

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

25 June 2005

Indian plantation workers strike over wages

Some 360,000 rubber, tea, coffee and cardamom plantation workers in the Indian state of Kerala began indefinite strike action on June 15 to demand a wage rise owed since 2002. Employees from state-owned plantations also joined the protest.

The indefinite walk-out occurred after negotiations between the labour minister, trade union leaders and management representatives failed to produce any settlement.

On June 23, the government, in an effort to end the dispute, announced a 30-percent wage rise for rubber plantation workers and 16 percent for tea, coffee and cardamom plantation employees. The rises are conditional, however, on productivity increases. Rubber workers would be required to tap 50 extra trees per day, for example, while tea-leaf pluckers would have to increase their harvest from 14 to 16 kilograms per day.

On June 20 over 300,000 workers from some 700 tea plantations in north Bengal and Assam struck for 24 hours for higher wages and benefits such as free medical treatment and subsidised rations. Union leaders have threatened an indefinite strike from July 15 if employees' demands are not met.

Transport workers walk out in Tamilnadu

Metropolitan Transport Corporation employees walked out of the Tambaram depot in the Indian state of Tamilnadu on June 20 over the suspension of seven of their colleagues. The strike ended after management assured workers that their grievances would be looked into.

As well as the withdrawal of suspensions, the employees want better working conditions and improved vehicle maintenance. Management does not consider time spent changing punctured tyres or other repairs part of working hours. Drivers allege that the vehicles are old and should be replaced. The depot does not have the stipulated number of buses, resulting in at least 30 services a day not operating.

Bank workers on strike in Kolkata

Workers at 17 branches of the State Bank of India (SBI) in Kolkata (Calcutta) struck on June 20 over the arbitrary transfer of the bank's employees.

Workers plan to continue the strike until June 29 and then escalate it to all 785 branches throughout the state of Bengal if their demands are not met. Asoke Dutta, general secretary of the SBI Staff Association, told the media that 80 employees at 56 branches had been transferred in violation of agreements between the bank and the union.

Punjab electronic sector workers protest retrenchment

Workers at Electronic Systems Punjab Limited (ESPL) protested on June 17 in Mohali over retrenchments. According to their union, ESPL has been profitable for the past six years but laid off staff on the grounds that it cannot afford them.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike

Transport workers at state-owned bus depots in Sri Lanka have launched indefinite strikes to demand outstanding May salaries. Workers at Koggala bus depot, near the southern city of Galle, have been on strike since June 14. Anuradhapura bus depot employees in the North Central

province struck from June 17 while drivers from Kandy depot in the Central province walked out the same day.

University workers strike across Sri Lanka

Hundreds of non-academic workers at 10 universities throughout Sri Lanka struck on June 20 to demand the abolition of salary anomalies between staff at different universities. Strikers protested outside the University Grants Commission office in central Colombo. On June 22, administrative staff at the universities also launched a strike to demand the payment of a promised salary increase.

Sri Lankan strikers demand payment of tsunami allowance

Around 600 workers employed by the Matara municipal council struck on June 13 and picketed the municipal council on Colombo's main highway to demand an allowance promised to those engaged in tsunami relief work. Matara city, 166 kilometres south of Colombo, was badly affected by the December 26 tsunami.

Nurses at the Mahamodara hospital, near the southern city of Galle, went on strike on June 14 to demand overtime payments. The hospital was devastated by the tsunami and the number of beds reduced from 415 to around 250. Hospital management responded by cutting nurses' overtime, severely reducing their income.

Matara council staff and Mahamodara hospital nurses have threatened indefinite strikes if their demands are not met.

Tensions rise after South Korean union official killed

Kim Tae-hwan, a regional leader of the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) in Chungju, South Korea, was killed on the picket line outside the Sajo Remican cement factory on June 14. He was run down by scab cement truck. The local KFTU was assisting cement truck drivers fighting for a collective workplace agreement and the right to join a union. The drivers are considered self-employed under Korean law.

The FKTU denounced Kim's killing as murder at a rally in Chungju on the weekend. Speakers called for a campaign to drive the President Roh Moo-hyun's administration from office. Nearly 100 labour and civic organisations, including the country's second largest peak union body, the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), have called on the South Korean cabinet to take responsibility for Kim's death and resign.

The unrest provoked by Kim's death coincides with strike preparations by auto and metal manufacturing workers for pay rises. Tensions between the government and unions were already high over planned laws to broaden the use of casual, or irregular, workers. The right-wing leadership of the FKTU has been negotiating with the government since the laws were first put before the National Assembly last September.

Chinese farmers protest over land seizure

Hundreds of farmers have protested over the past three weeks in the Beijing suburb of Maxingzhuang, after being evicted from their properties to make way for an Olympic stadium. The farmers displayed signs reading "Resettle the farmers who have lost their land".

The protests are the latest in a wave of disputes over property rights. On June 18, six villagers in Hebei province were killed and 28 injured when thugs attacked farmers fighting to stop their land being taken by an energy

company. Witnesses said men armed with pipes and shovels brutally assaulted the farmers. Gunshots were fired during the attack.

Unrest is spreading as the country's breakneck development has led to a growing number of land seizures by government officials acting on behalf of private developers.

Bangladeshi child workers demonstrate

Hundreds of child labourers working in Bangladeshi tannery, welding and chemical industries demonstrated in Dhaka on June 12 as part of the "World Day against Child Labour". Dressed in red t-shirts, they carried banners and placards declaring "Adults will work, children will go to school" and "We want a child-labour-free Bangladesh".

The International Labour Organisation estimates that about five million Bangladeshi children aged between 5 and 17 are forced to work in order for their families to survive. According to the UN Children's Fund, children in Bangladesh are engaged in about 430 forms of child labour, of which 67 forms are hazardous and dangerous.

One female child worker, 10-year-old Nazmin Akter, has been working at a plastic manufacturing factory in Dhaka for six months, earning just \$4 a month. She works at least 10 hours a day, seven days per week. "I hate to work, but I do to help my parents," she told journalists at the rally. Her mother works as a low-paid maid and her father pedals a rickshaw on the streets of Dhaka, a city of 10 million people.

Boeing workers return to work in Australia

Forty-five contract maintenance workers in dispute with Boeing Australia at the Williamstown air force base in New South Wales returned to work on June 21 for further negotiations. While Boeing has offered a pay increase to end the dispute, the company continues to reject workers' demand for a collective agreement rather than individual contracts.

Workers want an agreement similar to the one at Hawker de Havilland near Sydney. Their union has threatened further strike action on June 29 if there is no settlement.

Hunter Water workers stop work

About 300 maintenance workers at Hunter Water walked off the job for four hours on June 21 over the company's failure to notify the union that two employees were being made redundant. Staff picketed the head office in Newcastle. Hunter Water has shed 1,280 jobs over the past 10 years, reducing its workforce to just 400.

Aged-care workers protest in Western Australia

Aged-care workers at 14 Hall and Prior Aged Care Homes protested on June 23 for a \$1 per hour wage rise. Employees carried over 1,000 cutout figures, representing the more than 1,000 residents, family and friends who have supported the campaign. Workers at Hall and Prior, Western Australia's largest for-profit aged-care provider, earn as little as \$13.51 per hour.

The company wants them to give up two weeks annual leave and their accrued days off in exchange for any pay increase. Aged-care workers at other companies have received recent increases in their hourly rates.

Auckland bus drivers accept pay deal

Auckland bus drivers employed by Stagecoach accepted a pay offer this week after a seven month struggle. The deal provides for a 14.7 percent pay rise to \$16 per hour but is in exchange for reduced overtime wages.

The offer is for two years, with an extra rise to \$16.20 next year and includes a pre-tax payment of \$1,300 instead of seven months' back pay. The acceptance followed two strikes, including a six day stoppage during which Stagecoach lost about \$1 million.

Drivers must now work up to 45 hours a week before receiving overtime pay, at a reduced rate of time-and-a-quarter. This compares with the time-and-a-half paid until now for anything more than 40 hours a week. More than 80 percent of drivers work between 40 and 45 hours a week. The company intends to introduce a new computer program to cut total overtime by about a half.

A combined unions spokesman said many drivers had not readily agreed

to the overtime condition. However, the four unions had declared there was a risk that Stagecoach might lose contracts if its labour costs were too far above those of its rivals. Stagecoach has reportedly lost a large proportion of its North Shore routes to Ritchies Transport, which pays its drivers \$14.05, with no overtime rate.

New Zealand universities pay talks break down

Negotiations for new national collective employment agreements between unions and the seven main New Zealand universities have broken down. Universities will now, for the first time ever, face prolonged national strike action.

The negotiations, which resumed last week, collapsed after all the university employers maintained their refusal to agree to national collective agreements. They want single-employer agreements with salary increases ranging from 2 percent at Massey to 4.5 percent at Auckland University. Some of the campuses have initiated single-employer bargaining.

Meetings of academic and general staff have been held this week to consider escalating industrial action, proposed to start on 20 July.

Legal aid workers vote for industrial action

National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) members who work for the New Zealand government body that grants legal aid have unanimously rejected its latest offer in collective bargaining. After a year of negotiating, the Legal Services Agency (LSA) offered essentially the same terms and conditions that apply to staff on individual contracts.

NUPE members voted overwhelmingly to resume a campaign of industrial action they conducted in April and May. NUPE has written to the LSA requesting talks. Legal aid staff in Wellington, Christchurch, Invercargill and Whangarei, as well as workers who process legal aid applications for the Waitangi Tribunal, are involved.

Fijian public servants begin nationwide strike

Over 3,000 government employees walked out on June 21 in support of striking workers from the Public Works Department (PWD) and the Lautoka Hospital. PWD employees, members of the Public Employees Union (PEU), want payment of overtime owed since December 2002. Health workers, also members of the PEU, claim they have not been paid overtime since March 2003.

The strike has forced hospitals, utility departments and various government offices to implement contingency plans. Government hospitals across the country have closed their operating theatres and public volunteers have been mobilised to help nurses prepare patients' meals. PWD workers have set up pickets at utility depots along the Suva-Nausori corridor and the government wharf.

The Fiji Island Council of Trade Unions (FICTU) claims that the government has failed to comply with a 2004 disputes committee ruling on the non-payment of overtime. A meeting in Lautoka between the Public Service Commission, unions and Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck on June 21 failed to resolve the issue. Union members in the Northern Division said before the meeting they would join the strike the next day if nothing were resolved.

PNG nurses to strike

The Papua New Guinea (PNG) Nurses Association has announced a nationwide strike for June 29 over unpaid entitlements. Association president Lawrence Namaro formally notified nurses at hospitals and provincial health services, including clinics, aid posts, health centres, Defence Force hospitals, university clinics and Lutheran Health Services.

The industrial action is over the government's refusal to implement a 2000 industrial award that proposed new rates of pay for nurses.

The nurses association claims that the government made a one-off payment in July 2000, but then reverted salaries back to the previous level. The union officially told the industrial registrar's office last month about the dispute, triggering a meeting between all disputing parties at the Arbitration Tribunal on June 17. Department of Personnel Management,

Health Department and Treasury Department representatives, however, failed to attend.

The Arbitration Tribunal's acting industrial registrar, Sipelia Lemeki, claims to have told the nurses union that he has not given approval for a strike ballot, making it illegal to call for strike action.



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