

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 June 2006

Asia

Sri Lankan co-op workers strike over wage arrears

Around 700 workers at the main Cooperative Wholesale Establishment (CWE) in Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on June 2, demanding unpaid salaries for May and the payment of allowances for two months. The operations of seven state organisations that share the CWE building came to a standstill because the strike cut off the electricity and water supply.

On June 6, workers in CWE storage facilities throughout the country supported the strikers and busloads from Galle, Matara, Ambalangoda, Hingurakgoda, Badulla, Anuradhapura and Pollonaruwa converged on head office to join protestors.

During the last presidential elections, President Mahinda Rajapakse promised to revive the CWE but workers claim their conditions have gone from bad to worse. The government also plans to retrench 350 through a so-called voluntary retirement scheme that pays only meagre compensation.

Indian childcare teachers demand unpaid salaries

On June 5, hundreds of anganwadi (childcare) teachers and assistants in Bijapur, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, marched on the Deputy Commissioner's office to protest. They demanded the immediate payment of wage arrears pending for eight months.

The protestors also called for regular employment arrangements, on-time payment of salaries, the provision of houses and a program for the construction of childcare centres. The protest—organised by Anganwadi Teachers Association—closed most government-run kindergartens across the district.

Kerala journalists fight for pay rise

Journalists in the southern Indian state of Kerala protested at the Martyrs' Column in Palayam on June 5, demanding an improved pay scale and a 25 percent interim relief allowance. The Kerala Union of Working Journalists and the Kerala Newspaper Employees Federation Action Council called the protest.

In a separate dispute, on June 2 workers from the Co-operative Sugar Mills in Sheron, Punjab marched seven kilometres from the mill to the city to protest the non-payment of wages for the past five months. Traffic was held up for hours after workers and their families sat down on the road.

Chinese workers bashed for demanding back-pay

On May 31, a horde of company-hired thugs attacked and bashed 100 workers demonstrating outside the Wangjing International Commercial Centre. At least ten workers were hospitalised.

The workers were demanding a total of 1 million yuan (\$US125,000) to cover wages not paid since May. Their employer, a Chinese subcontractor, Construction Group Bureau 4-Company 1, refuses to pay. It claims it has not received 4 million yuan owed to it by the main South Korean contractor, JD Company, which is building part of the international centre project. The labour department and police are supposedly mediating the dispute.

Australia and the Pacific

Postal workers protest wage cut

Postal workers in Melbourne protested outside the residence of Australia Post CEO Graeme John last week over loss of pay. By changing starting times for part-time workers from 6 a.m. to 6.30, the company has cut out a penalty rate, reducing take home pay by 15 percent. The workers are paid a base rate of just \$300 a week.

A workers' spokesperson said the pay cut for people who could ill afford it was "obscene" considering that

“some of the managers got a 60 percent pay rise last year”. She claimed that on top of cutting pay, management was making part-timers “work harder and faster”.

Sydney cleaners protest poor pay and conditions

Office cleaners and their supporters in Sydney protested at the downtown 17-storey building owned by Investa on June 2 over pay and conditions in the industry. The protest was part of the “Clean Start—Fair Deal for Cleaners” campaign.

The protestors handed out leaflets to office workers leaving the building and visited staff in offices on every floor to explain their case and win support. Similar protests were held earlier at several other major city buildings. Cleaners are ruthlessly exploited by cleaning contractors who pay as little as \$13.50 an hour, even for evening shifts, while continually increasing workloads to cut costs.

New Zealand doctors set strike dates

The Resident Doctors Association confirmed this week that more than 2,500 junior doctors in New Zealand public hospitals will go on strike for five days from June 15. The association had originally issued a notice of strike over heavy workloads, staff shortages and poor working conditions last year but withdrew it after the employers promised changes. Since then, the District Health Boards (DHBs) ruled out improvements because of increased costs.

Resident doctors can be required to work 12 days without a break and 7 hours a night for 10 nights in a row when on night shift. Many are leaving hospitals because of poor conditions, leading to increased staff shortages. The industrial advocate for the country’s 21 DHBs denounced the strike as “absolutely outrageous” despite the health boards having reneged on the earlier promise to implement change.

Protests over probation bill

New Zealand unions began a protest campaign last week against legislation proposed by the opposition National Party to introduce a 90-day probation period for all new employees. During the probation periods, workers could be dismissed without reason, with no recourse to a mediation service or the Employment Court.

The Takapuna office of National MP Wayne Mapp was picketed on June 2 by members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU). Mapp, the

National’s industrial relations spokesman, drafted the bill, which passed its first reading in parliament in March. Although the governing Labour Party opposed it, United Future, a Labour ally in government, and a majority of Maori Party MPs supported it.

While the unions are threatening mass protests unless the bill is withdrawn, any action will be kept within the existing political and industrial relations framework. The EPMU, a key supporter of the Labour Party, has not demanded that Prime Minister Clark discipline United Future for supporting the bill.

Weekly protests are planned for Auckland, a demonstration will be held in Whangarei on June 21 and a mass rally outside parliament on July 20.

New Caledonia port workers maintain two-week blockade

Port workers, members of the Kanak USTKE union, are refusing to end a two-week blockade of Port Noumea aimed at preventing international shipping companies entering the port. The workers fear the companies will cost 200 local jobs if allowed to compete for sea routes between New Caledonia and Australia.

USTKE leader Gerard Jodar said the blockade would remain despite the New Caledonia government labelling the strike illegal and threatening to call in French security forces to “retake” the port.

Meanwhile, on June 5 about 8,000 workers and supporters of USTKE gathered at an international environment day rally in Noumea to protest damage by multinational companies and in particular the Goro Nickel project. Two months ago, the indigenous group Kanak Rheebeu Nuu protested at the nickel mine site, opposing environmental damage to their tribal grounds.



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