

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

23 July 2005

## Indian tea strike enters second week

Half-a-million tea workers from 350 estates in Bengal are continuing the indefinite strike they began on July 11 to demand better wages. The strike is the culmination of tea workers' agitation over the past 27 months for an eight-point charter of demands, including improved pay.

Estate workers currently receive approximately 46 rupees (\$US1) per day, which is insufficient to adequately support a family. Workers have rejected a one rupee per day pay rise. Union spokesman Samir Roy said they wanted the daily wage rate in Bengal to be doubled. They have also rejected employers' demands for productivity-linked wage rises and financial penalties against tea pluckers who fail to meet their daily quota.

A 12-hour walkout called on July 19 in support of the tea workers was backed by almost the entire workforce in four districts—Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri, Cooch Behar and Uttar Dinajpur—after a tripartite meeting between the state government, the tea workers' unions and the estate owners failed to agree on a wage rise. Public transport, shops, government offices, schools and retail outlets were shut down in support.

The Indian Tea Planters' Association claims the industry is facing intense international competition and cannot afford to meet the workers' demands. The tea industry is losing 100 million rupees (\$2.3 million) per day due to the strike.

## Indian aluminum workers strike over colleague's death

Over 2,500 employees of Bharat Aluminium (BALCO) launched an indefinite strike on July 18, following the death of a worker at an expansion site in Korba, in the Indian state of Chhattisgarh. A demonstration by the strikers was attacked by police and seven men were injured.

The Sterlite group now controls BALCO. Soon after acquiring its stake in the company, Sterlite unveiled a 50-billion rupee (\$1 billion) expansion and modernisation project to lift annual production from 100,000 to 350,000 tons per annum. Workers accuse the management of being "casual" over safety. Eight workers have died at the expansion site in the past 12 months.

## Indian telecom workers demonstrate

Telecom workers employed by Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) held a lunch-hour demonstration in front of the Bharat Nagar telephone exchange in Ludhiana, in the Indian state of Punjab. Their demands included access to company-provided personal loans of 100,000 rupees (\$2,000) and home loans up to 100 times their basic salary. They also want improvements to the pay of telecom mechanics, lorry drivers, draftsmen and phone

inspectors.

The workers have threatened to strike on July 28 and participate in a national telecom strike on September 29.

## Sri Lankan university workers strike continues

The strike by 9,500 non-academic university employees in Sri Lanka has entered its third week. Thousands of strikers from universities across the country picketed the education department on the outskirts of Colombo on July 18. Armed police were deployed against them.

In the days before, workers from the University of Colombo demonstrated in the streets adjoining the university on July 13. Workers from the University of Sabaragamuwa demonstrated in Balangoda township, 130 kilometres from Colombo, on July 14.

The strikers want the abolition of salary anomalies between staff employed on different grades at universities. Other claims include the filling of vacancies and an end to the privatisation of university services. Workers are vowing to continue their action until their demands are fulfilled. Thirteen universities and 60,000 students are affected by the strike.

## Teachers picket education ministry

On July 13, thousands of Sri Lankan teachers picketed the education ministry in Battaramula, a Colombo suburb, to demand the payment of suspended allowances, the ending of salary anomalies between different grades, hardship allowances for teachers working in remote regions and improved conditions for graduate teachers.

On the same day more than 250 teachers working in remote areas of the North Central province picketed the provincial council office in Anuradhapura, the area's main city. They demanded payment of two suspended hardship allowances.

## Graduate workers protest in Colombo

Thousands of Sri Lankan university graduates hired by government departments picketed the Fort railway station in central Colombo on July 15. Most of the graduates are paid an interim allowance and have not been guaranteed long-term employment. They demanded full-time positions and the streamlining of promotion procedures.

Around 1,000 graduates working as teachers demonstrated outside the ministry of public administration in Colombo on July 13 demanding full-time jobs. They presented a list of their grievances to the minister and marched to the prime minister's office. Some of the graduates were recruited in 1999 but have never been promoted.

## Sri Lankan cooperative workers demand job protection

Thousands of workers employed by the recently privatised Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) demonstrated in Colombo on July 14 to demand that the government guarantee their jobs. Workers believe the privatisation has placed over 3,000 jobs under threat. They called on the government to takeover the CWE again. They also denounced the failure of the company to pay their salaries, which were due on June 24.

#### **Indonesian railway workers protest over downgrade of work status**

Thousands of state railway company PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) employees protested in Jakarta on July 20 against a ministerial decree that reclassifies KAI workers from civil servants to regular company employees. The status change will mean that workers and retirees receive lower payments than civil servants and will lose benefits such as the additional month's salary given to government employees each year.

When the protesters failed to get a response at the ministry office, they marched to the constitutional court to demand a judicial review. The railway workers have threatened a nationwide strike from August 1 to August 3 if their demand is not met.

#### **Thai workers rally for wage rise**

Around 3,000 workers rallied outside the Royal Plaza and then marched on government house in Bangkok as part of a campaign for an increase in the minimum wage. The campaign is being supported by the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee, unions from around the country and students from various university federations.

The demonstrators presented the government with a petition calling for a minimum daily wage of 233 Baht (\$US5.60) to take effect in October and stricter price controls. Currently the minimum wage in some Thai provinces is just 139 baht. In the Bangkok region it is 181 baht.

According to media reports, the government has only been considering a 6-baht rise. Wilailan sia Tia, chairperson of the Thai Labour Solidarity Committee, told reporters that this would be little help to workers who are facing soaring fuel prices.

#### **Australian power workers walk off job**

Around 600 South Australian power workers employed by ETSA Utilities walked off the job for four hours on July 20 over a new wages and conditions agreement. The Electrical Trade Union (ETU) members have rejected ETSA's offer of a 17 percent rise over 3 years. The workers want a 20 percent rise over the same period.

The South Australian government privatised the state-owned ETSA Power in 2000 to a consortium consisting of Cheung Kong Infrastructure Holding, Hong Kong Electric Holding and AGL Gas.

#### **Air Zealand staff strike**

Up to 1,000 Air Zealand cabin crews struck on July 18 and 19 to demand a 3.8 percent pay rise and improved conditions. After months of negotiations, Air NZ would only agree to a 3.3 percent rise and has refused to meet workers' demands for meal allowances and increased annual leave.

The strike caused 85 flight cancellations, affecting 15,000 passengers. Cabin crews will walkout again on July 25 if an agreement between the company and their union is not reached.

Talks have been held with management this the week.

#### **PNG communications workers maintain strike**

Telekom PNG employees are maintaining strike action begun on July 14 after the Telekom board of management refused this week to pay a 4 percent wage rise agreed in the latest Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. The increase was due on July 1 but Telekom has delayed payment, claiming that an external audit had not been carried out to confirm the company's profit is 30 percent of total revenue. The audit was stipulated in the EBA. The company, however, is claiming it will not be completed until July 31.

The general secretary of the Papua New Guinea Communications Workers Union, Emmanuel Kairu, said industrial action would continue until Telekom officially confirmed the payment would be made. The union is also calling for the removal of a newly appointed strategic advising company, KPMG, which they claim has been employed to get the company ready for privatisation.

#### **Tonga public servants threaten strike**

Over 2,000 Tongan public servants met on July 20 and voted to hold a national strike from July 22. The newly formed Public Service Association convened the meeting. Union members insisted on immediate action, despite union attempts to delay the strike until July 26.

Union spokesman Finau Tutone said that government workers wanted a revision of pay scales and were outraged by how much top civil servants were paid compared to their subordinates. Government ministers receive over 100,000 paanga (\$US51,000) per year, while other public servants earn just 2,600 paanga (\$1,336).

Tutone said the union committee wanted the government to stop planned pay rises this month and introduce a fairer pay scale. The government has requested more time to consult a select committee. Tuton said that the strike would continue until the government gives a satisfactory response.

On July 13, over 1,000 public servants demanded the union hold a protest march and call a national strike. The union opposed industrial action and asked for more time to negotiate a pay deal. The government, however, did not respond to the union's approaches.



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