

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 May 2006

## **Indonesian workers continue action against new labour laws**

An estimated 100,000 protesters rallied outside the House of Representatives complex in Jakarta on May 3 demanding the government drop its pro-business amendments to the 2003 Labor Law. Among other things, the changes make it easier for employers to hire workers on flexible contracts and cut severance pay.

The protest was organised by the All Indonesian Workers Union with protestors bussed in from industrial zones on the outskirts of the capital. Despite a heavy police presence, demonstrators pushed down the complex's entry gate and pelted police with debris. Police fired tear gas and used water cannon to force workers to retreat.

The demonstrators had rejected earlier attempts by some legislators to dissipate their anger by pledging to oppose the new bill when it is put to parliament. One worker representative said that the protests would only cease when parliament refuses to review the law.

## **Retired teachers in China protest for improved benefits**

More than 700 former teachers from state-run kindergartens in China's Yunnan province protested outside the provincial government building on May 10. They were demanding pensions in line with primary and secondary school teachers and other civil servants. This would give them an additional 300 to 400 yuan (\$US50) per month.

One teacher said they had been fighting for improved pensions for more than two years. An official from the Yunnan Provincial Petition Office interviewed protesters' representatives but declared that neither his office nor the union would discuss the issue with the media.

## **Philippines school union files for strike**

The Silliman University Faculty Union (SUFA) filed a notice of strike with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board in Cebu City on May 5. The 287-member union said that the action was triggered by the university's violation of a 2001 collective bargaining agreement (CBA). SUFA president Vic Aguilan said that while the CBA contained a provision for pay rises based on increases in student enrolments the university refused to make the salary

adjustments and negotiate in good faith.

The strike notice process is deliberately torturous to prevent industrial action. If the Labor Board approves the application then a 15-day cooling off period follows. Union members must then vote in the presence of Department of Labor representatives.

## **Indian Water Board workers demand pay arrears**

Over 4,000 employees at the Patna Municipal Corporation (PMC) and the City Water Board in the Indian state of Bihar began an indefinite strike on May 5 after negotiations on various demands broke down. Hundreds of strikers held a sit-down protest at the corporation's main gate this week.

The workers want payment of five months salary arrears, a medical allowance increase from 50 to 100 rupees (\$US2) in line with other government staff, and the provision of a life-long family pension. The Joint Committee of PMC Workers Union and Patna Water Board Employees Union called the strike.

## **Indian jute mill workers locked out**

On May 7, management at the Nellimarla jute mill near Vizianagaram in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh locked out 5,000 workers. Management claimed it was unable to continue operations because of the unions' "recalcitrant attitude" and "disruption due to frequent strikes".

Mill workers claim the lockout is aimed at cutting already low wages, restricting workers' rights and introducing contract labour. Police broke up a protest of the locked-out workers at the mill.

## **Kashmiri public employees protest**

On May 9, nearly 100 government employees in India-controlled Kashmir protested outside the civil secretariat in Srinagar to demand an extension of the retirement age from 58 years to 60 and confirmation of daily wages. Many workers in India and Kashmir lack adequate means to retire and are forced to extend their working life to survive. State police wielding batons charged and dispersed the demonstration.

## **Sri Lankan fish-processing workers strike**

Fish-processing workers at the Apollo Marine factory, a

British-based transnational in the Wathupitiwala export-processing zone began on indefinite strike on May 2 to demand re-instatement of 11 suspended workers. They were suspended for refusing to work on May 1, which has long been a public holiday in Sri Lanka.

Employees who had taken leave on the day returned to work after being ordered back by management but then struck because of the sackings. Sri Lanka's ruling United Peoples Freedom Alliance government last month claimed that increasing military action against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam required that unions and political parties cancel planned May Day rallies and meetings.

#### **Teachers meet over pay offer**

Secondary public school teachers in Canberra attended meetings on May 8 to discuss the latest pay offer by the Australian Capital Territory government. The government claims that anything over its offer of 4 percent annually over 3 years would result in a budget blow out and could lead to the loss of 135 secondary teaching jobs.

The Australian Education Union told the media that teachers found the offer unacceptable and the union would meet the education minister on May 12 to discuss the issue.

#### **New Zealand rest home workers vote to strike**

Caregivers from 11 former Salvation Army aged-care homes around New Zealand protested on May 12 and voted overwhelmingly to strike in support of a pay rise. They also condemned the erosion of pay and conditions and the loss of a shoe allowance.

Negotiations between the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the homes' new owner ElderCare have stalled. A SFWU spokesman said that after two rounds of talks the company rejected the union's demand for a 5 percent pay increase and offered just 1 percent.

The company, whose majority shareholder is the Australia-based Macquarie Bank, refused to budge on its offer unless the government increased its bed subsidy. The SFWU claims that ElderCare is determined to get increased government subsidies while reducing staff. Staff workloads are already increasing and patient care suffering.

The best-paid caregivers currently receive just \$12.48 an hour. One caregiver at the Mercy Jenkins Home in Eltham said her pay had only increased by \$3 over the past 15 years.

#### **Strike by New Zealand rig workers called off**

The New Zealand Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) went into mediation on May 4 with representatives of five drilling companies over a pay claim. The parties were trying to avert an indefinite strike by 200 Taranaki-based oil and gas rig workers due to begin on May 7.

The drilling companies offered a 5 percent rise over 15 months in response to the union's claim for 20 percent over

12 months. The union says skilled rig workers are heading to Australia where they can earn double the New Zealand rate. A leading EPMU organiser said the negotiations had made "good progress" towards resolving the dispute and as a result the EPMU called off the strike.

#### **New Zealand postal workers campaign for pay rise**

New Zealand postal workers began a campaign for a 5 percent pay rise by holding a rally outside the Auckland Mail Centre on May 5. Most of the workers earn \$12 to \$14 an hour. NZ Post is the country's most profitable state-owned enterprise, and last year made a \$130 million profit.

The enterprise, which has not made a loss since 1987, has increased its capital value by 500 percent to \$2.5 billion since 1997. Negotiations to renew the collective agreement began this week between NZ Post and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union representing 5,000 postal workers.

#### **PNG teachers ignore union order to return to work**

Over 1,000 teachers in Papua New Guinea's National Capital District (NCD) and 6,000 teachers in the Momase region are striking in defiance of a union directive to remain at work. Teachers have been gathering at the PNG Teachers Association office in the national capital Port Moresby to pressure the union to endorse the strike.

The teachers claim they are being underpaid due to computer pay-roll discrepancies and have not received a 4 percent pay increase promised in 2004 agreement with Teaching Services Commission (TSC).

The union signed a memorandum of understanding with the TSC on May 9 giving it two months to resolve the pay issue but when union officials announced this at a stop-work meeting teachers howled them down.

Despite threats of legal action by Education Minister Michael Laimo, who declared the strike as illegal, teachers from other provinces are now joining in industrial action.

#### **French Polynesian telephone and postal workers strike**

Telecommunications and postal workers in French Polynesia have called for a strike to commence at midnight on May 9. The action was called when talks between the union and the Office des Postes et Telecommunications over improved contracts for 60 employees reached a deadlock.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**