

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 April 2007

## All India Radio and Doordarshan workers on hunger strike

A strike and fasting protest by workers at All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan in Tirunelveli in the state of Tamilnadu entered its sixth day on April 15. They are demanding management revoke its decision to arbitrarily transfer radio announcer G. Pandi who worked for AIR in Tirunelveli.

Workers also demand an end to the management victimisation of other employees and the release of bonuses and transport allowances that have been withheld for a protracted period. The workers are continuing to protest on the busy South Bypass Road, Vannarpettai in Palayamkottai.

## Tamilnadu sugar mill workers strike over employment status

Around 205 temporary workers, including 30 women, at the government-owned Amaravathi Cooperative Sugar Mills in Udumalpet in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu held a 24-hour sit-in strike on April 12. The sit-in is part of an ongoing campaign, with a number of earlier protests, for permanency.

Workers say they have been working in the factory for more than two decades and began demanding permanency 10 years ago. Presently the mill has 237 vacancies for permanent workers. The workers, members of the Labor Welfare Union, are threatening an indefinite strike.

## Government hostel workers demand permanency

Around 150 daily-wage workers from Raichur District Government Hostels held a sit-down protest on April 16. Raichur is in the Indian state of Karnataka. The workers are demanding permanency for all daily wage government hostel workers and the payment of minimum wage rates.

They also claim that the Social Welfare Department fails to pay salaries to hostel workers on a regular basis. The protestors handed over a memorandum containing their demands to the assistant secretary of the zilla panchayat, in Raichur. They are members of the Raichur District Government Hostels Daily-wage Workers Union.

## Vietnamese garment workers strike for pay and conditions

Over 700 workers employed at Quinmax International Company, a Taiwanese-owned garment factory in Vietnam's Thua Thien-Hue province, struck on April 11 to demand better pay and conditions. They are paid only \$US44-\$47.5 a month. Social and health insurance, New Year bonus and maternity leave allowance are normally paid late or not at all. The company director met with workers to resolve the dispute but a union leader later said they did not believe his promise that he would meet their demands in two weeks.

The strike is part of a wave of industrial unrest in the province. Over 3,000 furniture workers struck on April 9, as well as thousands of manufacturing workers, over low wages and poor conditions. Textile

workers at All Super were in dispute over excessive overtime of 1,000 hours annually and the company's plan to force them to work Sundays to fill contracts.

Matini, a Japanese chemical manufacturer, was forced to give its workers a 15-day holiday and now has to negotiate further grievances. Since January, nearly 30,000 workers have taken part in 16 walkouts, mostly wildcat strikes, in the province.

After a wave of strikes last year, the government raised the minimum wage in foreign firms by 25 percent. Wages in Vietnam are 30 percent lower than in parts of China but foreign investors have warned they will leave Vietnam if wages go higher. In response, the government is threatening to pass legislation to force workers who participate in "illegal" wildcat strikes to compensate the employer for lost income.

## Fish processing workers strike over safety and wages

Over 200 workers employed at the part state-owned seafood processing company Camimex Import Export on Vietnam's southern tip, struck on April 13 over unsafe working conditions. They are also demanding improved wages and claim the current monthly wage of 900,000 dong (\$US50) is too low.

After unsuccessful negotiations with management, the strikers went to the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) requesting intervention. Camimex was recently partly-privatised, with the government retaining 51 percent ownership. It employs 1,700 permanent workers and 1,000 casuals. There have been previous strikes at the company over wages and safety.

## Freeport miners strike for new work contract

Around 3,000 miners employed by PT Freeport in Indonesia's Papua province struck on April 17 after the mine management refused to negotiate a new two-year collective agreement with the union Tongoi. The union covers Freeport workers of Papua origin.

The workers' 27-point log of claims includes demands for a greater involvement by Papuans in the management of the mine, a 250 percent wage increase and an end to discrimination. They also want more career opportunities for native workers, an improved recruiting system and better pensions.

The mine employees marched 64 kilometres from the Grasberg mine site to the town of Timika where they were joined by other workers, swelling the numbers to 5,000. They protested outside the Freeport office as armoured vehicles and riot police stood guard. The protesters, carrying banners reading, "If not now, then when?" and "Employees demand justice" marched to the Mimika Provincial Legislative Council building.

Legislators met with the workers and directed both management and Tongoi to meet at Freeport's office in Timika on April 19 for further negotiations. Despite press releases by the mine management claiming

the dispute has been settled, all production activity has ceased.

#### **WA hospital workers strike over staff shortages**

Cleaners, caterers and orderlies at Port Hedland Regional Hospital, in Western Australia, went on strike on April 16 and April 18 over staff shortages. For months, the workers have been asking management to fill vacancies and employ casuals to address the problem of increased workloads. The hospital is the main emergency medical centre in the Pilbara mining region.

A spokesperson for the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, which covers the hospital workers, said there was “a pretty serious understaffing issue going on at Port Hedland hospital” and “we think there’s been some pretty serious mismanagement”.

A management spokesman said the hospital was “dealing with the concerns about rostering and staff shortages”. But nothing has been done, except to hold a series of meetings and discussions that failed to resolve the issue.

#### **Manufacturing workers strike over compulsory overtime**

Around 50 workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, went on strike for 24 hours on April 13 against plans by P&H MinePro Services in Bassendean, Western Australia to impose a 46-hour working week.

The company wants an agreement that compels workers to perform eight hours compulsory overtime each week, on any day determined by the employer. The workers say they are not prepared to give up family and leisure time. Around 86 percent of the workforce agreed to a hold secret ballot on the agreement but this was rejected by the company.

David Polgaze, a machinist at P&H, said workers were concerned that the development could lead to the eventual scraping of the current 38-hour week, forcing them to work more than 46 hours weekly.

#### **New Zealand radiographers’ strikes continue**

Radiographers at seven New Zealand district health boards (DHBs) began a series of work bans on April 16. Overnight bans on radiographic work, including x-rays, CT and MRI scans and ultrasound, were placed in Southland, Rotorua, Taupo, Tauranga, Whakatane and Otago hospitals, while Hutt Valley radiographers walked out on April 17 for 4 days. The bans are expected to continue into next month.

The industrial action is part of a campaign to gain pay parity. The radiographers receive 25 percent less than their colleagues working for other DHBs but employers say the increase needed to establish parity is “unaffordable” and have offered only 12 percent.

The Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex), representing 80 percent of radiographers, also issued notice it will begin one-hour rolling strikes in Canterbury early next month in addition to work bans and weekend strikes. Following talks this week, Apex also threatened a nationwide strike, claiming that a new employer proposal for a national agreement was an attempt to drag down working conditions for radiographers across the board.

Next week, medical laboratory scientists with all DHBs and the Blood Service will walk off the job for two days, the second strike within three weeks. Doctors, nurses and hospital food and service workers are making little headway in pay and conditions negotiations and may take industrial action.

Meanwhile, 1,200 health support workers employed by Healthcare NZ have agreed on a settlement after lengthy negotiations and industrial action. The company, which is contracted to provide home support and residential disability support services, is funded by DHBs, Accident Compensation and the Ministry of Health. The settlement

includes pay increases of up to 20 percent.

#### **Strike notice served on Air New Zealand-owned company**

Workers at Air Nelson have issued a 14-day notice of strike after the Air New Zealand-owned company repeatedly refused to offer a decent pay rise. From May 1, Air Nelson engineers will refuse to work overtime, while ground-handling staff are banning overtime and will refuse to load food freight. A series of four 3-day strikes are also planned.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) national secretary Andrew Little said the breakdown of negotiations at Air Nelson was a sign of “wider industry problems”. He claimed the country’s aviation industry was dominated by Air NZ, which was “on the warpath to erode the terms and conditions of its workers”.

However, Little and the EPMU have worked closely with Air NZ to enforce its demands, including agreeing to the destruction of jobs and hard-won working conditions. Air Nelson provides regional link services to Napier, Palmerston North, New Plymouth, Tauranga and Nelson.

#### **Series of strikes underway in Tahiti**

Workers at Tikiphone, a mobile phone provider in French Polynesia, went on indefinite strike last week for salary increases and for benefits in line with those of employees at the Office of Post and Telecommunications.

An inter-union grouping called the strike and Tikiphone retail outlets either have been closed or are being picketed.

Around 50 workers at technology company Cegelec have been on strike since February 15 after the firm announced plans for 43 redundancies. Strikers have picketed the company offices.

Workers at Total Oil, the construction company ETDE and in local government departments began strike action in the past week. The Total workers are demanding time off in return for working holidays and Sundays, bonuses for workers measuring, loading and unloading fuel tanks, better job prospects and stronger safety regulations.

Workers at ETDE are calling for an end to the use of legislation allowing companies to end permanent contracts when a site is closed. Many workers at the soon-to-be completed hospital site fear for their jobs. They are also calling for better redundancy packages. The local government strike is over a demand for permanent work contracts for seasonal workers.



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