

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 May 2007

Asia

Cambodia's largest union threatens strike over wage cuts

Chea Mony, the president of the Free Trade Union of the Kingdom of Cambodia, warned on May 7 that the union's 70,000 members would strike if the government went ahead with its proposal to slash the night-time work rate in the garment industry.

Currently the night time wage is set at 200 percent of the day rate. Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen recently announced he would seek to pass legislation on May 17 to cut night shift pay to 130 percent. This would affect the wages of around 330,000 people in the clothing sector.

Garment manufacturers want to run factories 24 hours a day but claim wages are so high the garments produced are uncompetitive. The government is pushing the pay cut on the grounds it will lead to the creation of more jobs.

Cambodian garment workers currently earn an average of just \$US50 a month for day shift work. Even with the night shift rate of \$US100, they are still among the lowest paid workers in the region. Garment workers are paid an average of \$127 in China, \$122 in Vietnam and \$164 in Thailand.

Chinese port workers return to work

About 400 crane operators and truck drivers at the Chiwan Container Terminal in the southern Chinese town of Shenzhen returned to work on May 2 after management agreed to resolve a pay dispute within a month.

The workers went on strike at midnight on May 1 demanding the payment of overtime that is owed them. In the morning, they held a sit-down protest outside the container terminal's headquarters, while police called in by the company stood by.

One worker said employees only get two days off each month and are therefore entitled to overtime by law. The terminal management said they had set up a committee to settle the dispute but did not guarantee to meet workers' demands.

The terminal is one of China's busiest and is jointly run by Hong Kong's Kerry Holdings, Chiwan Wharf Holdings and Hidoney Development.

On April 8, about 300 port workers struck at the nearby Yantian International Container Terminals and won a 3 percent wage increase. Workers at the port earn around \$US519 a month compared to the national urban average of \$127.

Indian horticulture workers protest for permanency

Temporary workers at the Government Botanical Garden in Udthagamandalam in the southern state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated opposite the gardens on May 4 to demand permanent positions. There are some 600 temporary workers employed at the government gardens and on state-run farms. The government promised in 2006 that workers would be given permanency after 10 years service, which has not taken place.

Railway workers demand better facilities

Railway workers rallied at Thanjavur railway station in Tamil Nadu on May 4 to demand that authorities attach additional coaches to the Diesel Electrical Multiple Unit (DEMU) trains to ease crowding in compartments. They pointed out that the overcrowded coaches do not have enough berths, toilets and drinking water. The trains are used by Southern Railway employees and local factory workers, as well as students and the general public as they are cheaper than buses.

Indian municipality workers demand reinstatement

Municipal workers at Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu protested in front of the town's municipal office on May 2 to demand that the reinstatement of three suspended workers. They claimed M. Mariappan, M. Palraj and S. Vallinayakam were suspended in an undemocratic manner after objecting to the rude behaviour of two supervisors. The protesters called for disciplinary action against the supervisors.

Indian forest workers demand minimum wage

Casual workers employed by the Forest Department in Gulbarga district in the southern state of Karnataka ended a 17-day strike and sit-down protest outside the Conservator of Forests office in Gulbarga. They were demanding to be paid at least the minimum wage fixed by government. On the final day of the strike, the Deputy Conservator of Forests V. Radhadevi gave an assurance that their demand would be met within one month.

Indonesian mini-van drivers strike over road conditions

Public minivan drivers in the municipality of Bekasi, 20 kilometres from the centre of Jakarta, struck on May 2. The drivers were protesting over the poor conditions of the main transport routes, which affects their income by increasing their travel time and reducing the number of trips they can do each day. They returned to work when municipal workers began filling in potholes.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian nurses seek pay increase

South Australia's public hospital nurses are threatening state-wide strikes as part of negotiations toward a new enterprise agreement. The nurses want a 14 percent pay rise over two years, a new career structure and improved working conditions.

The pay rate for nurses in South Australia is 12 percent lower than in the state of Queensland. This week, a spokesperson for the Nurses Federation warned if the Health Department does not respond by the end of May there could be industrial action.

New Zealand telecom workers strike over pay

Workers at a Telecom subcontractor in Christchurch struck for 24 hours and picketed the telecommunication company's headquarters on May 4. The 16 workers employed by Systemtech are demanding market rates of pay. They are paid between \$2 and \$5 an hour less than the industry standard.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has been negotiating with the company for the past six months, seeking a 10 percent pay rise. The highly-experienced workers install telephones and broadband. They picketed Telecom because the telco's contracting conditions ultimately determine their wages.

Auckland packaging workers locked out

Multinational packaging company Amcor locked out more than 60 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), at its Albany site on May 1 after they rejected management attempts to cut staff numbers.

The locked-out workers took part in the May Day march through the Auckland CBD and picketed the factory the next morning. After being locked out for two and a half days, they accepted a deal negotiated by the EPMU and returned to work.

The EPMU claimed the deal consisted of "appropriate" staffing levels without redundancies, an extra week's service and shift leave, an industry standard pay rise and a day's pay to compensate for some of the lockout time.

NZ students target Subway for sacking worker

Dunedin students protested outside a Subway restaurant on May 8 to support a worker facing theft charges for sharing a Diet Coke with a friend during a break. The Otago University branch of the Labour Party organised a march targeting the fast-food restaurant and called for a nationwide boycott of Subway.

Jackie Lang was fired from her full-time job and faces theft charges in Dunedin District Court on May 21 after she shared the drink with an upset friend during her break. Subway allows staff free soda and water while they are working. A student spokesperson called it "an extreme example of corporate bullying". Lang, who suffers from Asperger syndrome, has taken a personal grievance action against Subway.

Fiji unions vote for strike action

The Fijian Teachers Association (FTA) voted overwhelmingly last week in support of strike action to oppose a 5 percent pay cut and proposed redundancies. The Public Service Association (PSA), Fiji Teachers Union and the Fiji Nurses Association (FNA), affiliates of the Confederation of Public Sector Unions, had already secured a mandate for a

nationwide strike. The Indigenous Teachers Association is the only major union left to return a ballot result.

The FNA is now in the process of compiling a report on the outcome of its ballot which will be lodged with the Ministry of Labour. More than 80 percent supported a strike. The PSA is still waiting for a response from the ministry after it lodged its report in March. It is mandatory for unions to issue a 28-day notice to the government of intention to strike.

FTA General Secretary Maika Namudu said while members had decided to take a stand with other public sector workers, the union would engage in "final talks" with the Public Service Commission in a bid to seek a solution.

French Polynesian broadcasting workers strike

Workers at the public broadcaster RFO in French Polynesia have been on strike since last weekend. Local news production has been suspended and local broadcasts replaced with feeds from France. The workers accuse the management of a lack of impartiality and of making arbitrary decisions. They also want some staff to be reclassified and their status reviewed.

The Tahitipresse news agency reported that, in a separate dispute, workers at two major hotels on the island of Moorea are threatening to strike.

Strike at Samoan television station

Workers at Samoa's only commercial television station LAUTV remain on strike this week over the late payment of salaries. Staff are also concerned about the late payment of National Provident Fund contributions. The president of the staff association said workers were staying out to let the CEO know that they are "sick and tired" of the situation. The LAUTV staff association submitted a letter raising their concerns to the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Labour.



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