collective agreement unless the unions agree to the introduction of a performance management system. FEWA general secretary Daniel Urai also claimed that management had reneged on an agreement that newly recruited workers be offered the union's collective agreement. Urai said management is only offering these workers an individual contract.

Fiji court orders company to recognise union

The Lautoka High Court on May 20 ordered a trucking company, General Machinery Hire, to implement a Compulsory Recognition Order (CRO) issued by the Ministry of Labour and Industrial Relations in July 2004 to recognise the Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union.

Company management had applied for a judicial review, claiming that more than half its workers were intimidated into the joining the union.

The High Court turned down the company's application for a judicial review and ordered it to pay court costs of \$F400 (\$US240).

General strike hits New Caledonia capital

Thousands of people marched through Noumea on May 21 as part of a 24-hour general strike called by the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE). The action was called to defend employment preference for locals in the French colony.

USTKE president Gerard Jodar said too many companies were recruiting their workforce from overseas while locals were left out. USTKE is also claiming that its freedom to exercise its union rights is under threat.



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