

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 May 2007

Protracted strike by Indian auto-part workers continues

A strike by over 3,500 employees at dashboard instrument maker Pricol in Periyanaickenpalayam, Tamil Nadu, which began on March 5, is continuing. The auto-parts workers and about 150 of their children held a sit-down protest on May 19 in support of the strike.

The workers are opposing the transfer of six union leaders. Management has retaliated by shutting down the factory. The strikers want the transfer orders withdrawn and have called on the government to intervene under the Industrial Disputes Act to resolve the issue and force the company to reopen the plant.

Indian municipal workers strike

Strike action at the Kadapa Municipal Corporation and five other municipalities in Andhra Pradesh entered its seventh day on May 22. The workers want the disbursement of salaries and pensions through the state Treasury, restoration of the hereditary appointment scheme to provide jobs for children of sanitary workers, and regularisation of employment for temporary workers.

Workers blocked traffic in Kurnool at the busy Raj Vihar centre on May 17 over the government's delay in conceding these demands. They also picketed the Badvel municipal office and held a sit-down protest outside the Kadapa Municipal Corporation office to prevent the use of private contract workers. The strike is impacting sharply on sanitation services with garbage piling up and blocked drains overflowing in a number of places.

Midday-meal workers on indefinite strike

Around 2,000 female workers employed in the midday-meal program (Akshara Dasoha) in the south Indian state of Karnataka are continuing an indefinite strike. The workers want the government to pay the minimum wage and withdraw plans to privatise the program which provides meals for undernourished school children. They have held a number of protests during the strike, including a march from Bangalore City Railway Station to Bannappa Park on May 16.

Mallavva, who is employed as a cook under the program, said: "I get 650 rupees (\$US14) for working from 10 o'clock in the morning until late afternoon". Her helper Shimaggavva, who is paid just 300 rupees for working the same hours, said: "We cannot complain to anyone in the school because they will immediately threaten to throw us out of the job."

Midday-meal workers, who are mostly women from poor and low-caste Dalit families, are hired on 10-month contracts. The workers plan further protests and have vowed to remain on strike until their demands are met.

Post-graduate staff walk out

About 90 employees at the Medical Records Department in Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research in the Indian state of Puducherry staged a two-hour lightning strike on

May 21 over the administration's decision to open an hour before the scheduled starting time.

Workers said they were not consulted before the management decision. They resumed work after administration withdrew their directive.

Bangladeshi apparel workers protest unpaid wages

Workers at Fortuna Apparels Ltd, an export garment factory in Gazipur, blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway on May 19 delaying hundreds of vehicles. The workers were protesting the non-payment of monthly wages and overtime owed since March.

The government's Rapid Action Battalion was deployed to disperse the protestors who ended the blockade after the factory owner gave an assurance that all outstanding entitlements would be paid.

Nepalese teachers on indefinite strike

Strike action by more than 150,000 Nepalese government and private school teachers is continuing. The teachers want job security, salary increases, a formal contract system and annulment of the Company Act that allows commercialisation of the education sector. Many schools across the country have come to a standstill since the strike began on May 17.

The teachers, who provide services to 7.6 million students in over 8,500 private and boarding schools and 27,000 government schools throughout the country, receive extremely low pay. Around 18,000 government teachers are employed on a temporary basis with no job security.

The private sector teachers want equal salaries and facilities with permanent government teachers and want letters of appointment issued to casual employees, many of whom are hired without a contract.

The striking teachers have defied threats by private school owners to withhold salaries. Teachers from Kathmandu Valley and outside the Nepalese capital have held a sit-down demonstration outside the Education Ministry while around 7,000 protested outside the Ministry of Education and Sports.

The unions signed a six-point agreement in March with then education minister Mangal Siddhi Manandhar that was to be implemented by April 23. Claims by Pradeep Nepal, the new government minister, to have no knowledge of the agreement sparked the current strike which was called by the Nepal Education Republican Forum, an alliance of teachers unions.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike over unpaid wages

Close to 300 public transport workers at the Kandy bus depot began indefinite strike action on May 15 to demand unpaid April salaries for garage and running section employees.

The strike brought at least 16 bus routes to a standstill. The government had promised to pay the outstanding salaries by May 15

but reneged on the pledge.

South Korea subway workers strike

More than 2,700 Busan Subway Labor Union members went on strike on May 23 in Busan, South Korea after negotiations with the local transport corporation for a wage rise and a staff increase broke down. Negotiations have dragged on for the past six months.

The subway employees want a 4 percent wage rise and 88 extra employees for a new subway line scheduled to open early next year. The company has only offered to hire 52 workers. The government-controlled Busan Regional Labor Relations Commission threatened to declare the strike illegal unless work was resumed.

Strikes over wages and conditions continue in Vietnam

About 350 workers at the Taiwanese-owned garment company Sportteam Corporation in Quang Nam struck on May 21 demanding higher wages and shorter working hours.

Workers claim they are forced to work up to 14 hours daily without overtime pay for just 490,000 dong (\$US30) a month, well below the legal minimum monthly wage of 710,000 dong (\$US44). Local authorities began mediation talks with the company and employees when it was revealed that the workers had not been offered contracts.

In a separate dispute, 1,500 workers at the Hai Vinh shoe factory in Hoc Mon, Saigon struck for two days on May 17 over wages and conditions. They complain that employees with up to 10-years' service are only paid 21,000 dong per day (\$US1.30) and that shifts are continually extended up to 10 p.m.

Workers also claim that the lunch provided by the company is bad quality and that the eating area is close to toilets. Many workers at the plant are still employed on a casual basis even after three years service.

Nurses threaten industrial action over wages

About 11,000 nurses in South Australia are threatening industrial action for a pay rise. The proposed action includes bans on administration work.

The nurses want a 14 percent pay rise over two years, a modernised career structure and improved working conditions. The Australian Nursing Federation has given the South Australian Labor government a week to reach an agreement with the union or the work bans will be imposed.

A federation spokesman said that the Health Department had failed to reply to a union claim filed more than two months ago. Nurses in South Australia are paid around 12 percent less than their counterparts in other states.

Striking New Zealand lab staff suspended

The West Coast District Health Board (DHB) suspended seven medical laboratory workers this week for striking and the Auckland's Middlemore Hospital suspended nine others. The suspensions at Middlemore range from two hours to four days. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union is seeking legal advice on the suspension notices.

The laboratory workers were the first to begin stepped-up industrial action for better pay and working conditions. Their action follows a series of strikes by 1,200 laboratory workers after December last year.

The scientists plan to carry out rolling stoppages, bans and other forms of action nationwide during the next two weeks.

Meanwhile companies who contract to DHBs have issued 700 hospital, service and food workers with lockout notices. Last week, the Service and Food Workers (SFWU) Union gave notice of 4,160 separate stopwork actions by 2,800 cleaning and catering staff and orderlies. The SFWU is seeking a multi-employer collective

agreement to standardise pay around the country.

One contractor, ISS, has issued a seven-day lockout notice effective May 31 while two others, Compass and OCS, issued one-day lockout notices. The companies employ two-thirds of the workers with the remainder directly employed by DHBs.

The Medical Association this week demanded that Labour's Health Minister Pete Hodgson intervene into the disputes and that funding be increased for health boards in order to lift health workers' pay and improve staff retention. The minister refused.

Air NZ link workers to strike

Workers at Air New Zealand's largest link airline Air Nelson have begun industrial action after rejecting the company's latest wage offer. Most of the airline's permanent staff is involved in the action which includes an overtime ban and a series of four-day rolling stoppages targeting the food freight and engineering sections.

Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union members have overwhelmingly rejected the company's offer of an average of 3.6 percent a year for 30 months. The going rate elsewhere is around 5 percent. The union wants a two-year deal of 5.8 percent and 4.8 percent including catch-up payments from previously low settlements. The industrial action comes after 11 days of negotiations.

Fiji unions meet to plan strike over wage cuts

After three months of prevarication, public sector unions in Fiji were due to meet this week to set a date for a national strike against a 5 percent pay cut. Fiji's interim administration announced the pay cut for all public servants and a reduced retirement age of 55 in its last budget.

After a deliberately drawn-out series of secret ballots and many failed attempts to negotiate with the government the Confederation of Public Sector Unions announced this week that a strike "might now be close". Secret ballots have given the Confederation an overwhelming membership mandate to strike.

The Interim Minister for Labour Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau claims that the government is still open for talks but it has just announced that hospitality and tourism workers will have to accept a 50 percent pay cut.

New Caledonia blockade disrupts broadcasting services

News broadcasts from New Caledonia's public radio station RFO were cancelled last week when members of the Kanak USTKE union blocked road access to the broadcaster's premises in Noumea. The workers were demanding that one their colleagues be given a promotion and a pay rise.

While pedestrian access to the building was allowed, management objected to the action and subsequently called off all locally-produced news broadcasts.

The dispute also saw RFO drop a planned televised interview with the head of the USTKE union. RFO was hit by a seven-month strike last year over its refusal to rehire a sacked employee.



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