

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 April 2006

Indonesian workers continue protests over labour laws

About 5,000 workers organised by the Indonesian Trade Union Congress (ITUC) marched through Jakarta and Surabaya on April 11. They were protesting government plans to establish a committee of government, union and employer representatives to discuss modifications to a bill changing the 2003 Labor Law. The Labor Law changes would allow companies to outsource jobs, deny severance pay and hire workers for up to five years without a work contract.

In Jakarta, the protesters marched to the State Palace, which was heavily guarded by police. Demonstrators claimed that the 30 union leaders who had agreed to participate in the tripartite committee did not represent the majority opinion of Indonesian workers.

The protest follows two weeks of street rallies across the country. On April 7 Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono responded to the growing opposition by proposing the tripartite committee. Most unions accepted the proposal and called off their protests.

The ITUC has no principled differences with the committee. ITUC vice president Khoirul Anam told the *Jakarta Post* that the organisation would join the tripartite body if the government agreed to enlist universities nominated by ITUC to evaluate the Labor Law revisions. Otherwise," he said, "the ITUC will join forces with other major unions to stage a national strike on May Day".

Indonesian furniture workers protest

On April 16, 800 employees at furniture manufacturer PT Cipta Medelindo in Medan, North Sumatra began an ongoing protest action over alleged employer abuse and low pay. At least 100 workers at a time are camping outside the North Sumatra council building.

Protest coordinator Rudianto said the protest aimed to

secure council support. He said workers had lodged complaints for two years with the company, which responded with "intimidation," including some employees being beaten by company thugs.

PT Cipta Medelindo pays below the minimum wage and does not provide insurance benefits or bonuses to which employees are entitled. Rudianto claimed that after five years with the company he was only paid 600,000 rupiah (\$US66.60) a month, far below the provincial minimum wage of 796,000 rupiah.

Employees want the regional minimum wage, insurance benefits, set holidays and an Idul Fitri (religious day) bonus. While a council spokesman said it had begun talks with the company, workers have vowed to maintain their protests until their demands are met.

Indian bank employees demonstrate against contract work

Bank employees in the south Indian state of Kerala held protests on April 13 across the state, including Thripunithura, Perumbavoor, Muvattupuzha, Aluva, Angamally, Kalamasserry and Paravurm, over the federal government's moves to introduce contract work into the banking sector. The protests were organised by the All Kerala Bank Employees' Federation.

On the same day, Punjabi health workers rallied outside the civil surgeon's office at Patiala against a contract work system planned by the state government. If introduced, nearly 6,000 paramedics and doctors working in rural dispensaries across the north Indian state would be made redundant.

Indian plantation workers occupy estate

Plantation workers, widows and destitute people occupied the Fringe Ford Estate in Thalappuzha in Kerala on April 16. Closure of the estate has led to widespread hardship, with workers not paid their legal benefits.

The occupation was organised by the Plantation Thozhilali Varga Union (PTVU), which is pursuing legal action against the Kolkata-based company owner for breaching the Plantation Labor Act. The estate, which spans 150 acres, was closed after the Tea Board deregistered the company for a number of misdemeanours.

Cleaners rally for better pay and conditions

Cleaners in capital cities across Australia and New Zealand protested on April 20 for job security, better pay and working conditions. Over 200 rallied in Sydney.

The cleaning industry is extremely competitive, with a largely migrant workforce on low wages and poor working conditions.

The campaign is appealing to large corporations to insist that the contract cleaning companies they use adopt a 10-point plan that includes improved wages and conditions. Major cleaning contractors, however, subcontract to smaller operators at cutthroat rates, driving down wages and conditions.

A spokesman for the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union in Australia claimed that under the Howard government's new industrial relations laws employers could cut the average weekly part-time cleaner's wage of \$280 by up to \$90. The majority of cleaning workers in New Zealand receive as little as \$10.50 an hour.

New Zealand manufacturing workers to hold stop-work meetings

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has given notice of stop-work meetings to be held in Auckland on May 1, Christchurch on May 2 and Wellington on May 3. The stoppages will launch the 2006 wage round in the New Zealand metals and manufacturing industries.

The Metals Agreement is a primary agreement in the private sector, setting pay rates and conditions for thousands of workers across the manufacturing sector. The EPMU is yet to announce details of the claim it intends to lodge.

In a separate dispute, the union covering radiation therapists announced a 14-hour strike on April 27 after a zero pay offer from district health boards. A spokesperson for the Association of Professional and Executive Employees said the union was only seeking a cost of living adjustment to ensure previous pay

settlements retained their value.

PNG teachers threaten national stoppage

Over 1,800 teachers in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea unanimously voted on April 17 to demand a fortnightly 200 kina (\$US66) accommodation allowance from the government. The teachers warned that if the government failed to agree to their demand and the union refused to organise a campaign they would begin industrial action without union consent.

The National Capital District Teachers Association admitted that with house prices and rents in the nation's capital soaring the current 7-kina allowance was far too low. While the union confirmed that rising accommodation costs had forced many teachers to live in classrooms it did not announce a campaign of industrial action. Teachers have set a May 12 deadline for a response from the union and the government.

New Caledonian workers launch national strike

At least 15,000 people in Noumea on April 19 marched on government and congress buildings during a 24-hour strike called by several unions to protest over the high cost of living in New Caledonia. The strike, involving civil servants and members of the USOENC (Union des Syndicats d'Ouvriers et Employés de Nouvelle-Calédonie) disrupted services at the French colony's international airport and across a range of businesses.

To head off further protests, the government scheduled a meeting with the unions and promised to look at reforms and possible reductions in the price of some goods. The unions have threatened further industrial action if the government does not act quickly.



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