

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 May 2006

Asia

Indian workers demonstrate against “anti-labor” policies

Employees of nationalised banks, insurance companies and pharmacies demonstrated in Devangere in the south Indian state of Karnataka on May 1 protesting the “anti-labor” policies of the federal and state governments.

The protestors carried placards denouncing World Trade Organisation policies and the federal government’s deregulation and privatisation plans. They demanded Indian state and federal governments fulfill their mandatory obligation of providing education and employment. They also condemned the increasing use of contract labor in many government departments.

Addressing the protest, spokesmen for the medical representatives’ association alleged that many countries were dumping “banned drugs” in India and demanded the government act to prevent this. Several unions participated in the demonstration.

Indian quarry workers demand wage rise

Around 2,000 male and female workers from stone quarries in Tirusulam and near Pallavaram in Tamil Nadu demonstrated on April 27 in Tambaram for a wage increase. They demanded a fixed one-rupee rate (two US cents) for every cubic foot of stone cut.

Workers from the Tirusulam quarries said that a load of stone had increased in price from 225 rupees in 1996 to 430 rupees (\$US9.50) this year but that wages had only risen from 65 to 70 rupees in the past 10 years. For this, they had to cut 125 cubic feet of stone into five sections.

The protest, which was organised by the All India Trade Union Congress, also condemned the hazardous working conditions in the quarries.

Female apparel workers in Sri Lanka assaulted by police

A brutal police assault on a picket line at Dye-In Sri Lanka in Akmeemana in Galle district on April 25 resulted in seven female workers being hospitalised. The apparel workers are on indefinite strike over the sacking of three colleagues who had legitimately requested a bonus payment for recent New Year celebrations.

Uniformed police wielding batons and backed up by management-hired thugs attacked the picket to clear a path for a container truck filled with finished products. Earlier police had ordered workers to disperse or face 14 days in jail.

The strike began on April 21 after the sackings became known. Workers with five years’ service only receive 300 rupees New Year bonus (\$US3) while others get just 4 rupees.

Sri Lankan health workers and teachers strike over pay

Health workers at Rajagiriya Teaching Hospital of Indigenous Medicine (Auyurvedic medicine) and Nawinna Auyurvedic Research Institute in Colombo, Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on April 28. They are demanding salary arrears that have accumulated since 2004. Workers in the Medicinal Plant Gardens in Pattipola, Haldummulla and Girandurukotte joined the strike on April 29.

Sri Lankan teachers and principals held a sick note campaign on May 3 over government moves to cut salaries and make teachers work 30 years before they are eligible for a pension.

Hong Kong media staff strike for back pay

Twenty-three journalists and camera operators employed at *Sing Pao Daily News* in Hong Kong went on strike on April 29 demanding outstanding wages dating back to mid-March. The paper employs 350 staff and is notorious for paying wages up to a month late.

One third of the journalists returned to work after three days when the company agreed to pay outstanding wages by May 10. The remainder resigned, declaring that they did not believe management would honour its promise. While the journalists have sought Labour Department assistance it has failed to act on previous complaints.

Police break up May Day rally in Macau

Police confronted more than 5,000 workers in Macau, China during a May Day rally to protest government labour policies. Most of the protesters were middle aged and unemployed and angry over the lack of jobs and alleged collusion between government officials and business.

The rally, the largest since the return of the island to mainland China in 1999, turned violent when police attempted to disperse the workers. Around 25 police and two female protesters were injured. There were three arrests.

Meanwhile, 2,000 workers called for a minimum wage and improved working conditions during a May Day rally outside Hong Kong’s Central Government Offices. Protesters demanded a reduction in working hours and for the government to end job outsourcing.

Thousands turn out for May Day in Indonesia

Hundreds of thousands of workers rallied in major cities across Indonesia on May 1 to protest the government’s pro-business amendments to the 2003 Labor Laws. The changes will allow companies to freely outsource jobs, deny severance pay and to hire workers without a contract for up to five years.

Workers from at least 54 unions participated in rallies in Madan in North Sumatra, Banbung in West Java, Semarang in Central

Java, Yogyakarta, Surabaya in East Java and Makassar in South Sulawesi. In Jakarta, workers marched and rallied at the State Palace, the House of Representatives and the Tanjung Priok airport.

Prior to the rallies, the head of Indonesia's 250,000-strong National Police confirmed that thousands of armed police would be deployed in all major centres and that officers had been issued shoot-on-site orders if the rallies "became violent".

Sogo workers protest over dismissals

For the second time this month, hundreds of Sogo department store workers in Jakarta protested over the dismissal of six colleagues who refused to be transferred to the store's holding company PT Mitra Adi Perkasa (MAP). The workers, who are employed by a manpower agency, protested at the company's offices on April 27.

Sogo labor union chairman Palris Jaya said the transfers were part of a company strategy to lay-off workers and reduce their welfare entitlements. The union said that 43 staff had been issued transfer notices and another 36 left after being threatened with dismissal. Six workers decided to fight the decision. The manpower agency agreed to mediate with MAP.

Kuala Lumpur workers hold small May Day rally

Around 2,000 marched in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur on May 1 demanding increased labour rights, an end to civil service corruption, minimal wage laws and protection for immigrant workers. They also called for an end to outsourcing and contract work. The rally was organised by a coalition of 68 civil rights groups and unions, including the Malaysian Trade Union Congress.

Massive police presence fails to deter May Day protests

Tens of thousands of workers joined May Day demonstrations in major centres across the Philippines despite the presence of thousands of riot police and military personnel.

Local governments across the country had rejected applications from workers organisations to hold May Day rallies and over 5,000 riot police, backed by a 2,000-strong military force, were deployed in Metro Manila. An estimated 50,000 workers held 20 rallies in Manila even though authorities issued permits for only ten.

The demonstrations called for the resignation of President Arroyo, the scrapping of "Charta Change"—a constitutional change extending Arroyo's term in office to 2010—and the release from jail of former President Joseph Estrada. They also demanded an increase in the minimum wage and improved working conditions.

Australia and the Pacific

Western Australian teachers demand pay increase

Western Australia (WA) state schoolteachers began an industrial campaign on May 2 in support of a 9 percent wage rise over two years and improved working conditions. The teachers want their pay rates brought in line with their counterparts in New South Wales.

The campaign includes bans on administrative duties, a refusal to attend more than two staff meetings per term and extension of a current ban on numeracy and literacy tests.

Negotiations between the teachers' union and the state education department over pay and conditions have dragged on for over eight

months. According to the union, WA teachers are the lowest paid in Australia.

New Zealand manufacturing workers begin pay campaign

Members of Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) employed in the metals and manufacturing industries in New Zealand held a number of stop-work meetings beginning May 1 in Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington as part of the 2006 "Metals" pay campaign. The meetings voted for a 7 percent across-the-board pay rise. The "Metals" contract is a multi-employer collective agreement covering 2,000 workers and sets the benchmark for pay and conditions across most of New Zealand's manufacturing industry.

Last year, the EPMU sought a 5 percent rise but in many cases settled for less despite the union acknowledging that workers believed they had not benefited from productivity gains and economic growth in recent years. Inflation is currently 3.3 percent and eroding workers' buying power. The Canterbury Manufacturers' Association denounced the 7 percent pay claim as "crazy" and "unbelievable".

Hospital workers vote on national contract

Over 2,500 cleaners, food service workers, orderlies and home support workers in New Zealand public hospitals voted on May 1 for a single national employment agreement. Presently the workers, members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), are covered by 47 separate employment agreements.

A union spokesman said a national agreement was needed to ensure District Health Boards and contractors are "consistent and fair" in their treatment of workers. The SFWU claims to be seeking a "living wage" for all service workers in public hospitals, some of whom only just received a pay increase when the minimum wage was increased to \$10.25 on March 27. It is yet to confirm a specific demand.

In a separate dispute, nurses and community workers in primary healthcare organisations held protests on May 2 over the gap between their pay and that of their counterparts in public hospitals. The protests coincided with the latest negotiations between the NZ Nurses Organisation representing more than 3,000 workers and 650 primary health employers. The pay gap will increase to nearly \$200 a week by July.

Health managers warned workers to be "realistic" with their pay expectations, claiming that health boards were struggling to balance budgets. Contract negotiations for 2,500 junior and about 2,600 senior doctors are also underway, while 250 radiation therapists, 1,600 public and private lab workers and medical radiation technologists are also pushing for pay rises.



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