Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

4 June 2005

Filipino military deployed to strike area

Over 1,400 employees at the largest gold mine in the Philippines are expecting a confrontation with the military when they strike this month for a collective bargaining agreement (CBA).

On May 10, Labor Secretary Sto Thomas ordered the deployment of 85 troops to the villages surrounding the gold mine owned by Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company (LCMC), 348 kilometres north of Manila. The troop deployment came just two days before a mandatory cooling-off period lapsed. The workers, who are members of the Lapento Employees Union, are now legally able to take industrial action and establish pickets. They want wage rises over the next three years of 133 pesos per day ($US2.40) but the company has refused to increase an offer of 53 pesos over three years.

Last November, Thomas sent troops to the strike torn Hacienda Luisita in Tarlac City. At least 14 striking farm workers were killed when soldiers fired on a picket line.

Filipino workers in Baghdad strike over pay and conditions

About 300 Filipino workers at a US base in Baghdad have gone on strike over working conditions, low wages and poor accommodation.

Western employees can earn hundreds of dollars a day, while those from poorer countries are usually paid a few hundred dollars a month. The workers are also being forced to sleep 12 to a room, with no ventilation.

Around 6,000 Filipinos are employed at US bases in Iraq, mostly in construction, catering and maintenance. They work for contracting firms who are paid by the US military.

Burmese garment workers take legal action

Twenty-two migrant Burmese garment workers are suing their Thai employer over unpaid wages and overtime. They initiated legal action in the Thai border town of Mae Sot after the employer failed to pay the official minimum wage of 133 baht ($US3.50) per day and only paid 7-8 baht per hour for overtime.

Migrant Burmese workers who launched a similar case against a Thai employer in mid-2004 were eventually compensated a total of 1.17 million baht ($29,250) in unpaid back wages.

Sri Lankan farm workers strike

Over 160 casual farm workers employed by the state-owned Bopaththalawa farm in Agarapathana, Hatton, launched an indefinite strike on May 27 demanding a 2,500-rupee ($US25) per month wage increase promised by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government in its November budget. Strikers launched a fasting campaign on May 28.

Workers at the Dayagama and Makandura Milk Farms began striking on May 30 in support of the Bopaththalawa workers. Striking employees said that their 167-rupee daily wage ($1.67) was too low to live on.

Police have been deployed to the farm and the surrounding area to intimidate the workers. Anura Dissanayake, the minister responsible for the National Livestock Development Board which manages Bopaththalawa, issued a media statement claiming that the strike action could lead to the closure of the board and the layoff of all employees.

Dissanayake is a member of Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is part of the UPFA government.

Sri Lankan mineral and postal workers challenge authorities

Eighty-five workers laid off by state-owned Lanka Mineral Sands in Pulmoddai, near Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka, began a hunger strike outside the company on May 30 to demand reinstatement. Workers said that their families would starve due to the loss of jobs and threatened to continue the hunger strike until they die.

Postal workers at the main post office in Badulla, about 230 kilometres from the capital Colombo, launched a lunch-hour picketing campaign on May 31 over working conditions, including unjustified transfers. The protest was organised by three unions operating inside the post office.

University staff strike over new Australian workplace laws

University staff at eight campuses across the country stopped work on June 1 as part of a national day of protest against the federal Liberal Government's planned industrial relations laws.

Under the changes 3.6 million workers at companies employing less than 100 people will no longer be protected by unfair dismissal laws. A government-appointed Fair Pay Commission will also be established to review minimum wages, with the main consideration being company profitability.

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Institutions involved in the strike included Deakin, RMIT, the Victorian College of Arts, Melbourne University, Ballarat, Central Queensland University, Curtin, Wollongong and the Australian Catholic University.

Approximately 1,200 academics and TAFE teachers attended a rally in Melbourne with another 1,000 in Sydney.

Doctors impose work bans

Public hospital doctors in Adelaide imposed work bans on May 30 over a new wages and conditions agreement. Negotiations have broken down between hospital management and the South Australian government. The dispute will disrupt outpatient services and elective surgery. The doctors held a mass meeting on June 2.

New Zealand academics prepare to strike over contracts

Employers at New Zealand universities advised staff unions this week that they were not prepared to enter into multi-employer collective employment agreements. Most universities made their salary offers conditional on the unions accepting single employer collective agreements. These offers ranged between 2 percent (Massey) and 4.5 percent (Auckland). Victoria University made a lower pay offer to general staff than what it offered academic staff. Some universities are also claiming significant claw-backs on employment conditions.

The combined unions have called for a national agreement, with salary increases that would bring NZ universities into line with their Australian counterparts. Union members met this week at the seven universities involved in the negotiations and will continue until 10 June. They will vote on a national strike in July, the country's first by university staff, rolling stoppages in the fortnight following and a further national strike in August. In what would be an unprecedented move, staff will also vote on whether to withhold students' marks.

Christchurch council staff reject pay offer

More than 1,000 Christchurch City Council employees rejected a pay offer at a stop-work meeting called by the Southern Local Government Officers' Union last week. The vote came after months of fraught negotiations and strike action. The union had earlier spent six days in mediation, with the council stating it had increased its "pay envelope" from 4.5 to 5.1 per cent. A council spokesman claimed that management had exhausted all avenues to solve the dispute.

Bank workers continue industrial action

New Zealand's ANZ National Bank workers this week rejected the bank's employment offer by a 73 percent majority and will continue nationwide rolling strikes. It was the fifth time they have rejected settlement offers since negotiations started 10 weeks ago and means the stoppages will continue into their fourth week. Employees are seeking similar pay rates for working weekends and evenings as their Australian counterparts, and assurances that the employer will give equal treatment to workers at the two merging banks, the ANZ and National.

Plantation workers maintain strike in Solomon Islands

Striking Solomon Islands plantation workers at Russell Island Plantation Estate Limited (RIPEL) plan to celebrate one year of "Workers Solidarity" on June 17.

Their strike began on June 17, 2004, when 1,000 RIPEL employees walked off the job after management introduced a new harvesting system, sacked 100 workers, evicted their families from company-owned homes and told them to leave the island. While the plantation produces copra for the world market, workers have successfully prevented any product from leaving the island for 12 months.

Although workers have the full backing from island chiefs and the community, RIPEL management is refusing to negotiate.

On May 30, the Magistrates court in Honiara acquitted 18 RIPEL workers charged for participating in a blockade of the island's jetty. Thirty-four more employees facing charges are juveniles and will appear in court on June 20.

Fijian contract workers strike in Kuwait

At least 200 Fijians signed up by Lolohea's Meridian Services Agency (LMSA) to work in Kuwait began strike action on May 23 over a pay dispute. Sent to Kuwait four months ago to work mainly as truck drivers, they have not been employed and are receiving a "training wage" which is much lower than what they were promised and have had to find work elsewhere.

LMSA has signed up over 15,000 Fijians who are mainly employed in the Middle East. They are charged between $US90 and $180 for each application. Many, however, have returned to their rural homes without receiving any work. When they have attempted to secure repayment of their applications, they have been told that the agency operator, Timoci Lolohea, was not in the country to approve a refund. It is estimated that Lolohea has received over $1.4 million in application fees. The Ministry of Labour has begun an inquiry into the recruiting agency.

Expatriate Fijian workers send over $180 million home each year.

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