

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 June 2007

Indian weavers strike for pay increase

Handloom silk weavers at more than 7,000 weaving units in Nangavalli area in the southern state of Tamilnadu began an indefinite strike on May 24. The weavers, who want a 25 percent pay increase, demonstrated in Nangavalli blocking traffic.

While weavers' wages have not been increased for several years, the traders refuse to even attend meetings to discuss the issue. Large numbers of people are dependent on the handloom silk industry for a livelihood.

Cargo handling brought to standstill by strike

Container Corporation of India employees have joined a strike by cargo-handling workers and transport operators at South Eastern Railway's (SER) Shalimar goods shed in Kolkata, India. The container company adjoins the goods shed where workers have been on strike since May 22 opposing the SER's decision to impose around-the-clock working.

The sheds currently operate from 6 a.m. until 10 p.m. but management want an around-the-clock policy to "maximise" output.

The strike has stopped all work at the Shalimar goods shed, one of the largest operated in India by SER.

Pakistan hospital workers demand reinstatement

Laid-off employees from Al-Khidmat Hospital in Peshawar, Pakistan established a protest camp outside the local press club on May 29 and issued a media statement on the dispute. They are demanding reinstatement, removal of the hospital's chief executive and payment of gratuity.

The workers have threatened to take the issue up with provincial legislators and demonstrate outside the provincial assembly during the budget session if their demands are not met. They claim that hospital administration called in the staff committee last month to supposedly discuss the gratuity issue but instead called police to arrest workers' representatives.

Sri Lankan workers demand unpaid salaries

Building Material Corporation (BMC) employees picketed the company's head office and showroom in Colombo on May 30 demanding the payment of salaries owed for May.

They also allege management had failed to deposit payments into the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees Trust Fund (ETF) for last two months.

BMC is a state-owned building materials distributor but successive governments have drastically scaled down its operations. It now faces increasing competition from private companies.

In a separate dispute, health workers, including nurses and minor staff at hospitals in the Kegalle district in Central Province, struck on May 25 to demand outstanding May salaries.

Indonesian teachers protest over sackings

About 80 dismissed state elementary school principals from the Rembang regency in Central Java rallied on May 28 at the provincial legislature in Semarang to protest their sackings. They allege Regent Mohammad Salin said they were too old and replaced them with younger teachers. At least 176 principals have been dismissed under similar circumstances since August 2006.

In December 2006, the Semarang State Administrative Council ruled in favour of the principals in a lawsuit brought against the regent. He refused to reinstate the principals and appealed the decision. Having lost the first appeal, the regent has filed a second one which is currently being processed.

Taiwan bank employees to strike

Enterprise Bank of Hualien and Taitung Business Bank employees voted on May 30 to authorise their unions to strike for improved benefits and working conditions.

Union members are concerned that since the takeover of the two banks by the Central Deposit Insurance Corporation negotiations over employees' rights and for an increase in seniority compensation funds have stalled.

Ferry masters return to work

State-run ferry services at Stockton, near Newcastle in New South Wales, returned to normal after a snap strike on May 28 by ferry masters, members of the Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU). The strike was in protest over management plans to allow non-experienced personnel to operate ferries.

The AMOU is continuing discussions with management

and said there would be no further industrial action.

Wages dispute at Air Nelson continues

The New Zealand Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) this week filed for an injunction against Air NZ Link airline, Air Nelson, over its illegal use of alternate labour during a strike. Air Nelson flights were grounded after 95 staff began a three-day strike and picket on May 24. The union alleges the airline used Air NZ employees during the walkout.

The workers are holding rolling strikes and have imposed various bans, including on overtime. This will be followed by four rolling strikes of up to five days over the next six weeks.

Employees have voted overwhelmingly against accepting a pay offer from Air Nelson which amounted to an average increase of 3.6 percent a year for 30 months, well below the going rate of around 5 percent. The union wants a two-year deal of 5.8 percent and 4.8 percent, which includes catch up payments from previously low settlements. Negotiations held earlier this week to resolve the dispute failed and the next strike action is scheduled for June 6.

New Zealand defence workers protest pay offer

More than 300 civilian staff at the New Zealand Defence Force (NZDF) attended lunchtime rallies across the country on May 28 over NZDF's refusal to offer any pay increase despite yearlong negotiations. Hour-long rallies were held at seven armed forces bases and at the NZDF head office in Wellington.

The rallies were organised by the Public Service Association which represents 865 civilian staff. Negotiations are due to resume on June 12 and the workers, who carry out administrative work, have indicated they are prepared to take industrial action if necessary.

Fiji unions delay strike action

Following a meeting last week to discuss strike action over public service pay cuts, Fiji's Confederation of Public Sector Unions is now waiting for the Ministry of Labour to confirm secret ballot results of one affiliate. Confederation spokesperson Nirbhay Singh claimed the peak union body needed the ministry to issue a certificate of voting results for the Fiji Nursing Association before it could plan a common strategy and "decide on the next step".

While public sector workers have voted overwhelmingly to strike over a 5 percent pay cut by the interim government, the union leadership have refused to act. Labour Minister Bernadette Rounds-Ganilau said the validation of all strike ballots had been completed but the ministry had gained a union commitment to engage in "informal mediation".

Meanwhile, the Public Service Commission has revealed further cost-cutting plans, starting with the removal of 41 positions to cut operating costs by 10 percent. All permanent

secretaries are now required to submit "reform" programs in their ministries.

French Polynesian police used against striking hotel workers

Police in French Polynesia were called to the Sofitel Moorea Beach Resort last week to remove strikers. Workers had also blockaded the entrance of the Sofitel Tahiti Resort using wooden pallets and metal barriers.

At the Tahiti Resort 80 percent of the employees are on strike and 70 percent at the Sofitel Moorea Beach Resort in the disputes over pay. The strike action is the fifth labour dispute in Sofitel-owned hotels on Tahiti and Moorea in less than a year.

Tongan public servants issue pay deadline

Tonga's Public Service Association (PSA) has given the country's prime minister until June 15 to respond to demands in a dispute over pay. Around 800 public servants are demanding the government deliver pay increases promised following strike action in 2005.

The six-week strike in 2005, which posed a threat to the ruling monarchy, ended after the government agreed to pay increases of 60, 70 and 80 percent over two years as it carried out a wage review. The public servants want an extension of the memorandum of understanding signed at the time by the PSA and the government before it expires at the end of June this year.

Workers say they haven't ruled out strike action if the deadline is not met but PSA secretary Mele Amanaki said a strike would be "the last resort". The union leadership, which has been working to avoid a strike action, has been attempting for the past two months to meet with the prime minister. Amanaki declared the union wanted "a healthy dialogue with our employers ... in order to avoid what had happened in 2005 because that has really affected the whole country".



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