

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

9 July 2005

## Indian transport workers on indefinite strike

Thousands of transport workers in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on July 4. They want the government to write-off the debt of their employer, the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC), so it can finance pay increases for its workforce. The corporation has accumulated debts of 13.2 billion rupees (\$US264 million) in the last 10 years.

Public transport in the state has come to a halt. APSRTC is one of the largest state transport companies in South Asia, operating about 19,000 buses and employing 119,000 staff. Striking workers held protests in several cities, including Hanamkonda, Adilabad and Nizamabad. Fourteen depots in the Vijayawada region have been affected by the strike.

The Joint Action Committee of APSRTC employees union is organising the strike. Those involved include the Transport Mazdoor Sangh, the National Mazdoor Union, the Employees Union and the Staff and Workers Federation.

## Power workers demand payment of salaries in Karnataka

Contract workers employed by the Gulbarga Electricity Supply Company (GESCOM) protested outside the company head office on June 30 to demand the payment of three months' outstanding salaries and full-time positions. GESCOM distributes electricity from the national grid to five districts in the state of Karnataka and services about 10 million people in 38 towns and cities.

The contractors are paid less than full-time staff. They do not receive benefits such as a provident fund, insurance and medical facilities. In a memorandum submitted to the company, they insisted that GESCOM stop recruiting people on a contract basis and appoint them directly.

## Indian water workers demonstrate

Karnataka Urban Water Supply and Drainage Board employees demonstrated at the city municipal corporation in Gulbarga on July 4 to demand a wage increase and pay parity between contract staff and regular employees. Workers said that apart from 150 permanent staff, 300 contract employees are working for a monthly wage of just 1,000 rupees (\$US20).

Workers chanted slogans against the board and corporation management and submitted a memorandum to the mayor.

## Sri Lankan university workers strike continues

The strike of 9,500 non-academic university employees in Sri

Lanka entered its second week. Workers protested in major cities on July 4, with employees picketing Anuradapura in the North Central province, while some 600 workers protested at the main bus station in Matara in southern Sri Lanka.

Their main demand is the ending of salary anomalies between staff at different universities. Other claims include the filling of vacancies and an end to the privatisation of university services.

Thirteen universities and 60,000 students are affected by the strike.

## Filipino port workers strike for benefits

Operations at the Culasi Port in the Philippines city of Roxas were paralysed on July 4 when 248 port workers struck over a range of grievances against the Philippines Ports Authority. The authority has not been paying salaries on time and has paid workers' social security contributions to a local office rather than the agency's central office in Iloilo.

Shipping companies were not allowed to load or unload cargo, but striking workers allowed passengers to board and disembark from vessels.

The strike ended on July 8, after the authority agreed to pay salaries and look into the issue of the contributions.

## Government intervenes to end Philippines gold mine strike

The Philippines largest gold miner, Lepanto Consolidated Mining Company (LCMC), announced on July 6 that the 34-day strike, which halted operations at its Lepanto mine, was resolved after the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) agreed to increase employees' salaries and ordered them back to work.

The DOLE compromise granted rises for the three-year period November 17, 2004 to November 17, 2007. It provides daily increases of 25 pesos (\$US0.46) from November 2004, 27 pesos from November 2005, and 29 pesos from November 2006.

The Lepanto Employees Union accepted the wage offer, after pressure from local town officials, but is refusing to direct the 1,600 strikers back to work until LCMC reinstates 75 union officials sacked at the beginning of the strike on June 2.

LCMC management has begun hiring contractors in an attempt to force employees to return to work.

## Strike follows death at Australian building industry

Construction workers at the Epping underground rail link

construction site in Sydney have walked off the job for a week in respect for a 24-year-old worker who died at work on July 4. The young man fell from his vehicle into a large sediment pond and was not found for 12 hours. There were no safety barriers around the pond. It was initially reported that he had drowned but it now appears he may have suffered a heart attack.

There have been several serious workplace accidents at the Theiss Hochtief-operated site. The company is reportedly under pressure from the New South Wales state government to complete the project by the end of the year.

#### **Western Power workers hold 24-hour stoppage**

Around 700 electricity workers employed by the Western Australian state utility Western Power walked off the job this week for 24 hours to protest against the use of private contractors. Those involved in the strike were from metropolitan and regional centre depots, including Albany, Picton, Geraldton, Broome, Port Hedland and Karratha.

Employees have refused to rule out further industrial action if Western Power continues using contractors to cover overtime and deny its employees the extra hours.

The action was also taken to protest against the standing down of a linesman for two days without pay over a safety breach. Workers are angry that a Western Power supervisor photographed an employee not wearing a hardhat, which led to his suspension.

#### **Air New Zealand cabin crew to strike**

Air New Zealand long-haul cabin crews are set to strike for three days this month, possibly affecting international flights. The Flight Attendants and Related Services Association (FARSA), which represents about 1,000 cabin crew, has issued strike notices for July 18, 21 and 24. The notice came after FARSA withdrew from lengthy contract negotiations.

#### **NZ coal miners suspended in pay dispute**

The New Zealand state-owned coal company Solid Energy suspended more than 200 miners this week after pay talks broke down and employees took industrial action.

The company suspended 70 Waikato miners as they turned up to work their shifts. It accused the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) of telling its members to strike before considering its latest collective agreement offer. The EPMU said the miners refused to work after receiving informal reports of the offer from delegates before the scheduled meetings.

More than 100 workers at Solid Energy's Henry Walker Eltin-operated mine at Rotowaro near Huntly were stood down, with suspensions also in effect at Ngakawau in the South Island. Work has halted at the three mines.

Workers at the Huntly East mine had refused to load trucks or trains on June 30, the night before scheduled meetings on the pay dispute. Miners at Ngakawau also refused to load coal after voting to reject a 20 percent pay rise offer over three years, including an immediate 5 percent increase. They want a 25 percent increase over three years.

A week earlier the EPMU, which represents about 700 Solid Energy miners, hinted that the talks could be heading for a resolution. EPMU national secretary Andrew Little said there was "still room to move" and the union wanted to resume talks with the company. Solid Energy's chief operating officer said the suspensions would remain in force until the union ended all industrial action. The mine closures are estimated to be costing Solid Energy up to \$1.5 million a day.

#### **New Zealand paper mill workers consider strikes**

Kinleith pulp and paper mill workers are considering fresh industrial action over Carter Holt Harvey's (CHH) latest pay offer. In the first pay talks since a record 84-day strike two years ago, CHH has offered 4 percent for the 12 months from April this year and 3 percent next year. The combined unions' claim, covering about 300 mill workers, is for 5 percent immediately.

Kinleith site delegates chairman Graham Holmes said employees were angry because they spend large amounts of time on call and do not receive enough training. He said they would be seriously considering industrial action. More talks with the company are due next week.

#### **Worker crushed to death at NZ steel mill**

A worker was killed at the NZ Steel mill southwest of Auckland on July 4. The 40-year-old steel worker, who has not yet been named, was crushed between two rollers and died at the scene.

An Occupational Safety and Health investigation into the death coincided with the release of official figures showing that 1,100 workers die in New Zealand each year from work-related disease and injury, with another 700 so seriously are injured that they need daily medical help.

From July 2002 until March this year, 500 convictions were made under the Health and Safety Act and \$2.5 million in fines were imposed on employers over unsafe work places—a figure described by the Council of Trade Unions as "paltry".

#### **General strike called in New Caledonia**

New Caledonia's Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers called a general strike on July 6. It also called for a protest in the French colony's capital Noumea, with workers and their supporters to gather outside the French High Commission and march to the court house.

The strike is over the arrest of a union official at a public gathering. Union president Gerard Jodar has accused the French police and the judiciary of trying to destabilise the pro-independence union.



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