

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 April 2007

Indian highway workers protest

Highways workers from Tirunelveli, Tuticorin, Kanyakumari and Virudhunagar districts, in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, protested at the Jawahar Grounds, Palayamkottai on April 22 in support of a slate of demands.

They are demanding that salary arrears be paid immediately for a recent 41-month-long period of suspension. Further, they want children of road workers who died during the suspension to be employed on the basis of their educational qualifications.

Plantation workers demand better pay and conditions

More than 250 areca nut plantation workers at Mettupalayam in Tamilnadu began an indefinite strike from April 16 for higher wages.

According to an Areca Nut-Coconut Tree Climbers spokesman, no nuts have been harvested for the week. He described the conditions of workers in Mettupalayam, and nearby Kallar and Nellithurai, as akin to “slavery”.

“For many years, we are being paid 1 rupee a bunch [of nuts]. At the end of nearly 14 hours of work, we take home a wage of 250 rupees (\$US5.5), which is too low,” he said. “Unlike the work on coconut trees, we have to swing from one areca tree to the other. Many workers have fallen and broken their hands or legs or even died. But they or the affected families have not been compensated by the owners or the lessees of the plantation.”

The areca nut peak season lasts only for six months from August. For the remaining months workers are forced to do unpaid household work for the plantation owners. For example, workers in Mettupalayam begin work at six in the morning milking cows and return home at nine at night. Some in severe financial problems take out advances of 1,000 to 10,000 rupees. One worker said: “Earlier generations were forced to work under any conditions and this has been thrust on us too.”

Mumbai bus workers’ strike called off

Union leaders have called off a strike that began on April 18 by around 42,000 workers at state-run Brihanmumbai Electric Supply and Transport (BEST) in India’s financial capital, Mumbai. The stoppage ended after two days, amid a campaign of intimidation by the state authorities.

Union officials have developed a revised proposal to put to management. Originally the workers’ main demands included improved wages, a revision of pay scales and an interim dearness allowance. The company had previously promised to increase pay but failed to do so.

The strike put thousands of buses off the roads. BEST is the Mumbai’s only public transport network, besides trains. It has a 3,500-strong bus fleet carrying an estimated 4.8 million passengers.

BEST authorities worked to break the strike, announcing that strikers would be sacked via notices posted in local daily newspapers. Simultaneously, management invited applications from job seekers to replace them. Citing a Bombay High Court ruling on the strike, a BEST official said: “The strike is illegal. Yet the employees have gone on strike without heeding the court order.”

Non-academic staff strike in Sri Lanka universities

Non-academic staff at universities, affiliated university institutions and

the University Grants Commission began an indefinite strike on April 24, demanding the removal of salary anomalies and payment of wage arrears to all new recruits. The national strike has caused the postponement of recruitment, examinations and a range of other activities.

University administrations responded with intimidation and harassment, cancelling all leave for non-academic staff and demanding those working on probation, temporary, casual or a daily-paid basis to report to work immediately. Colombo University has banned all strikers from entering university premises. The strike was called by the University Trade Union Federation.

Sri Lankan health workers strike for conditions

Health workers at General Hospital in Anuradhapura, North-Central province, went on strike on April 24 for several demands. These include the withdrawal of a decision to demolish 34 quarters of non-medical staff, the resumption of distress loans, the appointment of a director to the hospital on a permanent basis and the immediate transfer of the administrative officer.

Strikers made alternative arrangements for patients, and emergency cases were treated by a skeleton staff. The strike was called by the Combined Trade Union Committee of Action of Anuradhapura General Hospital (CTCAGH).

Protesting workers block Chinese railway line

About 300 workers and residents in the Jiangxi province protested on April 21, blocking rail connections for six hours and disrupting rail traffic on the busy route from Shanghai to the southwestern city of Kunming. Police were called in but no arrests were made.

The protesters are opposed to a government plan to place the Guixi district, in which they reside, under the control of authorities in a neighbouring district. They fear this will lead to the lowering of wages and benefits across Guixi. While blocking railway tracks is a traditional form of protest in China, authorities can impose lengthy prison sentences for disrupting traffic and communications.

Hong Kong broadcast workers protest to save jobs

About 200 Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) employees demonstrated at the station in Kowloon Tong on April 20 to gain public support to stop the government closing the city’s sole public service broadcaster. Workers dressed in red and white T-shirts waved banners proclaiming, “Public broadcasting now” and collected signatures on a petition urging the government to keep the station open.

The workers’ jobs and the future of the station, widely regarded as a credible source of news, have been put under threat by a review committee recommendation that the station be replaced with a new public broadcaster.

Philippines sugar mill workers vote to strike

Over 770 workers at the Victorian Milling Company (VMC) voted to strike at a mass meeting on April 19. A spokesman for the VMC Industrial Workers Union (VMCIWU) said the strike was over management’s refusal to implement the wage increase stipulated in the collective bargaining agreement signed three years ago. He said management would

concede only a bonus, which he described as “nothing but petty cash”. VMC is the largest sugar refinery on the Philippines island of Negros.

The strike vote was supervised by the Department of Labor and Employment and follows a series of unsuccessful conciliation meetings facilitated by the National Conciliation and Mediation Board.

Since the mid-1990s VMC has reduced its workforce from over 6,000 to 2,700. Further job cuts are predicted when the company implements a plan to modernise equipment.

Freeport strikers return to work

Over 5,000 striking workers and contractors at Freeport-McMoRan’s Grasberg mine in Papua returned to work on April 22, ending a four-day strike and protests outside government buildings and Freeport offices in the town of Timika. The strike closed operations at the mine, forcing the mine’s senior management in the United States to meet some of the workers’ 27 demands.

In negotiations with Tongoi Papua—a group representing indigenous Papuan workers—the company agreed to increase the monthly wage from 1.6 million rupiah (\$US174) to 3.1 million (\$US406). The company also agreed to establish a Papua Affairs Department to handle workers’ welfare and promised to replace a number of company officials.

The strike followed stalling tactics by Grasberg’s management in negotiating a new two-year collective agreement with its 9,000 direct employees.

Car component workers return to work

Workers at car component manufacturer Coghlan and Russell Engineering in Geelong, southwest of Melbourne, returned to work on April 24 after voting to support a “rescue package”. The workers occupied the factory after being stood down earlier this month when the company was placed in administration.

The deal, involving the injection of \$1 million into the ailing parts company by customers Ford and Delphi, was put together with administrator PPB and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union after Ford began mass stand-downs.

The deal will allow the continued flow of parts to Ford and Holden, which is supplied by Delphi, while arrangements are made to sell off and restructure Coghlan and Russell. While the agreement supposedly commits Ford and Delphi to long-term purchasing contracts once the restructure takes place, these will last for three years. Any restructure will inevitably include job and conditions cuts to meet the major car producers’ demands for reduced components prices.

New Zealand health workers continue strikes

Nationwide industrial action by radiographers left hospitals in the Southland, Bay of Plenty and Rotorua District Health Boards (DHBs) without x-rays services last weekend. In Canterbury, radiographers also refused to assist with ultrasound services. The industrial action began earlier in the week and is set to continue until May 14. Around 200 radiographers from seven of the country’s 21 DHBs are seeking pay increases of 20 percent to bring their pay to a comparable level with other areas. Employers have offered just 12 percent.

Laboratory workers, who struck for two days earlier this month, went on strike again on March 24 and 26. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union, with about 1,200 members working at 15 of the country’s DHBs, the New Zealand Blood Service, Southern Community Laboratories and Medlab South, has spent 13 months in negotiations. A union spokesman said the DHBs had made a 2.55 percent per annum pay offer, but had demanded “savage” clawbacks on hours of work and to employment protection.

Meanwhile, hospital service and food workers have indicated they may strike if pay talks fail this week. Members of the Service and Food Workers Union want a 30 percent increase.

Support for sacked Auckland hotel workers

Workers last week protested at the Ascott Metropolis hotel in Auckland in support of five members of the Unite Union who were singled out for

being in a union and sacked from their restaurant jobs. Around 30 people marched into the hotel restaurant and held a sit-down protest.

The protest also highlighted a number of other issues, including missing wages. Around \$50 a week was deducted from one worker’s pay for 10 months for student loan repayments. The money, however, was not forwarded to Inland Revenue and the worker is being charged over \$800 in interest as a result. Deductions for child support, tax and union fees have also gone missing.

French company attempts mediation over Tahiti strike

The French company Cegelec has sent an official from Paris to French Polynesia to negotiate a solution to a protracted stand-off at its Papeete affiliate. Workers at the Tahiti branch have been striking to protest planned dismissals.

Last week, the workers blocked access to the Papeete port but lifted the blockade after being warned that riot police would be used to disperse the blockade. Industrial unrest at Cegelec comes amid industrial action by ETDE construction workers at a new hospital site as well as ongoing industrial disputes at Total Oil and communications company Tikiphone. Municipal workers in one town are also on strike.

Fijian unions block strike action

Public sector unions in Fiji continue to evade strike action in response to the military regime’s decision to reduce public servants’ pay by 5 percent and lower the age of retirement.

The Fiji Public Service Association (PSA) was the first to file a 21-day notice in early February to conduct secret ballots for a strike mandate. The PSA, along with the Teachers Union, are waiting for the Nurses Association to complete postal ballots of its 1,400 members before “coming out with a strategy” on the next course of action. The PSA claims there was “some goodwill shown by the interim Government in negotiations”.

The Teachers Union (FTU) followed the PSA in completing ballots, in which more than 80 percent of its members supported industrial action. However, an FTU spokesman said strike action would only go ahead if talks failed. The union was concerned with the pay cut and the breach of a so-called “Partnership Agreement” but supported the reduction in retirement age.

The Public Employees Union’s secret ballots started two weeks ago and have now been finalised. A union spokesman emphasised that strike action was the last resort. If the response from the union’s 4,800 members was “positive”, the union would go on strike only “if talks fail”. “We remain open for dialogue,” he said. The Viti National Union of Taukei Workers is just starting strike ballots that will continue until May but it too is seeking negotiations.

Secret ballots for more than 4,000 members of the Fijian Teachers Association have been completed, with a majority in favour of strike action. The military’s interim administration last week extended the public safety regulations outlawing strikes for another month.



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