

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 April 2006

Indian state government employees strike indefinitely

An indefinite strike by nearly 70,000 Manipur state government employees that began on April 20 has brought government services to a standstill. The strikers are demanding an increase in the Dearness Allowance to bring it in line with central government employees, an extension of retirement age from 58 to 60 years, permanency for casual and muster-roll employees and the rectification of pay anomalies.

The workers had given the Manipur government an April 19 deadline to grant their demands. The majority of Indian states have already introduced pay increases in line with the Fifth Pay Commission recommendations.

A spokesman for the workers' Joint Action Committee (JAC) said: "We will not talk to the government until the demands are fulfilled. We will not allow delaying tactics this time." The JAC is hoping that with elections for the State Assembly looming the government will concede its demands.

Punjab paramedical employees protest privatisation

On April 24, paramedical workers in Ludhiana, in the north Indian state of Punjab, held a sit-down protest outside the Civil Surgeon's office in Ludhiana.

They were protesting the state government's decision to place 1,193 Health Department dispensaries under local government control. Workers claim the move is a step toward privatisation of the health system.

Unemployed teachers demand appointments

Unemployed elementary teachers in Punjab held a sit-down protest outside the Mini-Secretariat in Ludhiana on April 21 and a number of teachers in Chandigarh began a hunger strike on April 19. They are demanding a revision of the selection procedures for allocating teaching jobs. Presently, positions for teaching positions are allocated through municipal councils but teachers are demanding the selection be based on merit.

The protestors also accused the government of falsely claiming that the selection of elementary teachers for village schools was underway. Many of the village schools, however, have no teacher and parents are forced send their children to private schools. The protest is being organised by Unemployed Elementary Teachers Union.

University employees demand pay increase

On April 20, employees at the University of Kerala in southern India walked out for two hours over the state

government's refusal to extend a pay revision package to university employees. The strike by Confederation of University Employees Organisations members affected the university's Palayam and Kariyavattom campuses.

NTR University of Health Sciences employees in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, also protested on the same day for a pay increase and the immediate implementation of outstanding internal transfers.

Indian cigarette workers demonstrate

Workers in Karnataka involved in the production of cheap local cigarettes (beedi) demonstrated in Shimoga on April 20. They were demanding a minimum wage, assured welfare benefits and the introduction of a provident fund and pension scheme.

The demonstration, which was organised by the Shimoga District General and Industrial Workers Union, marched to the Deputy Commissioner's Office where they held a sit-down protest and presented their demands. There are around 5,000 beedi workers in the Tirthahalli, Shimoga, Bhadravati, Hosnagar and Sagar municipalities.

Sri Lankan volunteer teachers demand permanent jobs

Around 500 volunteer teachers from the Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa districts in Sri Lanka picketed the North-Central Provincial Council on April 21 demanding permanency. Currently 1,944 volunteer teachers are working in the districts.

Many teachers have been working in rural schools for several years but not been offered full-time jobs despite there being around 2,000 vacancies across both districts. A spokesman said the teachers would continue protesting outside the Provincial Council until their demand is met.

Indonesian workers to strike on May Day

About 31,000 workers from 54 labour unions will strike nationwide on May 1 to protest the government's planned revision of the 2003 Labor Law. Union spokesman Dominggus Oktavianus said the turnout could be even larger as many other unions had indicated they might join the strike.

Most of the workers will be from greater Jakarta and will rally at the Hotel Indonesia in the centre of the city. Hundreds of workers in the West Java town of Cimahi will also strike. Their union, the Indonesia Workers Welfare Union, is also demanding government make May 1 a public holiday.

The proposed labour law changes would allow companies to

outsource jobs, deny severance pay and hire workers for up to five years without a work contract.

Jakarta dump employees plan strike

Workers at the Bantargebang waste disposal dump in Bekasi, Jakarta have threatened strike action if the dump administration does not pay them wage arrears dating back to December 2005. The 146 employees live near the site, which processes Jakarta's garbage.

Jakarta city authorities pay dump administrators 52,500 rupiah (\$US5.09) per ton and workers are paid a percentage. The city is currently behind in paying these fees.

Philippines government threatens May Day protests

Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo has threatened to place the country under a state of emergency if Labor Day rallies on May 1 are not peaceful. The government is expecting the mass demonstrations to call for Arroyo's resignation.

The Alliance of Progressive Labor (APL) said workers would protest the government's proposed changes to the 1987 constitution giving Arroyo more powers and extending her term in office to 2010. The KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno) on April 25 organised nationally coordinated protests in the lead up to the May 1 rallies. The protests ranged from work stoppages, lunch break and locker room assemblies, to go-slow action and pickets.

Alcoa threatens legal action over proposed work bans

Management at Alcoa's Portland aluminium smelter in Victoria has threatened legal action against 65 workers after they lodged an application with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to begin "protected" industrial action, mainly work bans, on May 1.

Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union, are seeking a 13 percent pay increase as part of a new work agreement. The unions have been negotiating with Alcoa since November.

Under the Howard government's new industrial relations laws—WorkChoices—employees must apply to the electoral commission before taking industrial action. A union spokesman said Alcoa had told workers they could be fined individually under the new laws. The union is waiting on a ruling from the IRC whether a three-month transition period exists between WorkChoices and the previous workplace relations laws that allowed industrial action during work agreement negotiations.

New Zealand radiation therapists strike nationwide

Radiation therapists across New Zealand held a 14-hour strike on April 27, stopping services at public hospitals in six district health boards. These were Capital and Coast, MidCentral, Auckland, Waikato, Canterbury and Otago. About 250 radiation therapists, who operate linear accelerator machines, are seeking a 5 percent pay increase and an employer contribution to workers' superannuation schemes.

Association of Professional and Executive Employees secretary Deborah Powell said the boards had made a zero pay

offer. She described the strike as a "warning shot" but confirmed that further talks will be held next week. In 2002, radiation therapists won pay rises ranging from \$7,000 to \$13,000 a year. They currently earn \$42,000 per annum.

New Zealand telecom technicians strike

Telecommunications technicians at Transfield Services in New Zealand struck for 24 hours on April 26, one day before the commencement of negotiations for a nationwide collective agreement. The workers had earlier placed bans on callouts and standbys. To beat the bans, management offered non-union workers new weekly callout payments of \$195, \$95 more than the current rate.

Workers claim wages are stagnating and some are still waiting for a pay increase that was due in March 2005. They are also sometimes required to work 48 hours a week with no overtime payment and are called into work on rostered days off. They are not compensated for working in the snow or rain.

New Zealand timber workers settle pay dispute

Workers at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) laminated veneer lumber plant in Marsden Point have settled a new collective agreement, following extensive industrial action last year. The 190 workers, members of the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union, spent 22 days on strike.

The settlement includes a 3.4 percent pay increase backdated to July 2005 followed, by another 3 percent or cost of living (CPI) increase in July this year. A higher duties allowance has been introduced and workers with 12 months' service will qualify for five weeks' annual leave by next year.

Strike at New Caledonia's RFO television enters second month

A strike at New Caledonia's public broadcaster RFO has entered its second month with no end in sight. The strike was called on March 23 by the Kanak USTKE union when technician Rock Haocas was sacked after a court found him guilty of allegedly assaulting a cameraman during a 100-day strike in 2004.

The strike was temporarily called off after two days when USTKE reached an agreement with RFO management to have Haocas employed by another public television group. Workers, however, rejected the compromise and maintained the strike. Management is refusing to negotiate further. USTKE spokesman Pierre Chauvat said the workers would remain on strike and the issue would be raised with the French government in Paris.



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