

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 May 2008

## Indian police arrest thousands of midday-meal workers

Thousands of midday-meal workers, including more than 1,200 women, were arrested by police on May 8 at demonstrations in cities across the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu, including Karur, Tirunelveli, Nagapattinam, Madurai and Udhagamandalam.

The workers prepare noon meals for children in the state's schools. The arrests occurred on the second day of a three-day state-wide protest in support of long-standing demands, including the introduction of time-scale pay, a monthly pension and the appointment of qualified noon-meal workers to existing vacancies in other government departments. Pay-scales have not been adjusted in over two decades.

The workers also want pay increments based on employee experience, the filling of all current vacancies, compassionate-based appointments and a promotion stream for assistants to cooks.

Most of the demonstrations, which were organised by the Tamilnadu Nutritious Noon Meal Employees' Association, were at major city intersections and outside government offices.

## Indian botanical garden workers strike

Horticulture workers at the Government Botanical Garden in Udhagamandalam in Tamilnadu went on strike and demonstrated inside the gardens on May 12 over delays in the payment of salaries.

Nilgiris District Horticulture Department Workers Welfare Association members want their salaries paid on time and a pay increase. Further industrial action is threatened if their demands are not met.

## Indian plantation workers demand back wages

Thousands of Manjushree plantation workers demonstrated on May 7 over the non-payment of wages during the past four months. The plantations, which are located near Gudalur in Tamilnadu, produce tea, cardamom, pepper, coffee and spices.

Workers also claim that employers' provident fund payments have been erratic and that many employees have not received their retirement benefits. Living quarters at the plantations are in dilapidated condition. The demonstration

called for a government take-over of the estate.

## Health workers in Sri Lanka strike over allowance cut

Minor (auxiliary) staff at the Vavuniy General Hospital in the country's war-torn North Province went on strike on May 12 over the reduction of an overtime allowance. The workers picketed the hospital and pledged further industrial action unless the issue was resolved.

The hospital director claimed that he had forwarded workers' concerns to the Ministry of Health but not received a directive to act on the complaints.

## Rallies demand ratification of Indonesian nursing law

Over 1,000 nurses and students in Jakarta, Central Java and West Sumatra in Indonesia held rallies on May 12 to demand the government immediately ratify a nursing law formally establishing professional standards. Ratification has been under deliberation in the House of Representatives since 2006.

Around 1,000 protesters from clinics and hospitals in West Sumatra marched 1.5 kilometres from the Haji Agussalim Sports Hall to the provincial legislative building while 300 nurses and students in Bukittinggi demonstrated at the Gadang Monument.

Rismanto, the field coordinator of a rally in Banyumas, Central Java, said that the nursing profession lacked a clear and legal platform and that legislation was needed to formalise job description in order to protect nurses and patients. Representatives of the Indonesian National Nurses' Association met with government officials after the rallies.

## Malaysia's low-wage workers protest

Hundreds of low-wage private sector workers risked arrest to picket Parliament House in Kuala Lumpur on May 7. The protesters demanded the government set a minimum wage and a cost-of-living allowance. One worker, Vaneshi Gopal, said that she receives only \$US200 a month and that the cost of living in the capital and education fees may force her to remove children from school.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC), which organised the picket, estimates that 40 percent of the country's private sector employees, most of whom work at plantations and factories, earn less than 700 ringgits

(\$US220) a month. The MTUC wants an across-the-board minimum wage of 900 ringgits plus a 300-ringgit cost-of-living allowance.

### **Philippine's jeepney drivers strike over fuel costs**

On May 12, thousands of jeepney owner-drivers in major cities across the Philippines went on strike for two days over fuel price increases. In some cities around 98 percent of public transport was crippled and commuters stranded. Government offices across the country reported that up to 40 percent of staff failed to attend work and that employees were sent home early in a bid to reduce traffic congestion.

The drivers' strike and street rallies were supported by various regional owner-driver associations and coordinated by the transport umbrella organisation Pinag-isang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Opereytors Nationwide (PISTON). The drivers want the regressive 12 percent VAT (value added tax) on petroleum products and the Oil Deregulation Law removed.

The May 12 action was not the first time drivers have struck work over fuel prices. In December last year a national drivers' strike brought major cities to a near standstill and drivers have been petitioning the Land Transport Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) since March this year for a 1.5-peso fare rise to compensate for the fuel hikes. The government has ignored these demands.

### **Queensland power workers rally for better pay**

On May 14, an estimated 5,000 Queensland electricity workers at state-owned power distributors Ergon Energy, Energex and Powerlink walked off the job for 24 hours and rallied across the state to protest stalled pay negotiations. Around 1,000 workers from around South-East Queensland gathered in Brisbane's CBD and marched to State Parliament demanding a meeting with Energy Minister Geoff Wilson. Similar rallies were held in the northern towns of Maryborough, Rockhampton, Gladstone, Townsville and Cairns.

Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members have rejected a 4.5 percent pay offer and want a new collective agreement, including a \$1.20 an hour rise in the attraction and retention allowance and increased spending on network maintenance to improve safety. Queensland Premier Anna Bligh claims an increase above 4.5 percent will force up electricity prices.

The latest action is part of a campaign of rolling strikes begun on April 22 after negotiations failed to deliver any change in the government offer. An ETU spokesman said the campaign would be arduous and protracted and "we don't expect too much at all today from the government".

### **Air New Zealand unions call off industrial action**

Industrial action by Air New Zealand engineers due to begin on May 9 was called off after last-minute talks. Around 1,500 members of the Aviation and Marine

Engineers Association and the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union had threatened two weeks of industrial action in support of a 5.8 percent pay claim.

The parties had been negotiating since March but Air New Zealand refused to improve its pay offer of just 3.75 percent. No details of the settlement have yet been released.

### **New Zealand doctors strikes set to continue**

New Zealand junior doctors are threatening more strike action as a protracted pay dispute with District Health Boards (DHBs) remains deadlocked. More than 2,000 junior doctors returned to work this week after a 48-hour strike. The doctors, members of the Resident Doctors' Association (RDA), are seeking an annual 10 percent pay rise over the next three years but the DHBs have refused to budge from their offer of 4.25 percent increase for last year and this year.

With the doctors multi-employer collective agreement (Meca) due to expire at the end of June industrial action could intensify. Once the contract agreement expires DHBs could legally offer any working conditions of employment they chose. Stop-work meetings have been scheduled by the RDA for the week starting May 26.

### **New Zealand public servants vote on strike action**

More than 860 New Zealand Department of Labour staff are attending meetings throughout the country to vote on industrial action, including a walkout on a date to be determined and a ban on performing unpaid work. They want an improved pay offer and the scrapping of the current system used for setting pay, claiming that it is "confusing, inconsistent and unfair".

Public Service Association members are demanding a 4 percent pay increase and have rejected a 3 percent department offer. The union is also calling for the current performance management system to be replaced with one that is "fair and transparent".

### **New Caledonia drivers blockade nickel site**

Local truck drivers are blockading the Koniambo nickel site in the north of New Caledonia in protest over not being awarded contracts. No one has been able to work at the site since May 12.

The mine was blockaded over the same issue in April with drivers parking their trucks outside the site entrance. The local workers accuse the management of Koniambo Nickel of deliberately ignoring them when handing out contracts.



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