

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 June 2006

## Asia

### Bank workers protest sackings

A fast by 175 casual workers sacked from the Sri Lanka Central Bank entered its fourth week on June 13. The workers have been camped outside Colombo's Fort railway station since May 22 demanding reinstatement. They were dismissed in December last year when they demanded permanent employment. Some had worked at the bank for eight years.

In March this year, the sacked workers held a sit-down protest at the residence of President Mahinda Rajapakse in Colombo. They had planned to hand a petition to Rajapakse but were attacked by police and a number were injured and some arrested.

A workers' spokesman rejected management claims that the casuals were not Central Bank employees saying that although they were recruited through a manpower company, "We were interviewed by the bank and we were paid by the bank."

Ruwan Indika, 26, recruited in 2002, told the WSWs that casual employees at the bank worked almost every day of the year for a meager daily payment hoping to be made permanent: "But our dream was shattered. Losing my job is a great blow to our family." Indika and his family now depend on his elder brother who earns only 350 rupees a day as a fish seller.

### Sri Lankan port workers demand salary increase

Around 1,500 port workers protested at the main entrance of the Colombo port on June 7 demanding a 3,000-rupee (\$US30) monthly salary increase. Other demands include cost of living index pay adjustments and improved increments.

The workers distributed a leaflet accusing management of harassment, including attempts to restrict union activity. A union spokesman said the government had failed to respond to repeated requests for a salary increase. Around 14,000 workers are employed at the Colombo port and are covered by 16 trade unions.

On the same day, July 7, Central Postal Exchange workers in Colombo began a go-slow protesting the non-payment of benefits that were due to sorting officers in line with a recent government circular on salary improvement. Around 200,000 letters and parcels are piling up every day due to the action. The workers sort out around 450,000 letters and parcels daily.

In a separate dispute, workers at Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) went on strike on June 8 opposing the government's plan to allow the Indian Oil Company to directly import oil into Sri Lanka and dictate fuel prices. They also demanded the payment of salary arrears.

### Sri Lankan jewelry workers protest sackings

Around 65 workers at German-owned jewelry manufacturer AMS International in Nawala, Rajagiriya on outskirts of Colombo picketed the plant on June 14. The action is part of an ongoing campaign to demand the reinstatement of eight sacked workers.

### Indian postal workers protest privatisation

Postal workers held a sit-down protest outside Shimoga post office in Karnataka state on June 7. The demonstration was part of national action organised by the National Federation for Postal Employees (NFPE) against a proposed amendment to the Postal Act aimed at facilitating the privatisation of postal services.

In a separate dispute, tailors held a daylong protest on June 11 near the State Guest House in Chennai, Tamil Nadu. They are pressing for a six-point charter of demands, including pension benefits and gratuity payments. The workers are members of the All India Tailors Welfare Association.

### Bangladeshi silk workers demand factory reopening

Around 100 workers retrenched from the Rajshahi Silk Factory demonstrated for three hours outside the Rajshahi mayor's residence on June 9 demanding the re-opening of the factory. The plant closed in 2003 with the loss of 1,000 jobs.

The workers chanted slogans demanding unpaid salaries and accused the local authorities of handing land belonging to the silk plant over to certain politicians. Protesters dispersed after the mayor told them the factory would reopen soon.

### Indonesian security workers occupy

On June 12, around 150 workers occupied Securicor Indonesia offices demanding the company comply with a Supreme Court directive to reinstate employees it illegally dismissed in April 2005 and provide back pay. The company sacked the security guards when they went on strike over whether they would be retained as permanents with the same rights following a merger of Group 4 Falck with Securicor.

Rather than giving any guarantees, the company fired 238 striking workers in Jakarta and another 24 in Surabaya. Those sacked were not even given severance pay. The Indonesian Supreme Court issued its reinstatement directive on June 8 supporting previous orders issued by lower courts.

## Australia and the Pacific

### Schoolteachers protest against OBE plans

Around 200 high school teachers and students protested outside Western Australian (WA) state parliament on June 14 against the Labor government's plan to introduce Outcomes-Based-Education (OBE) courses for Year 11 and 12 students in 2007. The union has stated that the courses would not be accepted until teachers were

confident about how they will be taught and assessed.

While state premier Alan Carpenter met teachers' union representatives this week, he only offered concessions on when the OBE courses would be introduced and some alterations to the course structure. This did not satisfy teachers who will impose bans on teaching OBE if it is introduced.

#### **New Zealand doctors hold first national strike**

More than 2,500 junior doctors in New Zealand public hospitals began a five-day strike on June 15. Three days of last-ditch talks between the Resident Doctors Association and representatives of 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) failed to avert the first nationwide strike of resident doctors in the country's history.

The union had originally issued a notice of strike over heavy workloads, staff shortages and poor working conditions last year but withdrew it after employers promised changes. The DHBs then ruled out improvements because of increased costs.

Resident doctors are expected to work 10 hours a night for 7 consecutive days once every 4 weeks. Annual wage packages are around \$70,000 including superannuation, holiday pay and cost of training allowance. Because of the long working hours the doctors' hourly pay rate works out around \$21 or less.

The union rejected a key DHB demand to set up a joint committee comprised equally of doctors and health board representatives to review working hours, pay and training saying doctors should negotiate their own terms and conditions, "rather than having them dictated to us by a committee".

In a statement to a parliamentary select committee on the eve of the strike, Labour's Finance Minister Michael Cullen warned workers not to expect across the board wage rises this year. He singled out striking workers in the health sector claiming the government "can't afford" pay rises even to compensate for cost of living increases.

#### **New Zealand radiation therapists strike**

New Zealand radiation therapists, members of the Association of Professional and Executive Staff (Apex), went on strike from June 9 to June 14 as part of an ongoing pay dispute. Following the strike, workers maintained a ban on overtime for four nights and banned working between 5 p.m. and 7.30 a.m.

District Health Boards refuse to move from their offer of between 2 and 3 percent pay rises through a system of staggered increases agreed to in 2002. The union claims that in today's terms the increase amounts to a zero pay rise.

The 250 therapists walked off the job for 14 hours last month after their claim for a 5 percent cost-of-living rise was rejected. They claim the increase is necessary to retain skilled staff and keep pace with cost-of-living rises. While the strike could lead to a backlog of up to three weeks for some 500 cancer patients undergoing radiation therapy, Apex members agreed to treat more than 150 life-threatening cases.

#### **New Zealand rest home workers' strike postponed**

A series of strikes by 250 staff in ten ElderCare residential homes across New Zealand scheduled to begin on June 9 were postponed after the company signaled it would consider changes to its plan to cut pay and working conditions.

ElderCare, who bought the homes from the Salvation Army last year, wants to cut out a \$100 annual shoe allowance, abolish

10-minute handover meetings between shifts and cut the hourly rate for new caregivers by 50 cents. A Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU) spokesman said the union needed to speak with members about "some changes" to ElderCare's position before it called off further planned strike action altogether.

#### **PNG Telecom workers threaten strike action**

Papua New Guinea (PNG) Telecommunications Workers Union members in Port Moresby unanimously voted on June 8 to strike if the government refuses to dispense with Australian-based consulting firm KPMG. Union president Bob Magaru threatened a national strike if the government does not comply.

KPMG has been contracted by the government to oversee privatisation in all state entities such as Telecom, PNG Harbours Limited and PNG Power. Telecommunication workers are also angry over the alleged appointment of a KPMG consultant as head of finance at Telecom. The union gave no deadline for the government to respond.

#### **National blackout threatened over grievances**

Members of the PNG Energy Workers Union voted at a lunch-time meeting on June 8 to give PNG Power Limited (PPL) 14 days to resolve grievances over individual contracts, allowances, new disciplinary guidelines and the involvement of consultants in disciplinary matters.

They demanded management cancel a contract with Island Pacific Consultant, an Australian consulting firm engaged to restructure PPL, and replace PPL's new Australian CEO with a local official. A union spokesman threatened a national blackout if the demands were not addressed. The dispute will be lodged with an industrial registrar.

#### **Noumea port workers strike after police attack**

New Caledonia's Confederation of Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) began a general strike on June 13 to oppose the entry of Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) to the Noumea-Australian sea route. The USTKE claims entry of the company could see 200 local seafarers' jobs axed.

The strike was called after French riot police broke up a three-week blockade by USTKE members that stopped an MSC ship being offloaded. Seventeen people were arrested including USTKE president Gerard Jodar. The strike has affected bus services in Noumea and domestic air services.



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