

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 June 2006

Asia

Indian police attack protesting petroleum workers

Police clashed with strikers from the state-owned Oil India Limited (OIL) at drilling sites in the northeastern Indian state of Assam on May 24. About 80 workers were injured with 25 strikers and their supporters arrested. The 2,000 temporary petroleum workers are demanding wage increases and bonuses.

Police wielding long bamboo canes and firing tear gas, backed up company officials and security men, attacked the strikers. The workers fought back, stoning vehicles carrying company officials and snatching radio communication sets from security men. Hundreds of villagers and other strike supporters participated in the protests.

Assam state produces about 15 percent of India's onshore crude. The two state-owned Indian exploration companies, OIL and Oil and Natural Gas Corporation Limited, supply crude oil to the state's four refineries.

Hindustan Lever workers demand better medical facilities

More than 700 workers at the Hindustan Lever factory in Dibrugarh, Assam are continuing protests which they began on May 25 with a sit-down demonstration at the factory gates.

They want the company to reestablish and improve medical facilities at the plant. A one-year agreement requiring Hindustan Lever to provide the facilities lapsed on December 22 last year but the company has made no attempt to renew it.

Employees, who have been boycotting the factory canteen and wearing protest badges to work, are planning further protests.

Indian sugar workers fight for jobs

Over 200 workers and junior officials at the Faridkot Cooperative Sugar Mills in the Punjab protested on May 24 against state government moves to privatise the mills.

The workers, who fear the move will lead to jobs losses, submitted a memo to the Deputy Commissioner outlining their concerns. A spokesman for the Joint Action Committee told protestors that the government had already appointed an administrator with instructions to sell the mills as soon as possible.

Sri Lankan apparel workers fight for dues

The predominantly female workforce at the Four Star Apparel factory in the Malwatte investment promotion zone in rural Thihariya held a sit-down protest outside the plant on May 25 over the non-payment of employee provident and trust funds. Management retaliated with a lockout.

The workers want the company to deposit amounts outstanding for the past four years into the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees Trust Fund (ETF). They also protested over the non-payment of overtime.

Following an earlier complaint to the labor office in Gampaha the

company was summoned to a meeting on May 24. Management did not bother to attend.

Health workers demand outstanding payments

Over 1,500 health workers, including nurses, at Peradeniya Teaching Hospital near Kandy, Sri Lanka have been on strike since May 30. They are demanding overtime and holiday pay due since March. The hospital director admits that 13 million rupees (\$US130,000) is outstanding but claims the necessary funds are not available. The workers have decided to continue the strike until their demands are met.

In a separate dispute, Cooperative Wholesale Establishment employees picketed the Lipton Circle in Colombo on May 31 to demand salary arrears. Workers claim that they have not been paid a wage increase granted in 2005.

Pakistani power workers on hunger strike

On May 24, workers at the Peshawar Electric Supply Company (PESCO) in Pakistan began a three-day hunger protest outside the Peshawar Press Club. There are demanding the provision of transport and daily work allowances and to be paid for off-days.

The workers also protested delays in recruitment under a newly restored appointment quota system that gives employment preference to current workers' sons. They also called on the government to scrap a number of anti-labour ordinances.

The Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Central Labor Union plans to hold further protests if employees' demands are not met.

Chinese construction workers strike over back-pay

About 400 building workers employed by the Yutong Construction Group at a shopping mall project in China's Guangzhou City began an indefinite sit-in at the company's head office on May 29. They want 4 million renminbi (\$US500,000) paid in wages owing since February 2005. Another 300 workers from Yutong Construction are owed 1 million renminbi.

In October 2005, company thugs assaulted 100 workers after they approached management for the back wages. Following mediation, the company distributed just 1.5 million renminbi to 700 workers, nowhere near the amount outstanding.

Australia and the Pacific

The State School Teachers Union of Western Australia this week threatened mass walkouts if the state Labor government attempts to discipline teachers who follow a union directive and refuse to implement new outcomes-based education (OBE). The union said the courses would not be accepted until teachers were confident about how they will be taught and assessed. Members of the Independent Education Union have pledged to follow suit.

Last week, the government threatened that Years 11 and 12 teachers who were "uncomfortable" with the new courses could be moved to

lower grades. A union spokesman said that parents “would be outraged” if the government moved experienced teachers out of upper school courses and replaced them with inexperienced staff.

A spokesman for the Western Australian Council of State School Organisations (WACSSO), which represents parents, said OBE should not be introduced if it created problems. Education Minister Ljiljana Ravlich, however, confirmed this week the government would not back down or delay the introduction of the controversial courses.

Ukrainian fishing crew on hunger strike in New Zealand

Four members of an Ukrainian fishing crew who are stranded in the port of Lyttleton, following a pay conflict with their employers, have locked themselves in a cabin and begun a hunger strike. They are demanding the New Zealand minimum wage of \$10.23 an hour and repatriation.

Earlier this month, 27 fishermen began protests aboard the Malakhov Kurgan, whose owners are in a joint venture with the Christchurch-based United Fisheries. The seafarers believed they had a collective agreement giving them three to five months’ employment but the vessel was laid up after mechanical problems forced fishing to be abandoned.

Nineteen members of the crew returned home but eight remained to fight for unpaid wages. One seafarer said the crew had been working for three months and were paid only \$2.40 a day. Conditions on the ship were so bad they had been unable to catch fish. Part of their income depended on a percentage of the total fish take.

The men have declared they will not eat until they are paid the improved wages or returned home. Those who went home had accepted some payments but the deals brokered by the Department of Labour are being investigated by the Maritime Union.

New Zealand radiation therapists to strike

Two hundred and fifty radiation therapists in New Zealand last week served notice of a two and half day strike beginning on June 9. Emergency treatment for some cancer patients will be exempted. Hospitals under six district health boards (DHBs), including in the main centres of Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch, will be affected.

It will be the third strike by radiation therapists in support of a 5 percent pay rise. The union described the June 9 action as “a very limited strike to give the employers a warning”.

While the DHBs claim that a 2002 settlement included staged increases giving most therapists a rise of 2 or 3 percent this year, a spokesperson for the Association of Professional and Executive Employees said these did not keep pace with cost of living rises.

New Zealand aged-care workers vote to strike

Aged-care workers at nine Shield Health rest homes around New Zealand have voted to strike for two days on June 9. The workers are opposing proposed cuts to pay and conditions demanded by Elder Care who bought the homes from the Salvation Army last year. The company wants to end a \$100 annual shoe allowance, cut the 10-minute handover meetings between shifts and cut the hourly rate for new caregivers by 50 cents.

A spokesman for the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) said the strike was the only recourse because no progress had been made through negotiations. Strike action by Shield Health staff, he added, was a sign of widespread tension in the aged-care industry with growing concern that low pay and skills shortages were impacting on the provision of quality care.

New Zealand doctors vote to strike over hours

More than 2,500 junior doctors in New Zealand hospitals have voted

to strike if district health boards refuse to cut back dangerously long working hours. Negotiations over six months between the Resident Doctors’ Association and health board representatives have failed to resolve the issue.

Resident doctors typically work 12 days without a break. On night shift they sometimes work seven hours a night for ten nights in a row. Junior doctors are leaving hospitals because of the poor conditions leading to greater staff shortages and increased workloads.

The union first issued notice of strike last year but then withdrew it after the employers promised changes. District health boards refuse to adopt any new system that might cost more.

Union pressures PNG teachers to end two-strike

Papua New Guinea Teachers Association (PNGTA) executive members this week met with striking teachers to persuade them to resume work. About 1,000 National Capital District (NCD) teachers struck on May 10 over an outstanding 4 percent wage increase, pay roll discrepancies and for a housing allowance increase. The strike quickly spread to all districts across the country and included around 18,500 of the 37,000 teachers employed by the government.

The teachers rejected several agreements struck between the union and the Teaching Services Commission (TSC) and called for the sacking of union president Tommy Hecko. Under the latest agreement, the TSC has promised to pay the 4 percent pay increase and fix up pay-roll discrepancies. The claim for an improved housing allowance, however, will be put before an arbitration tribunal.

The NCD teachers reluctantly agreed to end their strike after considerable pressure from the union leadership. Their colleagues in the regional districts are expected to return to classes immediately.

Tongan demonstrators clash with police

On June 1, about 5,000 demonstrators calling for constitutional change and the installation of an interim government to replace the monarchy broke through a police line in Nuku’alafa, the capital of Tonga. The National Reform Committee, which organised the protest, delivered a petition to the Princess Regent giving the monarchy 30 days to begin constitutional change and parliamentary reform or face civil disobedience.

Although the Tonga’s Public Service Association (PSA) did not participate in the protest it has threatened to call a national strike unless the calls for an interim government are met. The union gave the Palace Office two weeks to reply to its demands on May 24.



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