Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 May 2010

India: Mumbai rail workers strike

On May 3, 1,000 motormen from the central and western railway services in Mumbai walked off the job and held a protest hunger strike to demand salary increases as per the Sixth Pay Commission. At least 50 trains were cancelled, impacting on 80 percent of services during the 24-hour strike.

Around 170 striking motormen were taken into custody at the Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus on trumped-up charges of unlawful assembly and obstructing rail employees from reporting for duty. The motormen were left isolated by other unions, including the National Railway Mazdoor Union, the Central Railway Mazdoor Sangh and the Rail Kamgar Sena, which did not support the strike. The strike was called off after the Maharashtra state government threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act if the motormen failed to return to work by 3 p.m. on May 4.

The government has agreed to enter negotiations and consider the motormens' additional demands, which include a per-kilometre allowance calculated on the distances travelled each day, extra overtime pay and a near 50 percent rise in salaries for assistant drivers. Assistant drivers are currently paid 1,900 rupees ($US41) per month.

About 1,700 taxi drivers from the Meru Cab Company in Mumbai also struck on May 4 over pay and conditions.

Punjab health workers arrested prior to protest

State police have been arresting and detaining anganwadi (health) workers since May 1st in an attempt to prevent them joining a hunger strike protest outside the Punjab chief minister's residence in Mukstar. Police and civil authorities have also begun fortifying the chief minister's residence in anticipation of the arrival of thousands of protesting health workers.

Anganwadi Workers Union state president Hargobind Kaur said workers would be sent daily from across the state to participate in a "relay-fast" at the chief minister's residence to demand a wage increase on par with colleagues in other Indian states. The health workers also want allowance increases and vacancies filled according to the new seniority list.

Anganwadi workers and helpers, who are only paid 2,100 rupees ($US47.20) a month, work in the state-operated Integrated Child Development Scheme which caters for the health and pre-school education needs of infants and young children and the health and nutritional needs of pregnant women, nursing mothers and adolescent girls.

Bangladeshi job applicants end protest

On May 4, some 8,000 workers who had applied for work in South Korea ended a day-long protest at the Bangladesh Overseas Employment and Services Ltd (BOESL) office in Dhaka after authorities agreed to deal with their grievances. Protesters claimed that due to BOESL negligence over several years thousands of applications for jobs in South Korea had not been processed.

Many workers complained they had registered with the government's Bureau of Manpower, Employment and Training (BMET) five years ago, passed the language test and underwent medical examinations each year while waiting for a job. A BOESL spokesman admitted processing application "errors" and agreed to hold talks with the protesters and other government departments involved to resolve the issue.

Indonesian food processing workers strike

More than 500 employees of food seasoning maker PT Ajinomoto in Mojokerto Regency, East Java walked off the job and rallied outside the plant on May 4. Workers were demanding a 10.75 percent rise wage rise following three years of increased profits by the company.

The Indonesian Workers Union (Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia) said negotiations between workers and the company reached deadlock and the union will call for three party talks involving the manpower office.

Western Australia power-station workers walk out

On May 5, over 200 workers walked off the job at Muja Power Station, 200km south of Perth, over asbestos exposure and refused to return until the state-owned operator Verve Energy guaranteed their safety. The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) claims that areas known to contain asbestos are left open and without appropriate safety warnings.

The walk-out is being interpreted as an unlawful industrial action by Verve contractor United Group, which has applied to Fair Work Australia (FWA) for a return to work order. An AMWU official said the union would be contesting the application on the grounds that it was an occupational health and safety matter and had nothing to do with FWA.

The workers were hired by the United Group to carry out a multi-million dollar overhaul of one of the ageing coal-fired power station's units. The union claims that Verve had failed to adhere to its own policies by not swabbing allegedly asbestos contaminated areas.

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Telstra technicians strike in Victoria

An estimated 1,000 communications technicians at Telstra, Australia's largest telco, walked off the job on May 5 in Victoria over their 18-month long dispute for a new union-negotiated Enterprise Agreement (EA). Over 200 Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members rallied at Telstra's T[life] retail store in Swanson Street, Melbourne demanding a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years that will give them pay parity with Telstra technicians on employee collective agreements (ECAs).

Telstra is offering 10 percent over three years with annual performance bonuses of up to 2.5 percent, which the technicians claim are almost impossible to achieve. Telstra also wants to "simplify processes" for redundancy allowing managers to pick and choose who they want to terminate. The CEPU claims the company offer could be up to $10,000 a year worse off than Telstra workers on individual contracts.

Telstra CEPU members have not had a wage increase for over two years. In an attempt to reduce worker discontent during stalled negotiations, Telstra has granted an interim 2 percent pay increase backdated to February this year. The interim rise, along with what members describe as "ineffective" ongoing work bans, are part of a softening up process designed to drag out the dispute and push CEPU members into accepting an agreement acceptable to Telstra management.

New South Wales unionists protest non-union agreement at new coal loader

About 100 union members protested at the opening of the Newcastle Coal Infrastructure Group (NCIG) coal-loading port facility in Newcastle on May 3. Members from five unions—Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), Transport Workers Union (TWU), Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU)—were protesting against the non-union work contracts imposed on 21 employees at the new facility.

According to union officials, NCIG employees' pay and conditions are grossly inferior to those at the adjacent Port Waratah loader. Unions claim base rates of pay are 17 percent lower than under a union agreement, leave loading is only 17 percent compared to 45 percent, superannuation contributions 9 percent as against 16.9 percent and overtime rates marginally lower.

New Zealand retail workers strike

JB Hi-Fi employees at stores in Auckland and Wellington struck for a half-day on May 1st to protest against the company's zero percent pay rise. The Unite union organised marches to the pickets, claiming that 100 attended in Wellington and 40 in Auckland. The action follows random stoppages at the Wellington store in the preceding week and half-day stoppages on April 9 and April 16.

Unite organiser Omar Hamed said workers would take "rolling, sporadic industrial action" across the country until the company offers to raise wages. JB Hi-Fi has nine retail outlets in New Zealand and, according to Unite, the Australian-owned company is expected to make over $A150 million profit this year.

Ministry of Justice workers accept union deal

After five months of bitter strikes and a work-to-rule, 1,700 Ministry of Justice (MoJ) employees across New Zealand have voted by 80 percent to accept a new pay deal. The Public Service Association (PSA) deal delivers a miniscule 1.5 percent pay increase from mid-2011 with no back pay. MoJ workers earn between 6 and 9 percent below the average pay of other public sector employees.

Despite strong calls for an end to the MoJ's performance-pay system, the union has agreed to retain it in a modified form, which leaves it open for manipulation by the employer. The PSA has also agreed to a staff restructure in which an estimated 70 staff will either be transferred to other departments or made redundant.

One worker told the media: "We took five months of tough industrial action against an aggressive Ministry. And what do we get? The union bureaucrats have estimated that 70 redundancies will occur because of the cost of our tiny pay increase. I didn't strike to get my fellow workers laid off. We are overworked enough as it is, most of us have to work overtime to meet our crippling workloads. Cutting jobs back just means more work for us."

The PSA repeatedly stated during the long-running dispute that it was prepared to work with the MoJ to "reduce their costs by finding ways of working together more efficiently, identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity."

Papua New Guinea contract workers occupy government building

Cleaners and gardeners contracted by the Lae city council last week stormed the Lae provincial treasury office and padlocked themselves inside demanding payment for services. The occupation ended when police were called to remove them.

The workers claim they have not been paid since February 2009 for services provided to the council and provincial administration, and can no longer afford fuel for lawn mowers and other basic equipment. They blame the delay on corruption within the council.

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