

# 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.*

## India: Manipur government arrests striking public servants

On May 17, police raided the Bapupara office of the Joint Administrative Council (JAC) of All Manipur Trade Unions Congress (AMTUC) and arrested 60 unionists after JAC leaders walked out on a meeting with the Manipur state government and refused to end a five-month strike by government employees. The detained JAC officials and striking supporters are being charged under the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA).

Manipur government employees struck on January 16 to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. The government eventually began paying commission rises from April but claims it does not have enough money to pay the arrears, which date back to 2006.

Three days before the JAC walkout, leaders of the Manipur Secretariat Services Association and the Manipur Secretariat Non-Ministerial Drivers' Association reached an agreement with the government and ordered their members back to work.

## Bangladeshi river-vessel workers end strike

The Bangladesh River Vessel Workers' Federation called off a national strike by 150,000 of its members on May 15 after the government and vessel owners agreed to revise pay scales and correct wage structure inconsistencies. The government has also agreed to drop charges against workers and union officials arrested during the dispute.

The river-vessel workers walked off the job on May 7 after the government set their minimum monthly salary at 2,850 taka (\$US41). Although this represented a 100 percent increase for many, it fell far short of the union's original demand for a 5,000-taka (\$US71) monthly minimum salary. The workers have not had a pay increase since 2004.

A four-day strike in March over a 22-point log of claims was ended after the government agreed to form a committee to fix up the wage structure and set a minimum wage.

## Bangladeshi police attack garment workers

At least 15 people were injured when police, assisted by Rapid Action Battalion personnel, baton-charged demonstrating garment workers on May 13 at Mirpur in Dhaka. Witnesses said several hundred Arizua Fashion employees walked off the job to demand unpaid wages and allowances. The strikers said they had not been paid for two months and some had been evicted from their homes because they could not pay the rent.

Workers ended their protest after police and local authorities assured them that company management would meet their demands. Similar assurances have been made on two previous occasions.

## China: Nikon employees strike

Around 5,000 workers from Nikon Imaging's Wuxi plant walked off the job on May 8 to protest gas poisoning and to demand compensation. Nikon employees have been complaining of nausea and vomiting since late April following the apparent release of sulphur dioxide in the area. At least 50 workers were affected and several required hospital treatment.

Nikon employees have rejected claims by Wuxi authorities that the plant was safe and that the gas came from an "unknown" source. Around 200 workers maintained a protest at the factory for several days after the one-day strike.

## Apple electronics workers to sue

Some 44 employees from an Apple iPad LCD plant in Shenzhen, China have begun legal action against Wintek, the factory owner, for alleged poisoning. Over 2,000 Wintek workers walked off the job in January after 62 employees were hospitalised after using an iPad screen cleaner supplied by the management. According to media reports, the banned substance, which is called n-hexane, releases a toxic nerve gas.

Shenzhen authorities have accused Wintek managers of repeatedly deceiving investigators attempting to discover the cause of the poisonings.

## South Korean teachers protest

On May 16 around 5,000 teachers rallied in Yeouido, western Seoul, against President Lee Myung-bak's education policies. The Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTEWU), representing 80,000 teachers, wants government reforms to include less dependence on private

education, strengthening of welfare in education and an end to education policies that create “unnecessary” competition.

This is the first rally by teachers since police raided the KTEWU offices in July last year. Around 17,000 unionised teachers were accused of violating the Civil Servants’ Law after signing a KTEWU petition criticising the Lee government’s education policies and its attacks on civil liberties.

Earlier this month, 183 teachers were indicted by the Seoul Central District Prosecutors’ Office for paying monthly membership dues to an opposition political party. According to authorities, over 1,700 teachers are members of the Democratic Labor Party. South Korean law bans teachers from involvement in political activities.

### **Pakistan court orders power workers to end industrial action**

The Sindh High Court has ordered workers at the Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) to end industrial action over the retrenchment of 250 colleagues. Workers have been observing a “pen and tool-down” strike for several hours each day to demand reinstatement of the retrenched workers.

A joint action committee of KESC unions protested outside the Karachi Press Club this week and accused company management of retrenching workers and using the dispute to cover up its poor performance. Karachi residents and businesses regularly endure long blackouts due to lack of government spending on new infrastructure and maintenance. This week the *News International* accused KESC of reducing power production in order to save on fuel costs.

Power blackouts are a regular occurrence in all Pakistani major cities. Union leaders have accused the government of letting the power infrastructure deteriorate so it can justify large scale privatisation, as demanded by the International Monetary Fund.

### **Pakistan leather workers strike over killing**

At least 30,000 leather workers struck on May 19 to protest against the alleged killing of Muhammad Shehbaz at Jaffery Tanneries. The strike closed all leather and garment factories in Sector 7-A of Korangi Industrial Area in Karachi.

Workers allege that Shehbaz was killed during a police interview at the workplace. While the police have submitted a report against two policemen, workers insist that there were four police involved in the incident which killed Shehbaz.

The All-Pakistan Leather Workers’ Union is seeking compensation from the Pakistan Tanneries Association for the leather worker’s family.

### **New South Wales coal miners strike**

For the second time in two weeks, miners at Xstrata’s Ulan underground coal mine in the Hunter Valley, west of Newcastle, walked off the job to demand an improved Enterprise Agreement. The 48-hour strike on May 14 by members of the United Mineworkers Federation of Australia, a division of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union CFMEU, was called to protest the company’s latest pay offer—an

improvement of just 11 cents per hour.

Details of the union’s demands and the company’s offer have not been released to the media.

### **Queensland public hospital staff walk out**

Operational staff at the Gladstone Hospital, north of Brisbane, walked off the job on May 19 to protest ongoing payroll errors. Australian Workers Union members, including ward, catering, cleaning, maintenance and gardening staff, said that 10 weeks after the introduction of the new Queensland Health (QH) payroll system hospital employees were underpaid by half an hour each day and are not being paid overtime and allowances.

Thousands of QH employees across the state, including doctors and nurses, have been incorrectly paid or not paid at all because of problems with the new payroll system.

Prince Charles Hospital workers in Brisbane protested this week over the issue. They told the media that casual nurses were rejecting shifts because there was no guarantee they would be paid.

Queensland Health Director-General Mick Reid claimed the number of workers receiving no pay was diminishing but indicated that the problem would continue for some time because there was “no easy fix”.

### **Australian Capital Territory public servants vote for industrial action**

ACT public servants have overwhelmingly voted for industrial action after pay negotiations with the territory government stalled. Nearly 90 percent of Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) member who voted rejected a 4.75 percent pay rise over two years from the government. CPSU official Vince McDevitt complained: “This pay offer doesn’t even match inflation; it’s a pay cut.” Australia’s national annual inflation rate currently stands at 2.9 percent.

The union planned a lunchtime rally this week in Canberra and said it would apply to Fair Work Australia to approve protective strike action.

### **Melbourne parking officers protest**

Around 50 parking officers employed by Melbourne City Council held a protest rally at the Melbourne Town Hall on May 18 to protest management bullying and unsafe working conditions. Australian Services Union members complained that managers were pressuring parking officers to increase the number of parking fines. One worker said, “If you come in with five [parking tickets] then you’re pulled in and questioned about your productivity. They’re being told that their jobs are at risk,” he said.

Workers are also concerned that the extension of paid parking from 7.30 p.m. until midnight would increase tension between officers and angry drivers.

### **New Zealand: Power line engineers to take industrial action**

Eighty engineers at Electrix, a contractor for Auckland's Vector power line network, announced last week that they will begin industrial action on June 1. The work-to-rule action, which includes a ban on overtime, callout and standby arrangements, was called to oppose the company's practice of using less skilled contractors on lower wages.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman Joe Gallagher said the union was "taking this action as a last resort after the new employer tried to drive down terms and conditions in our industry."



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