

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 July 2006

Asia

Indian lignite workers strike over privatisation

Over 19,000 employees at the state-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu began an indefinite strike on July 4. They want the Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government to abandon its decision to sell 10 percent of the company.

Prior to striking, thousands of NLC workers held protests on June 26. They also rejected an attempt by Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi to bribe them into accepting the sell-off by offering employee shares.

The corporation is the leading lignite mining and lignite-based power generating company in India. The strike action, which has almost halved aggregate power generation, threatens power supplies to all of southern India.

The Joint Action Council, which is organising the strike, has agreed to supply power to Neyveli township hospitals and households and maintain water pumps in deep mines. Emergency service and paramedical staff have been exempted from taking part in the strike.

Inspector-General of Police (North Zone) K. Radhakrishnan has setup a camp at Neyveli to monitor the situation and over 3,000 police from a dozen districts have been relocated to the area. The DMK-led state government has also deployed the Central Industrial Security Police Force. NLC employees struck for eight days in 2002 against the then BJP-led government's moves to privatise the company.

Indian bank employees strike

Canara Bank employees in India walked off the job on June 29 for a range of demands, including staff recruitment, preference to family members when staff members who die in service are replaced, and seniority for promotions. Workers want an interest rate reduction on staff loans, restoration of 9.5 percent interest on provident funds and no outsourcing. The bank has 2,508 branches nationally.

The strikers held a sit-down protest outside bank branches in Malappuram in Kerala and Tiruchi in Tamil Nadu. The Canara Bank Staff Union organised the strike.

Computer teachers demand regular pay scales

Hundreds of computer teachers and computer faculty members throughout the Punjab demonstrated outside the school education director-general's office in Chandigarh on June 30. They want the state government to provide regular salary scales in line with those of other schoolteachers.

The computer teachers, who are employed on a contractual basis, must work 48 periods a week, have computer education degrees and be prepared to do a range of jobs, including clerical work. They are paid just 3,960 rupees (\$US88) a month with some only receiving 3,080 rupees.

According to a teachers' union spokesman, the state government is profiting from computer education in many schools. Students up to middle level are required to pay 20 rupees a month for mandatory computer studies. In secondary schools, the fee is 25 rupees.

Teachers have also complained about working conditions. One teacher

said: "We only allowed 10 days casual leave a year and treated like bonded labour in most of the schools. In the case of illness, we are made to take leave without pay."

Bangladesh garment workers protest sacking

On July 1, thousands of garment workers demonstrated for hours at Purba Sheorapara in the national capital Dhaka against the sacking of 28 garment colleagues and closure of the SQ Sweater factory. The demonstration stopped all traffic on the busy route from Mirpur section 10 to Agargaon crossing.

Employees claim that the factory owner sacked the workers and closed the plant for 15 days after being served with a 9-point log of claims for improved conditions to be met by June 29. Workers from five other garment factories in the area joined the demonstration.

Sri Lankan non-academic university employees strike over pay

Non-academic staff at Sri Lankan universities struck on July 4 to demand the resolution of salary anomalies and for increases promised in the government's budget proposals. The salary anomalies remain, despite strike action earlier this year and pledges by successive government to resolve the issue.

In a separate dispute, contract workers from farms, botanical gardens and research institutes run by the Department of Agriculture across the country rallied on June 30 outside the department's head office in Peradeniya near Kandy. They want job confirmation and permanency. There are around 3,500 contract workers, many have 20 years service with the department.

Philippine plantation workers picket

Agricultural workers at a 14,000-hectare plantation in South Cotabato owned by multinational company Dole Philippines (DoleFil) picketed the company's office on June 28. A spokesman for Amado Kadena, the local union, said that DoleFil management had acted in bad faith during negotiations for a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

He said management refused to discuss the more than 70 claims, including a wage increase and regularisation of contractual employees, presented by the union. Rather than discuss these issues the company attempted to withdraw benefits from previous CBAs. Management also wants to increase the number of casual workers.

Australia and the Pacific

Construction workers face fines over strike

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members from the Perth to Mandurah rail project in Western Australia face hefty fines and penalties for participating in a 12-day strike in late February this year.

The Howard government's Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) filed legal action in the Federal Court this week against 107 of the more than 400 workers who walked out over the sacking of CFMEU site delegate Peter Ballard by the contractor Leighton Kumagi.

The 107 workers could be fined \$22,000 each. Eight-two of them could also face additional penalties of up to \$6,600 for breaching a total strike

ban which was imposed on the project by the Industrial Relations Commission at the behest of ABCC and project contractors.

Telstra staff protest over job cuts

About 100 Telstra dispatch operators, member of the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, held a stop-work outside the company's Parramatta office on July 7 over the axing of 130 positions at the site. Telstra said that displaced workers could apply and compete for 63 jobs in Newcastle with a pay cut of \$10,000 per annum.

Australia's largest telecommunication corporation plans to eliminate 12,000 positions before the federal government's remaining 50.1 percent share of Telstra is sold off.

Tasmanian ambulance workers protest work changes

Ambulance workers throughout Tasmania voted for industrial bans last week to stop the state government stripping them of road accident rescue responsibilities. The services will be given to the Tasmanian Fire Service.

Officers in the state's north and northwest also rejected an offer of talks by the Health and Human Services Minister Lara Gidding. Bans have been imposed on a planned counter-terrorism exercise and on-call work in outer urban areas.

In a separate dispute, Victorian ambulance workers voted to strike within a month if an agreement is not reached over breaches of working conditions by the Melbourne Ambulance Service.

New Zealand rail union returns to talks

The Rail and Maritime Transport Union and rail lines company Ontrack went into mediation on July 5 to break an impasse in a pay dispute. Nearly 500 track maintenance workers nationwide have been refusing to work overtime or attend nighttime callouts in support of a pay claim.

The track workers are the lowest paid in the industry, earning on average \$30,000 a year before tax. An RMUT spokesman said the pay claim of up to 17.6 percent and 20 percent on allowances would bring pay up to the average rate for similar skilled work. Ontrack offered 4.5 percent and threatened to pass on cost increases to the traveling public.

The bans have severely curtailed rail services, particularly in the Wellington region, and the main trunk rail service between Wellington and Auckland, which was also cancelled for the first week of the school holidays. Unattended problems on two rail sections in the North Island caused freight trains to be cancelled last weekend and other services were delayed.

Aviation workers impose overtime bans

Workers at the South Island regional aviation firm Safe Air in New Zealand have imposed a total overtime ban over stalled wage negotiations. A 14-day notice of the ban was given by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which has 188 members at the company mainly in aviation maintenance.

The decision to impose the ban was made at a stop-work meeting on June 30 and follows a lunchtime protest outside Safe Air's Woodbourne premises on June 28. The union has been negotiating since January for a collective agreement. Workers have rejected the company's offer of a 2.65 percent wage rise saying it does not even cover inflation.

The ban will continue indefinitely, with the possibility of strike action. The EPMU, however, has promised to cancel the industrial action if "progress" is made on the claim.

Papua New Guinea Telecom workers protest job cuts

About 200 Telecom PNG employees held a sit-in protest on June 29, followed by a stop-work meeting the next day, over management's refusal to reveal how many jobs will be eliminated in a planned company restructure.

Bob Magaru of the PNG Communications Workers Union said management refused to admit that there will be any redundancies but workers interviewed by the *Post Courier* newspaper claim that up to 1,000 of the 1,800 employed at Telecom could be affected.

PNG university staff walk out again

On July 5, both academic and non-academic staff at PNG's Goroka University walked off the job for the second time in a month over conflicts with the university board. Some staff returned to work after delivering a petition to the university chancellor demanding dismissal of the vice chancellor, Dr Rawlence.

The petition also levelled mismanagement allegations and abuse of powers against two other pro-vice chancellors, Dr Gairo Onagi and Dr Margaret Obi. It called for the current management to step aside until an internal independent inquiry completed investigations and for the appointment of a caretaker administrator during the inquiry. The petitioners gave the university board 48 hours to satisfy their demands.

The university staff walked off the job for a week in mid-June after the Minister of Higher Education Don Polye sacked two chancellors. Staff only returned after interim council members announced that they were close to completing investigations into management issues and would begin drafting a report.

PNG water utility workers threaten to strike

The PNG Waterboard Workers Union national executive has given management 14 days from July 2 to respond favourably to outstanding grievances, otherwise they will turn off water to 11 centres. The Waterboard supplies Lae City, Madang, Wewak, Kundiawa, Mount Hagen, Alotau, Kavieng, Lorengau, Popondetta, Rabaul and Kokopo.

The union wants management to address issues relating to unpaid overtime, overtime duty hours, a housing allowance increase and delays in the implementation of an enterprise agreement. It is also demanding an end to ongoing sexual harassment of female employees by a number of senior officers in outlying provinces.

Emperor Mines renege on redundancy deal

Emperor Gold Mines Limited announced on July 3 that 99 hourly-paid workers and 25 staff at its Vatukoula mine would lose their jobs this week. They will receive a package of three months pay plus two weeks for each year of service.

Fiji Mine Workers Union secretary Satish Chandra has threatened industrial action, stating that the company was in breach of an April "master agreement" between the government, union and mine management. The union had agreed to end a strike and allow 300 sackings at the mine, providing a redundancy package was negotiated before the dismissals. The company, however, has repeatedly refused to negotiate. The union wants a redundancy package of six months pay, plus two weeks pay for each year of service.



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