

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Bangladeshi military and police attack garment workers

Members of the Rapid Action Battalion, police and paramilitary forces were mobilised against about 15,000 garment workers demonstrating in Narayanganj and Savar on May 11. The garment workers were attacked with rubber bullets, batons and tear gas, injuring around 50 people.

The Narayanganj demonstration, which blocked the Dhaka-Narayanganj road, was triggered when Rukshi Sweater factory employees were locked out. Fellow workers from six adjacent factories immediately walked out forming a large protest and demanding a salary increase and the unpaid salaries of the locked-out employees.

On the same day, Doel Garments factory workers in Savar blockaded the Dhaka-Aaricha highway for about three hours demanding a wage rise and the payment of three months' outstanding wages. Factory management previously promised to pay the outstanding wages but failed to deliver.

Indian port strike in third week

Around 3,500 marine and cargo-handling employees at Kerala's Cochin port are maintaining indefinite strike action having walked out on April 26 over manning levels. Ships have been diverted to other ports and the government has deployed navy personnel to help clear the work backlog and break the strike.

On May 14, Cochin Port Trust (CPT) management said it would terminate the services of 14 striking probationers and warned other strikers that the walkout was a "service break" and would impact on pensions and other retirement benefits.

The port workers claim that CPT plans to introduce new manning scales that will cut jobs. Strikers said that employment has already been cut by

75 percent where the new manning levels have been introduced and by similar amounts at other port facilities.

Negotiations convened by Chief Central Labour Commissioner S.K. Mukhopadhyay in New Delhi on May 11 failed to resolve differences over the new manning scales between the All India Port and Dock Workers Federation and the management of 11 major ports. The union federation, however, has dropped previous threats to extend the strike to all other Indian ports after CPT management said it was prepared to hold further talks.

Indian tyre workers strike as Hyundai employees return

Nearly 5,000 employees at MRF's Arakkonam and Puducherry tyre-making plants in Tamil Nadu began indefinite strike action on May 9 over wages and union recognition. The workers are maintaining sit-in protests at both factories and have boycotted the Indian general elections. The MRF United Workers Union is not recognised by the management.

Workers want union recognition and a basic salary structure instead of piece-rate payments. MRF has launched court action accusing the union of illegally preventing the workers from voting.

MRF produces tyres for Hyundai Motor India in Chennai where 1,300 workers ended a 19-day strike on May 8. The walkout also involved a hunger strike and road blockade of the Commission of Labour office and resulted in the arrest of 900 strikers.

Hyundai Motor India Employees' Union members returned to work after management agreed to not take retaliatory action against strikers. The union and the company will hold talks under the auspices of the District Commissioner of Labor.

Indian nurses strike for pay and conditions

Around 200 nurses from the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Imphal, Manipur struck work for nine hours on May 12 (World Nursing Day). The walkout impacted on theatre surgery, casualty and outpatient services.

Their demands include rectification of pay anomalies, a uniform allowance (which has been pending for the past eight months), more nursing jobs and adequate supplies of oxygen and life-saving drugs.

The Trained Nurses Association of India-RIMS unit submitted their demands to the institute's director on April 2 with the ultimatum that the regular nurses would go on an indefinite strike from May 12 if the anomalies were not rectified. The nurses agreed to end their strike on the evening of May 12 after the medical superintendent, Y. Mohen Singh, invited them for talks.

Indian midday meal workers demonstrate

School midday meal workers in Mysore, Karnataka demonstrated on May 12 at the Mysore municipal council demanding a fixed 74-rupee (\$US1.50) daily wage for cooks and life insurance cover. Other claims, which include job security, no privatisation, maternity leave, on-time wage payments, new job guidelines and the provision of well-equipped kitchens in schools, were presented to the municipal council's chief executive officer.

The Karnataka State Akshara Dasoha (midday meal scheme) Workers' Association organised the protest.

Cambodia: Shots fired at protesting workers

Security police at the Chinese Embassy in Phnom Penh fired shots when over 100 protesting Chinese construction workers tried to enter the embassy on May 6 over a pay dispute. No one was hurt. Jiangsu Province First Construction Installation Company employees claim that firm's owners fled Cambodia, taking workers' passports and owing six months' back pay.

Later in the day embassy officials agreed to meet workers representatives and to issue papers so they could return home to China. Embassy officials claimed that they were unable to contact the construction company owners to resolve the outstanding wages.

Indonesian garment workers end strike

Over 800 employees of PT Pan Rama Sukoharjo in Grogol, Indonesia ended a two-day strike and picket at the factory gate on May 7 after the company agreed to workers' demands on work status. Details of the settlement were not reported.

PT Pan Rama Sukoharjo previously lowered the status of permanent and

contract employees to part-timers, lowering their wages by 30 percent. Workers also lost holiday pay and sick leave entitlements. For women, this meant no wages for time taken off for menstruation and maternity leave.

Displaced workers in West Java demonstrate

Hundreds of former employees of Texmaco Perkasa Engineering rallied outside the company's office in Karawang, West Java on May 11 demanding unpaid severance payments. The company produces precision machines, such as textile manufacturing equipment and two-stroke engines, and engine parts.

One demonstrator said that the company had failed to pay the full amount of severance pay due to over 1,190 employees who were laid off before 2004.

Philippines export zone workers down tools

Some 200 employees of lamp shade manufacturer Paul Yu in the Mactan Export Zone-II, Cebu downed tools and marched to the manager's office on May 8 demanding the resolution of longstanding grievances. They refused to return to work until their demands were met.

A spokesman for the workers said their main grievance was work outsourcing, which had halved their work-week. Other issues include permanency for irregular workers (who are forced to sign new contracts every two months), non-payment of holiday pay, paternity leave and break time.

Management agreed to hold joint discussions with employees and the Philippines Export Zone Authority.

Pay dispute strands iron ore carrier

Bulk iron ore carrier Grand Esmeralda remains anchored 500 metres off Geraldton, Western Australia after its 24-member Filipino crew went on strike and refused to sail last week. The crew claims that Newfront Shipping owes them \$US115,300 for two months' wages and fear that they'll be abandoned without wages or airfares home if the ship sails to China.

International Transport Workers Federation Australia acting co-ordinator Matt Purcell said the crew would not sail until the company paid their wages and gave assurances that they would be paid their fares back to the Philippines from China. He said the Greek owners of the vessel had

a history of not paying their workers.

“This mob are shockers,” Purcell said. “They owe money everywhere. My concern is they haven’t got it.” He said the same 24-member crew was involved in a similar dispute with Newfront in Canada where they successfully claimed \$US70,000 in unpaid wages.

Queensland teachers vote to strike

Queensland’s 37,000 teachers and administrators have voted for a 24-hour strike on May 19 to demand a new pay deal. Public schools across the state will be affected by the walkout. Teachers and staff want pay parity with their colleagues in other states.

The state Labor government has refused to increase its latest offer of a 12.5 percent wage rise over three years. Queensland Teachers’ Union president Steve Ryan said the government offer still meant that Queensland teachers would earn between \$4,000 and \$7,000 less than their interstate counterparts.

NSW health workers impose work bans

Health Services Union members in Orange and Bathurst, New South Wales imposed work bans last week to demand that the government address a shortage of allied health workers in their region. The bans include not reporting information to the Health Department and “working to rule”, which means they will take lunch breaks and not work unpaid overtime.

The union began action in the Industrial Relations Commission this week over the health workers’ claims.

Victorian metal workers protest sackings

Tieman Industries workers began protests this week at the company’s Thomastown plant in Melbourne over the sacking of 13 employees. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members said that the road haulage equipment manufacturer had plenty of work but was contracting it out.

Employees have also accused management of targeting specific workers. Union delegate Frank Bonicci said that the 13 workers who lost their jobs had been at the company for 11-18 years. He claimed they were targeted because they were active union members.

Victorian port workers call off planned strike

A strike planned for May 15 at the Port of Melbourne involving 200 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) was called off at the last minute with the union and employer agreeing to continue negotiations over pay demands.

MUA state secretary Kevin Bracken said the planned walk-out was a result of stalled negotiations between the union and stevedoring giant Asciano. “It’s been two-and-a-half years since we’ve had a pay rise,” Bracken told the local media. The company has offered a 5 percent increase for the next 18 months but wants concessions on penalties and other pay rates.

Auckland cleaners rally to highlight low pay

Cleaners from Auckland’s CBD held a lunchtime rally on May 14 over low pay. The demonstration was one week before national pay talks between employers and the Service and Food Workers Union to negotiate one of New Zealand’s largest collective agreements.

Union organiser Fala Haulangi said most cleaners were paid just five cents above the minimum hourly wage of \$12.50. Cleaners will leaflet building tenants and city workers in the lead-up to next week’s negotiations.

PNG mine workers clash with Chinese managers

Around 30 employees were injured and five hospitalised on May 10 when construction workers at the Chinese-owned Ramu nickel mine in Papua New Guinea confronted management over an accident involving a native worker.

PNG nationals employed on the site accused the company of discrimination after one of their colleagues was seriously injured in a work accident and transported to hospital by boat and not by helicopter, as is the normal procedure.

Mine-owner China Metallurgical has been accused by PNG officials of forcing locals to work in sub-standard conditions. Last August, local labourers walked out over poor working conditions at the isolated project.



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