

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 May 2007

Strikes continue to erupt in Vietnam

On May 13 about 2,500 workers walked off the job at a South Korean-owned garment factory in South Vietnam demanding a wage rise. Employed by Shin SungVina Company in Long An province, the workers want salaries increased from 870,000 dong (\$US55) to 1.1 million dong (\$US69).

The provincial branch of the government-sanctioned trade union, however, has refused to support the strike, claiming that the workers are “asking for too much” and that the company is already paying 22 percent above the minimum wage. Shin SungVina management has threatened to scrap plans to expand the factory if the government agrees to an increase.

On May 11, 400 garment workers at Korean owned-company Daewon in Da Nang went on strike over being forced to work 13 hours a day, including Sundays, without proper pay. They also oppose the company sacking female workers who become pregnant.

On May 10, workers at Malaysian-owned car parts manufacturer JRD in Phu Yen struck because they have not been paid promised wage rises. On the same day, about 100 workers at the Korean-owned E. Green company in Saigon struck over the late payment of wages. Workers also allege that the company keeps wage deductions meant for insurance.

Meanwhile, the Labour Ministry is preparing anti-strike laws that empower local authorities at village level to force striking employees back to work. Workers believe that the new law will lead to employers bribing corrupt village authorities. The proposed law is in addition to a mid-April decree that forces workers to compensate employers for strike-related economic losses.

Municipal workers in India on indefinite strike

Around 3,500 municipal workers in Visakhapatnam in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on May 14. They want the regularisation of non-muster roll (NMR) workers, the framing of service rules and minimum wages and statutory benefits for contract employees.

Road workers, park and greenery caretakers, community health employees and drivers are participating in the strike. The municipality employs around 6,000. The striking workers are members of the Visakhapatnam Municipal Employees' Union.

Nepalese teachers protest for pay and conditions

Some 7,000 teachers at private and boarding schools in Nepal

held a four-hour sit-down protest on May 13 outside the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES). Most of the private schools in the Kathmandu Valley were closed. Temporary teachers working in government schools also joined the protest.

The more than 150,000 teachers employed in over 8,500 private and boarding schools in Nepal receive extremely low pay and around 18,000 are on temporary basis with no job security. The teachers want equal salaries and facilities with government schoolteachers and letters of appointment issued to casual employees.

The teachers have been pressing their demands since January and are threatening to strike indefinitely if the government continues to ignore them. Meanwhile, the Institutional School Teachers' Union and the Academic Republic Forum have planned further sit-down protests outside government offices.

Sri Lankan university authorities threaten legal action

Hundreds of non-academic staff from universities across Sri Lanka demonstrated opposite the University Grants Commission (UGC) in central Colombo on May 16 over UGC threats to deduct salaries for striking.

The non-academic staff began an all-out national strike on April 24 to demand the removal of salary anomalies and the payment of wage arrears to all new recruits. University administrations responded by cancelling all leave for non-academic staff and demanded that those on probation, temporary, casual or a daily-paid basis to report to work immediately or face penalties.

The University Trade Union Federation called off the strike on May 7, after mediation by the Labor Ministry and establishment of a cabinet sub-committee headed by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake to resolve the dispute.

This arrangement, however, allowed the UGC to go on the offensive, threatening to dock wages and launch legal action against workers for striking. UGC chairman Professor Gamini Samaranayake warned this week that the commission would “enforce the law to the letter”.

Health workers oppose new clocking on system

Health workers in Colombo National Hospital and other general hospitals across the country struck on May 15 to protest the introduction of Finger Sensing Machines that register staff arrival and departure times.

Apart from essential patient care services, all other activities

at hospital ceased during the strike. Workers planned to stay out for two days but the strike ended at mid-day after the All Ceylon Health Workers' Union (ACHWU) announced that it had reached a "settlement" with Health Ministry officials.

In a separate dispute, Colombo Municipal Council employees demonstrated May 15 in front of council building over several demands, including the resolution of salary anomalies.

Workers from the post office in Moratuwa, a coastal suburb south of Colombo, picketed their place of work on May 14 to demand the recruitment of extra staff to reduce excessive workloads.

Australian miners strike over workplace agreement

About 700 workers at the Anglo Australia-operated Dawson mine in Moura, Queensland walked off the job on May 13 for 24 hours. The strike occurred after negotiations stalled between the Construction and Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and management over a new enterprise agreement. Differences emerged over health and safety and disciplinary and disputes procedures.

Workers are also concerned about company plans to extend the maximum shift time to 12 hours and 45 minutes with only a one-hour break.

New Zealand hospital workers to strike

New Zealand hospital cleaners, kitchen orderlies and security staff stopped work on May 10 and voted overwhelming in support of strike action. The more than 2,500 members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) voted by a 96 percent margin to reject a pay offer from the District Health Boards (DHBs) and contractors. The SFWU has given notice of 4,160 separate actions starting May 31, including a series of 55-minute rolling stoppages in hospitals nationwide.

A SFWU spokesman said the decision followed a year of frustration in which DHBs and contracting companies employing two-thirds of the workforce did everything possible to avoid a national collective agreement and pay parity. The workers are the lowest paid in public hospitals. Hourly pay rates of just \$13 are common and many only received raises through general increases in the minimum wage. The DHBs are offering a 2.1 percent average increase.

Senior hospital doctors are also planning to hold stop-work meetings over the next three weeks for an extra \$10,000 per year. It will be the first time senior doctors have held national stop-work meeting and up to 2,700 are expected to attend.

The average annual salary of a fulltime senior doctor in NZ public hospitals is around \$140,000.

Australian doctors receive \$32,500 a year more and the gap increases to more than \$50,000 for specialists. The DHBs' offer of a 1.4 percent increase over three years has remained unchanged since negotiations started 11 months ago.

Deadlocked negotiations have seen health workers, including radiographers, medical laboratory workers and radiation therapists, walk off the job in the past year. Only two groups—junior doctors and radiation therapists—have settled

claims.

Air NZ link airline faces strike action

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has served a strike notice on Air New Zealand's biggest link company, Air Nelson. The decision to take industrial action comes after nine days of talks and mediation failed to resolve a pay dispute. Industrial action, which begins at midnight on May 24, includes rolling stoppages, a food freight handling ban and a blanket overtime ban. It will affect Air Nelson operations between most provincial cities and main centres.

An EPMU organiser said Air Nelson workers agreed to a below average deal during the last round of pay talks to allow the company to grow and "now they expect that loyalty to be rewarded." Air Nelson has also picked up extra business following the collapse of Origin Pacific and workers are performing extra duties for the same pay.

The company is offering a three-year pay deal of 3.6 percent, 3 percent and 3.6 percent and wants the removal of long-service leave. The union is demanding 5.8 percent and 4.8 percent over two years and the retention of long service leave.

Christchurch academics strike over pay

More than 200 academics at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) walked off the job on May 14 and voted to strike indefinitely. A meeting attended by 160 members of the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education also decided to boycott a major careers expo. A quarter of all classes were closed by the stoppage.

The academics want a 4 percent pay rise this year and another 4 percent in 2008. The polytechnic has offered a 3 percent increase to cover the next 9 months. Management also wants to cut the amount of sick leave that new employees can accrue. CPIT staff currently get 10 sick days a year and can accumulate up to 260 days over 30 years. Management wants to reduce the accrued days to just 90.



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