Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

11 June 2005

Hotel workers maintain picket in the Philippines

Despite police intervention and harassment from hotel management, Associated Labor Union (ALU) members have vowed to continue picketing the Cebu Holiday Plaza Hotel in the Philippines.

Nine hotel workers are manning the picket, assisted by about 40 members of the ALU-Trade Union Congress. Of the 40 hotel workers who initially resigned from the union under pressure from management, 20 have rejoined and are participating in the strike.

The workers went on strike on May 20 over the hotel's refusal to sign a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). They said management had already agreed to sign the CBA in earlier negotiations but backtracked because it wanted to omit the provision recognising the Cebu Holiday Plaza Hotel Incorporated Employees Union. Employees formed the union in February 2003.

Unpaid Filipino furniture workers strike

About 96 employees of Rattan Pacific, a furniture manufacturer in the Philippines city of Mandau, struck on June 2 because the company refused to comply with some of the conditions in their Collective Bargaining Agreement. Rattan Pacific Employees Union president Willy Avila said workers had not been paid for the past three weeks. Workers' contributions to the Social Security System were also not being remitted, he said.

Indian steel workers walk out

Thousands of contract workers for the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant (VSP) in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on June 2 to demand higher wages. According to striking workers, their pay is lower than employees in other steel plants. Other demands include increased allowances, bonuses and medical facilities.

Seven thousand strikers held a mass meeting on June 2. Leaders of the Steel Employees Union, the Contract Labour Union and the All India Trade Union Congress addressed the rally.

Indian chemical workers continue strike

Mangalore Chemicals and Fertilizers (MCF) employees in Karnataka have been on strike since May 31 to demand the reinstatement of 152 loading section workers. Striking employees have held a relay hunger strike outside the Deputy Commissioners Office in Mangalore. Seventeen have already been hospitalised.

According to strikers, 154 workers have been laid-off since last August on the grounds that they were only "contract" staff. In reality, the company had employed them for between 5 and 25 years and they had received full-time workers' conditions, such as bonuses, loan entitlements, uniforms and pensions. Two workers have died since being retrenched.

Punjab electronic workers protest retrenchment

Workers at Electronic Systems Punjab (ESPL), a software export unit operating in the Software Technology Parks of India (STPI) complex in Mohali in Punjab state, demonstrated outside the factory on June 1 over the retrenchment of 25 employees. Workers have threatened to step up industrial action if their demands are not met.

Tamilnadu telecommunication workers strike

Over 21,000 contract workers at the Tamilnadu Electricity Board began an indefinite statewide strike on May 28 to demand full-time jobs, with 2,000 employees demonstrating in Chennai. The strike was organised by the Central Organisation of Tamilnadu Electricity Employees (COTEE).

According to COTEE, while workers have had several campaigns over the last seven years for regularisation of their employment, the government has refused to meet their demands.

Calcutta nurses boycott work

Nurses at RG Kar Medical College and Hospital in Calcutta, West Bengal, boycotted work in operating theatres, labour rooms and outdoor department on May 25 over their conditions.

One nurse told the media: "We are reeling under pressure. But the hospital authorities have no sympathy for us." Just 100 nurses are caring for 1,200 patients—a nurse-patient ratio of one-to-12, compared with the norm of one nurse to three patients.

Indian construction workers demonstrate

Thousands of building workers marched on May 30 in the city of Hagaribommanahalli, in the Bellary district of the Indian state of Karnataka. Their demands included pensions, financial assistance for medical treatment, maternity pay for female workers, and education assistance for workers' children. The march ended outside the Hagaribommanahalli municipal office where workers submitted a log of claims.

Sri Lankan transport workers protest in Colombo

Thousands of transport workers employed by the state-owned Central Transport Board and the Cluster Bus Company demonstrated in central Colombo on June 3. Their main demand was for payment of a 2,500-rupee ($US25) salary increase promised by the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government in its last budget.

Transport services throughout the city were brought to a halt. The protest ended after three hours, when the transport minister promised that the pay rise would be made.

Two days earlier, hundreds of workers from 11 state-owned

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Northwest Bus depots demonstrated in Kurunegala, 93 kilometres from Colombo, on the same demand.

Victorian rail workers strike over harassment

Twenty railway signallers employed by Connex in metropolitan Melbourne took strike action on June 6 over the unfair treatment of a trainee signaller. The strike affected 40,000 commuters on the Pakenham, Cranbourne, Epping and Werribee lines. The dispute began after the signaller was disciplined for being seven minutes late for work and was denied access to a union representative while being interviewed by management.

The dispute was taken to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission, which ordered the workers back to work.

Nestlé Australia lays off workers

Nestlé Corporation has announced that it will cease production of powdered milk in Australia and cut jobs at two of its country plants in Victoria. Around 147 jobs will be axed from the Tongala plant, while 79 will be cut from its Dennington factory. According to the National Union of Workers, Nestlé has suggested that it could close the Dennington plant.

Nestlé operations in New Zealand recently slashed 79 jobs. The company has been sold to the Fonterra dairy co-operative, as part of the company's global restructuring and cost-cutting plans.

New Zealand bank workers receive pay offer

ANZ National Bank workers were offered a 5 percent pay rise this week, after previously rejecting an offer of 3.75 percent. The bank workers union, Finsec, said the increase was the result of recent strike action.

A bank spokesman said it was offering the 5 percent to non-union members and would make the same offer to unionists so as not to "create divisions" between union and non-union staff. Of the bank's 6,700 staff, 3,700 are Finsec members, while 3,000 are on individual contracts.

Union members still want more compensation for working weekends and evenings, and assurances that the bank will treat the staff from its two merging components equally.

In the first week of rolling strikes, held last month, 18 branches were closed for between ten minutes and two hours. Seven branches struck during the next week, eight in the third and several last week. The bank's rural lending settlements staff, who process farm mortgages, also joined the rolling strikes. In Auckland, 150 lending support service employees walked off the job.

Negotiations are due to continue on June 14 and 15.

Stagecoach increases offer to Auckland bus drivers

Auckland bus drivers for Stagecoach have finally been offered the $NZ16 hourly wage rise they have fought for over the past seven months. The offer, which came after two strikes, is a 14.7 percent rise on the current rate of $13.94 and is expected to be lifted next year to $16.20 as part of a two-year pay deal.

Under the previous offer, drivers would have received $15 now and had to wait until 2007 for $16, after an interim step to $15.40 late next year. The company is also understood to have offered its 900 drivers a before-tax cash payment of $1,300 in lieu of back pay—a $300 increase from the package that workers rejected last month after a six-day strike.

Stagecoach, however, wants changes to overtime, including a reduction in the pay rate to time-and-a-quarter and an extension of ordinary-time hours to 45 a week. This compares with the current situation of time-and-a-half paid after eight hours a day, or after 40 hours a week. Depot-by-depot union meetings are being held to discuss the deal.

New Zealand coal mining contract negotiations continue

Negotiations for a national coal-mining collective employment agreement resumed in Christchurch this week. Some 700 miners, represented by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), are pushing for a national agreement. They also want pay parity between mines.

The negotiations follow several days' national strike action by the miners. Last week, state-owned enterprise Solid Energy announced it was about to close the Spring Creek mine at Greymouth. The EPMU national secretary denied claims by Solid Energy that the union had agreed not to strike as a condition of the mine remaining open. The company had asked for this agreement but it was not given.

Fijian public works employees strike over back pay

About 3,000 Public Works department employees walked off the job on June 8, halting all work in Sigatoka, Nadi, Lautoka, Ba, Tavua and Rakiraka. Members of the Public Employees Union (PEU), they are protesting over the non-payment of overtime from December 19, 2002 to June 2005.

This is the second time in the past week they have stopped work over the issue. PEU Lautoka president Jiuta Waqatabu said the department had set aside $490,000 for back pay but only half had been distributed. The union wants to know "where the rest of the money is".

Public Works chief executive Anasa Vacea claimed his clerks needed time to make the calculations from the time sheets. Clerks, however, claim that management is holding up the payment because the "timesheets had been worked out" but management had not decided "what to do".

Department management has promised to make the payments no later than June 17.

Solomon Islands unions issue strike notice

Solomon Islands Council of Trade Unions (SICTU) issued a strike notice on May 31 in support of its demand that Prime Minister Allan Kemakeza establish a Commission of Enquiry into the management and operation of the National Provident Fund (NPF).

SICTU national secretary Tony Kagovai said the unions want the commission to investigate management, investments, loans and other operations at NPF. The union is also demanding that workers' representatives on the NPF board be increased and that they be nominated by SICTU. Kagovai said that if the government did not respond, union members would have no alternative but to strike after the notice expires on June 27.

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