

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 April 2007

## Asia

### **Filipino garment workers maintain picket after seven months**

Striking garment workers employed in the Cavit Export Processing Zone (CEPZ), about 15 kilometres south of Manila, are struggling to maintain a picket that began last September. Municipal and CEPZ police have blocked workers attempting to join the picket or deliver food to the strikers. The police action has reduced the picket to a handful of people.

The workers struck on August 30, 2006 after the Korean-owned garment manufacturer Chong Won Fashion locked out a number of employees in a dispute for a new work contract. Throughout 2006, workers were involved in a series of lengthy disputes over the status of the union, the United Workers at Chong Won (NMCW-Ind), unfair labour practices, the company's refusal to bargain, and discrimination against union officers and members, including arbitrary suspension and sacking.

Following the August strike, the company sacked 117 workers and replaced them with contract or casual labour. Several workers' rights organisations are appealing to Wal-Mart, which buys Chong Won garments, to put pressure on the company to recognise the union and begin meaningful negotiations.

### **Sri Lankan casual health workers on strike**

An indefinite strike by 15 casual health workers at the Embilipitiya Hospital in southern Sri Lanka entered its fifth day on March 30. The workers have been employed at the hospital for one and half years but management refuses to make them permanent staff.

Three workers have climbed to the top of a water tank at the hospital and are holding a hunger strike while others continue a similar action in the hospital premises. At least three of the fasting workers were admitted to hospital after their condition worsened.

### **Tamilnadu police attack protesting workers**

On April 4, police wielding long bamboo canes charged and dispersed 200 people holding a sit-down protest in support of workers on strike at a private company on the

outskirts of Coimbatore in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu. The protestors threw stones in retaliation. Several protestors were injured in the police attack

More than 700 workers are on strike in opposition to the forced transfer of six union officials. The police have intervened to stop workers blocking strike breakers. Two women workers poured kerosene over their bodies and threatened to set themselves alight but were snatched away by the police. Additional police have been deployed around the plant.

In a separate dispute, insurance workers in Coimbatore demonstrated in front of the Regional Office on March 28 against the government's move to introduce a comprehensive Insurance Bill undermining workers' conditions and its decision to allow foreign direct investment in the insurance sector to increase from 26 percent to 49 percent.

### **Indian postal workers vote for pay strike**

Postal workers in East Singhbhum and other districts of Jharkhand, India voted unanimously this week for an indefinite strike on April 24 to demand the national government implement the Sixth Pay Commission recommendation to increase salaries. The workers, members of the Akhil Bharatiya Dak Karmchari Sangh (ABDKS), are also seeking a time-bound promotion system, the filling of all vacant posts, a transportation allowance and other employee welfare schemes.

Unlike other government employees, postal workers have not received pay and dearness allowance increases. A union spokesman said the central government had rejected the commission recommendation in order to cut costs. "We have no choice but to go on an indefinite strike," he said. Sona Ram Mardy, a postal employee, said workloads in post offices had increased and complained "the government has forced its employees to sell tea, mutual funds, contraceptive and other products".

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Australian tyre workers return to work**

Around 450 production and maintenance workers at tyre-maker Bridgestone returned to work on April 1 after a three-

day lockout at the plant in Adelaide, South Australia. The dispute, over a new enterprise work agreement, remains unresolved and management continues to refuse to negotiate with the three unions involved—the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communication Electrical and Plumbing Union.

The dispute began one month ago when workers walked off the job for four hours and imposed overtime bans. They are seeking a 12 percent pay increase over three years but the company is offering only 6 percent, plus a cash incentive and productivity bonuses. For the past six years, workers at the plant have received pay increases marginally close to the cost-of-living index. A LHMU spokesman said last week: “The company’s offer is a step backwards as far as the cost of living is concerned.”

#### **Alcoa workers threaten strike over asbestos dangers**

Around 200 workers employed by Alcoa at its Wagerup aluminium refinery in Western Australia’s south west this week threatened to take further strike action over a potential asbestos dust contamination. On March 23, the workers stopped work for four hours after being informed that asbestos fibres may have blown into the workplace from an adjacent site where energy company Alinta is building a power plant.

The asbestos source was found on March 9 in packaging for pipes which had been imported from India as part of construction materials. Construction on the site was cancelled for 10 days, but according to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), the Alcoa workers were kept in the dark over the contamination threat.

The Alcoa workers are demanding the company provide each of them with a letter confirming the asbestos incident occurred and taking responsibility for any related health problems that may arise. They also called for measures to ensure the workplace is free of asbestos dust. A union spokesman told a meeting of 30 Alcoa shop stewards that the company had failed to meet the demands.

#### **New Zealand food processing workers walk out**

About 150 workers employed by New Zealand food company Heinz-Wattie’s struck for 24 hours on March 30 and picketed the company’s Hastings factory. Some workers were told they had lost their jobs because of the strike.

The casual workers, employed on food processing lines, decided to strike after the breakdown of bargaining talks between the Service and Food Workers Union and Allied Workforce, a labour contract firm. Union members had earlier held an unpaid stop-work meeting and voted to strike if an agreement could not be reached.

They are seeking to have a collective work contract in place before the season ends in two weeks’ time. This is

essential to protect workers’ conditions and pay rates before the new season begins at the end of the year. Pay disputes at the plant have increased since Allied Workforce took over hiring casual workers for Heinz-Wattie’s last year. Talks were held with Allied Workforce last September and again last month, but no agreement was reached over pay rates and other issues.

#### **Fijian public sector workers vote for nationwide strike**

In a series of ballots conducted by the Fijian public sector unions, members have voted overwhelmingly for a nationwide strike over pay cuts. The strike ballots were called after the interim administration installed by the country’s military regime decided to reduce civil servants’ pay by 5 percent and lower the retirement age from 60 to 55 years.

So far, members of the main public sector unions—the Public Service Association, the Nursing Association and the Teachers Union—have voted for industrial action. The Teachers Association concluded a ballot of its 4,000 members this week and a number of other unions are still to do so.

The vote to strike came despite mounting threats from the military. Last week, Fijian police used emergency regulations to stop the annual meeting of the National Union of Public Workers in Suva. The Public Service Commission has declared that in the event of strikes, police and soldiers will carry out the work of strikers. The military has also warned that strikers could be sacked.

The Fiji Trades Union Congress (FTUC) is manoeuvring to head off opposition to the military regime. After meeting with the labour minister and the public service commission minister last week, the FTUC declared that “jumping up and down” was not the answer to “the problems being faced by the public servants”. Having publicly criticised the holding of strike ballots, the FTUC has now called a meeting for next week in a bid to head off industrial action.

In two other disputes, members of the Air Traffic Management Association and the Fiji Electricity Allied Workers Union have threatened to strike over outstanding grievances with Airports Fiji Limited and the Fiji Electricity Authority.



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