

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

2 July 2005

Sri Lankan estate workers' strike continuing

Some 400 estate workers from Dunkeld estate in Dickoya have been on strike since May 19. The company has not paid into their Employee Provident Fund and Employee Trust Fund since 1995, while still deducting the employee contribution from their salaries. Workers are striking to demand that the money be immediately paid into the Central Bank. Other demands include the re-roofing of workers' housing, adequate toilet facilities and the establishment of maternity and funeral funds.

One worker, Sinaiah Thankeswaran, told a WSWS reporting team: "In this estate many workers have no housing facilities. Two or three families are forced to live in one house. Many houses have no toilet facilities. I am living in a small clay hut that I built at my own expense. The estate dispensary has no medicine. We have to go to Maskeliya Hospital [7 kilometres away] but we have no transport. Sometimes, pregnant mothers deliver babies on the road."

M. Narayanasamy said: "My basic salary is 135 rupees (\$US1.35) per day. My wife gets the same but we have to spend 500 rupees per day for food. Normally we eat roti [a type of bread] for breakfast and lunch. For dinner we only eat rice with dhal or leaves and can only eat fish or meat once a month. Now even that is difficult."

Sri Lankan university workers strike

Thousands of non-academic university employees launched an indefinite strike across the island on June 28, demanding that anomalies in their salaries be rectified. Other demands include the filling of vacancies and an end to the privatisation of university services. Workers held a one-day strike on June 20 but their demands were ignored. Thirteen universities and 60,000 tertiary students are being affected by the strike.

Sri Lankan transport workers walk out

Drivers, conductors and mechanics at two state-owned bus depots in Sri Lanka have launched indefinite strikes to demand payment of their outstanding May salaries. Around 500 workers at Nittambuwa bus depot, some 40 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on June 23. About 400 workers from Gampaha depot struck from June 24.

Anuradhapura depot employees in the North Central province have been on strike since June 14 on the same demands.

Indian teachers demonstrate

Nearly 600 contract computer teachers in Goa province demonstrated on June 24 to demand full-time positions. Teachers in Mormugao held a sit-in protest (dharna) outside the Mormugao municipal building. Protests were also held at the Margao, Quepem, Sanguem and Canacona municipal councils in the south Goa district.

College teachers at Chandigarh in Punjab held a sit-in campaign outside government education offices on June 22 to demand a 50 percent salary increase. The campaign was organised by the Punjab and Chandigarh College Teachers Union.

Cashew workers demonstrate in Kerala

Cashew workers in the Indian state of Kerala set up roadblocks at 20 locations in the Kollam district on June 28 to fight for improved working

conditions. Their demands include a higher minimum wage, a travelling allowance and the filling of all vacancies in public sector cashew factories.

Centre for Indian Trade Unions general secretary P.K. Gurudasan said employees would intensify their campaign if their demands were ignored. He said the next phase of action would include blocking major highways to bring the state to a standstill.

Underground explosion kills four Chinese miners

On June 26, a gas explosion ripped through the Huzhou coal mine in East China's Zhejiang province, killing four miners and injuring two. Operations at the state-owned coal mine, the largest in the Zhejiang, were stopped while investigators inspected the section where the blast occurred.

Chief investigator Ye Wuyue said the explosion happened after monitoring equipment alerted workers to a lethal build-up of gas. The blast was triggered when two pieces of iron hit each other and caused a spark. Despite the accident, managers kept the mine operating until investigators ordered it shut down.

Australia: mass protests against industrial relations legislation

Wollongong council staff threaten strike

About 1,100 workers are threatening strike action if the Wollongong City Council refuses to accept their demand for a new wages and conditions agreement, which includes a 15 percent pay rise. Council employees held a stopwork meeting at the Wollongong Town Hall on June 22 and voted to reject a 9.5 percent rise over three years. The council has refused to increase the offer, blaming its budget deficit.

Council staff went on strike for four days last year over wages and other conditions, closing down all garbage collections.

Auckland airport workers walk out

Service employees at Auckland International Airport stopped work for 24 hours this week. The group of 71 workers, most of them "redcoats" who help with customer service, banned overtime from Wednesday before walking off the job just after midnight on Friday. Members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, they have rejected the company's 3.5 percent pay offer, and want at least 5 percent. Union national secretary Andrew Little described the offer as paltry and pointed to record profits being earned by the airport company. "This company is awash with money," he said. The airport, which employs 300 workers, is refusing to negotiate.

The company announced this week it would return up to \$NZ200 million to shareholders and increase ordinary dividends. A special distribution to shareholders will comprise a dividend of 12 cents per share combined with a share buy-back of up to \$53 million.

New Zealand call centre workers strike

About 50 workers at TelstraClear call centres in Wellington and Kapiti struck this week to join a picket of technicians outside the company's New Zealand head office. Twenty technicians had been picketing the office in protest over the company's refusal to settle a collective employment agreement with its Wellington-based employees. Some 20 workers at the Lambton Quay call centre and 30 at the Kapiti call centre

walked off the job to join the picket.

A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said the company was refusing to allow technicians into the agreement, would not offer an across-the-board pay rise and wanted to cut the pay for new employees.

New Zealand university staff to strike

Academic and general staff at universities across New Zealand will walk off the job later this month following a breakdown in wage talks. Academic members of the Association of University Staff and general staff from the Public Services Association will strike on July 20 and again on August 4. Lower level industrial action has also been discussed at union meetings this week.

While the two unions want a 5 percent pay increase and a 12-month national agreement, the original demand was for a 30 percent pay rise for academics and 16 percent for general staff to bring them up to international levels. The country's seven main universities are offering between 2 and 4.5 percent.

Fishing company fined after death of worker

Sealord, New Zealand's largest fishing company, has been fined \$NZ205,000 after one of its workers died aboard the vessel *Aoraki* in the Southern Ocean last year. Sealord pleaded guilty to charges of failing to provide a safe workplace and appropriate supervision and training.

Hugh Hope, 58, died after he slipped into the ship's steam-heated cooking auger while cleaning it with a water blaster. He was trapped to his hips for 18 hours, with one leg severed and the other caught. The Maritime Safety Authority (MSA) told the court that Sealord had failed to identify work around the auger as a workplace hazard.

The company had not provided an access platform beside the auger, which stood 2.3 metres above the fish-factory floor. Workers had to climb on adjoining machinery and then straddle the cooker to clean it. Sealord had also neglected to fit dead-man alarms to the fish-meal plant, despite a MSA recommendation to do so after a previous accident on another vessel.

NZ bank workers accept offer

Workers at ANZ National Bank have voted by a slim margin to accept the bank's latest employment offer.

Over 2,600 workers, members of the finance sector union Finsec, voted by a 59.8 percent majority to accept the bank's offer, which includes a 5 percent pay increase over 16 months. This brings to an end the largest industrial action in the finance sector in over two decades.

The narrow vote reflected widespread membership dissatisfaction over the union's failure to secure the same pay and conditions for weekend and overtime work as apply in the bank's Australian operations.

Striking nurses force PNG government to capitulate

A national strike by Papua New Guinea (PNG) nurses on June 29 has forced the government to sign a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) agreeing to all their demands. Most hospitals and health clinics across the nation shut down up to 80 percent of their operations. Doctors who were not part of the industrial action manned emergency departments.

Nurses began returning to work in the afternoon after the MOA was signed by government representatives and the PNG Nurses Association. Earlier, Public Service Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal chairman Pex Avosa declared the strike illegal and ordered a return to work. Health Secretary Dr Nicholas Mann later assured the nurses that "the department won't take any action against those who walked off their jobs".

The government has agreed to implement the wages and conditions agreement it signed with the nurses in 2000. In the 2000 MOA, the government agreed to reclassify nurses' salaries, bringing about pay rises, and recognise all their qualifications. Only one payment under the new classifications was ever made. The government has agreed to pay all allowances and back-pay no later than February 1, 2006. For their part, the nurses agreed to remove all threats of industrial action and return to work.

Striking Fijian public employees return to work

Close to 3,000 striking government employees returned to work in Fiji on June 23 after a three-day strike over the non-payment of overtime.

The strike ended after a meeting between the Works Ministry and the Fiji Islands Council of Trade Unions in which the government agreed to make the overtime payments after a two-week verification period. Some payments date back to December 2002.

The strike began in Lautoka on June 20, when more than 1,000 casual government workers walked off their jobs in support of staff who had struck at the Lautoka Hospital. Public Works Department employees at various locations around the country joined them the next day.

Fijian timber workers strike for pay increase

More than 200 employees of Tropik Wood Industries in Fiji walked off the job on June 28 over management's failure to address issues they promised to resolve nearly 12 months ago. Management signed an agreement with the union on September 29, 2004, in which it agreed to pay a cost-of-living adjustment and a 3 percent increase in allowances.

When management failed to honour the agreement, members of the Tropik Wood Employees and Allied Workers Union, held a secret ballot to mandate a strike in March this year. They held off taking action after management agreed to negotiate a settlement.

A union spokesman said the workers have vowed to stay on strike until management makes an effort to resolve the dispute.

American Samoa factory owner jailed for 40 years

Kil Soo Lee, an American Samoa garment factory owner, was sentenced to 40 years jail by a federal court in Hawaii on June 22 for what prosecutors called "modern day slavery". The case involved 300 Vietnamese and Chinese immigrant employees.

The workers, ranging from 20 to 40 years of age were employed in the Daewoosa Samoa garment factory in Pago Pago on the Pacific island of Tutuila (American Samoa). They paid labour companies up to \$US5,000 each to work in the factory and were forced to stay until their debt was paid. They were kept in virtual slavery from March 1999 to November 2000.

Lee controlled all aspects of their daily life, including how much they ate and were paid. He punished them when they complained about working conditions and threatened them with arrest, beatings and deportation if they did not follow orders. The average weight of workers when they left the factory was 76 pounds (34.5 kilograms).

Lee was ordered to pay the workers \$US1.8 million in restitution for unpaid wages.



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