

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 May 2006

## Vietnamese garment workers strike

Over 400 Folimex Garment Workshop employees in Ho Chi Minh walked off the job on May 12 over the non-payment of outstanding wages. The workers were initially promised monthly salaries ranging from 850,000 to 1,500,000 dong (\$US53-\$93) when the firm recruited them. These amounts, however, were only paid for the first month and then cut without notice to 200,000 to 300,000 (\$12.50-\$18.70) for one month's work.

The Vietnamese Communist Party-controlled unions have refused to back the striking garment workers even though local labour authorities are reported to have begun investigating employees' complaints. Employees also allege that they were forced to work additional hours beyond the limit stipulated under current Vietnamese labour laws.

## Bangladeshi jute workers demand unpaid salaries

Workers at the state-owned Platinum Jubilee Jute Mill in the Khalishpur industrial belt held a series of angry protests this week to demand payment of salary arrears.

Over 5,000 workers established barricades on four entry points to the mill on May 14 and laid a siege to the administration building. Electricity was cut and 40 officials, including the deputy general manager Mujibar Mallick, were locked in their offices for about ten hours. Mallick was not released until noon on May 15 and only after he agreed to ask the government for funds to pay the arrears. Mill authorities claim they need 1.2 million takas (\$US20) to pay 32 weeks' arrears.

Bangladeshi security forces and the Rapid Action Battalion were put on high alert in the Khalishpur industrial belt but workers' representatives warned of severe consequence if the security forces attacked the protest. Angry jute mill employees said that they did not have enough money to buy food and that their families were starving. They vowed to continue strike action until the payments were made.

## Indian insurance workers oppose increasing workload

Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) employees in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, staged a lunch-hour demonstration outside their offices in the Swarnalok Complex on May 16, against privatisation of the state-owned company and "the anti-people" policies of the Indian central government.

The protesting workers demanded immediate staff recruitment and opposed the government's outsourcing policies. The LIC is the largest insurance company in India with over 100 divisional offices and more than 2,000 branch offices. Employees allege that there has been no staff recruitment for the past 15 years creating heavy workloads for all. The demonstration was organised by LIC Corporation Employees' Union.

## Indian railway workers demand pay rise

Hundreds of Karnataka railway workers held a sit-down protest at Mysore Railway Station on May 16 demanding a wage rise in line with the sixth Central Wage Commission constitution and for all rail vacancies to be filled.

The demonstration organised by SouthWestern Railway Mazdoor Union also called for the recruitment of additional staff for safety related activities, such as train running and yard working, and to ensure that safe

conditions existed for all employees and commuters. In addition, the protest demanded an end to the ongoing harassment by executives.

In a separate dispute in Karnataka, around 50 workers from Mysore Paper Mills staged a sit-down protest for few hours in Bhadravati on May 15 calling for permanent employment. Employees allege they have not been paid according to Department of Administrative and Personnel Reform guidelines for the past two years.

## Sri Lankan estate employees on strike

Staff employees at 31 State Plantation Corporation estates in Kandy, Matale, Galaha Deltota and Panwila launched an indefinite strike on May 15 to demand payment of outstanding Employee Trust Fund (ETF) and Employee Provident Fund (EPF).

According to the striking workers, these payments have not been made since 2001, with approximately 350 million rupees (\$US3.5 million) in arrears. Estate employees also called for urgent repairs made to existing staff homes and for the construction of new houses.

The striking workers said that their salaries have not been increased for a long period and that pensions were not being paid to workers who had retired at the age of 55.

Gampaha district postal workers in the Western province walked out on May 14 in an unrelated action. They were demanding payment of overtime accumulated during recent local government elections.

## Sri Lankan electricity workers threaten strike action

The Ceylon Electricity Employees Union has threatened a total blackout from May 23 if Sri Lanka's ruling United People's Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government passes its Electricity Reform Bill. The proposed legislation, which will break up the state-owned power corporation and sell it to eight separate companies, was tabled on May 9. It is due to be debated on May 23.

The union, which issued the threat in a letter to the Sri Lankan president early this week, claims that several other public sector unions have expressed support for possible strike action. The UPFA government came to power claiming that it would not privatise the CEB, which has approximately 10,000 employees.

## Nurses protest outside military health centre

NSW Nurses Association (NSWNA) members from hospitals and other health facilities in the rural city of Wagga Wagga in New South Wales demonstrated outside the Kapooka defence base on May 18, as part of their campaign against the recent sacking of nurse Anne Woodward from the Kapooka Health Centre (KHC) and to defend the right of nurses to speak up in the workplace.

Woodward, who was KHC Nurse Manager, was sacked from her position on March 29. She was given an hour to clean out her desk the next day and management even threatened to call the Military Police if she was not gone by that time. A list of reasons for her removal was not provided for another 13 days and because she was technically employed by a nursing agency, RED Alliance, the Defence Force has refused to listen to her side of the story.

Woodward was sacked two days after the Howard government's Work

Choices industrial laws came into effect which makes companies with less than 100 workers exempt from unfair dismissal laws. RED Alliance claims that it does not have 100 employees and has the right to sack nurses at any time.

The nurses union has filed an unfair dismissal case with the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and called for an immediate review of management and employment practices at Kapooka Health Centre and all Defence Force medical centres.

#### **Australian and New Zealand cleaners hold joint pay rallies**

Cleaners stepped up their campaign for better pay and conditions this week with protests outside buildings owned by finance giant AMP, Australia's largest property owner. The rallies were organised by the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and held in Sydney, Melbourne and seven other cities in Australia and New Zealand.

The cleaners, most of whom are low paid contract workers, fear that their wages and conditions will further deteriorate under the Howard government's new industrial relations laws.

One cleaner told the media that work rates had been rising for the last ten years and that Australian cleaners had to do three times the floor area demanded of cleaners in America. "We can't just earn enough to live and we don't have time to do a decent job," he said. The protests were organised to coincide with an AMP shareholders meeting in Sydney.

#### **Ukrainian seamen protest at New Zealand port**

A group of Ukrainian seamen from the *Malakhov Kurgan* picketed the Port of Lyttelton on May 11 in protest over wages and conditions. The 27 crew said that they had been recruited by a Ukrainian firm in partnership with United Fisheries, a Christchurch company, with promises that they would receive \$NZ10.23 an hour, the minimum wage in New Zealand.

The seamen claimed they were paid only \$2.40 a day and that conditions on the ship were so bad they had been unable to catch fish. Part of their income depends on a percentage of the total fish take. A spokesman said that 68 people had arrived in New Zealand on the fishing contract, although none had signed a contract. They believed they had a collective agreement for employment for between three and five months.

The ship was in extremely bad repair and working conditions were unacceptable with bad food and water. Equipment breakdowns meant the vessel, which has since been condemned, was unable to process fish. Many of the group asked to be returned to the Ukraine but the captain refused to return to port and kept the ship at sea until it had run out of fresh water.

Forty-one of the group had since returned home after threats to their family in the Ukraine. The ship's navigator said "I fear for my safety when I return as I have been told I will be blacklisted, but someone has to speak up." NZ Department of Labour officials are holding mediation talks with the company and the fishermen to determine the facts of the case.

#### **Auckland polytechnic staff vote for industrial action**

Staff at Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) in south Auckland voted overwhelmingly this week to take industrial action over a pay dispute. It is the first time in over 10 years that members at MIT have been prepared to take industrial action.

The Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) has made a salary claim of 4 percent over a 12-month term but management has only offered 1.5 and 2.3 percent staggered over an 18-month term. With the current cost-price index running at 3.3 percent and petrol prices predicted to rise to over \$2 a litre, the workers regard the offer as far too low.

#### **New Zealand sewage workers strike**

Water and sewage treatment workers at the New Zealand provincial city of New Plymouth went on strike from May 15 over stalled pay talks. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) says all operators at New Plymouth District Council's water and wastewater plants would stay off the job until their pay claim is settled. The union says the claim is "negotiable", but the council's counter-offers have not

been high enough. The council wants to use contractors to cover for the striking operators and claims that the treatment plants will not shut down.

#### **New Zealand clerical health workers protest pay deal**

New Zealand clerical health workers this week protested a low pay deal struck by the Public Service Association (PSA) with the government, saying it amounted to a wage cut. The National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), a rival union, claims South Island District Health Boards (DHBs) are now forcing its members to accept the settlement.

A NUPE spokesman said it originally wanted a starting rate of \$14.90 an hour, but with the recent PSA deal the rate will only be \$11.30 an hour by 2009. In effect, the deal delivers an 8 percent real pay cut to 2,000 ward clerks, telephonists, clinical records and other medical staff. Clerical health workers say many have been bribed into accepting the PSA deal, which is now being extended to all other DHB workers.

NUPE organised a lunch-hour protest in Christchurch on Wednesday May 17, claiming that it would pressure the government to allocate more money for health sector pay settlements in Thursday's budget.

#### **Defiant PNG teachers remain on strike**

An estimated 37,000 striking teachers across Papua New Guinea (PNG) continue to ignore repeated calls by their union to return to work and have vowed to remain on strike until the government meets their demands. Over 1,000 teachers struck in the National Capital District on May 10 and were quickly joined by teachers across the country. The teachers claim they are being underpaid due to computer pay-roll discrepancies and have not received a 4 percent pay increase promised in a 2004 agreement with the Teaching Services Commission (TSC). They are also demanding an increase in their fortnightly housing allowance from 7 kina to 200 kina (\$US66).

The teachers have called for PNG Teachers Association President Tommy Hecko to resign after he ordered them back to work on May 12 because of an agreement that he made with the TSC to establish an arbitration tribunal over their claims. The teachers said this failed to resolve the issues and that they would not return to work until their entitlements were paid into their bank accounts.

Teachers in remote districts who are not on strike have rejected an Industrial Registrar ruling that the industrial action is illegal and threatened to walkout if any of their striking colleagues are terminated.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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