

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 May 2010

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

Air India unions call off strike

About 25,000 striking Air India (AI) employees returned to work on May 26 ending a 48-hour strike that caused the cancellation of over 140 flights and affected over 20,000 passengers. The six unions representing the workers called off the strike after the Delhi High Court ruled the strike illegal and AI had sacked 15 engineers and suspended 17 union officials. The court restraint on industrial action will remain in force until June 16 when the court will meet again.

The strike began after management prevented employees from speaking to the media about an AI plane crash at Mangalore on May 22. AI issued the gag order after All India Air Engineers Association general secretary Y.V. Raju told the media that the company asked him to issue an air-worthiness certificate for the fated plane hours after it overshot the airport's runway and crashed, killing 158 of the 166 people on board.

Air India has a fleet of 136 aircraft and employs 30,000 people. Parent company, National Aviation of India, is expected to post a loss of \$US1.2 billion for the fiscal year ended March 31, 2010 and is planning to reduce staff numbers by 50 percent and streamline its fleet.

Strikers were also protesting six months of delayed salary payments and low staffing of cabin crews. Last year, pilots launched a five-day strike to protest against an attempt to trim performance-linked pay.

Indian beedi workers demonstrate

On May 22, Nizamabad beedi cigarette workers in Andhra Pradesh rallied at the Labor Welfare Department office and the Heeralal Prabhuram Company to demand a wage increase, dearness allowance and 12 weeks' maternity leave. Protesters said they only receive 85.75 rupees (\$US1.82) for rolling 1,000 cigarettes, which is less than an unskilled agriculture worker. They want 120 rupees per thousand beedies.

A Joint Action Committee (JAC) comprising the Indian Federation of Trade Unions, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, All India Trade Union Congress, All India Federation of Trade Unions and Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh organised the protest. The JAC claimed beedi workers are still being paid according to an agreement reached in 2000 and want companies to pay wages in accordance with a 2008 agreement.

Manipur non-teaching staff on strike

Administrative staff at the Regional Institute of Medical Sciences, a medical college and hospital in Manipur, India, walked off the job on May 21 to protest non-payment of salaries for two months. Strikers warned that if authorities failed to pay salaries to its 1,700 employees they will extend the action to include the outpatient and emergency departments and laboratory works.

Nagaland government employees on strike

All government offices in the Indian state of Nagaland were closed from May 24 to 26 because of a three-day strike by Confederation of All Nagaland State Services Employees Association members. The association wants wage rises on par with central government employees who have been granted Sixth Pay Commission increases.

An association spokesman said that the government has refused a pay an increase because it claimed staff had "no fundamental right" to the rise. The government has agreed to form a committee and hold talks with the association.

Pakistani communications and engineering workers protest outsourcing

Pakistan Communication and Works (C&W) Department employees marched in Rawalpindi, Punjab and rallied at the Liaquat Bagh Park on May 24 to oppose state government plans to abolish the department and outsource 100,000 jobs.

The demonstrators, who carried placards condemning the government, were addressed by All Pakistan Muttahida Action Committee President Muhammad Safdar. He told the rally that long-time employees, such as engineers, assistant engineers and draftsmen, would be affected. Workers warned that they would block all roads from Peshawar to Karachi if the state government tried to implement its plan.

Pakistani government workers demand national pay increase

On May 19, members of the All Pakistan Government Employees Federation marched through Islamabad and rallied outside parliament to

demand a 100 percent pay rise. Demonstrators complained that their wages had not kept pace with inflation and threatened a hunger strike if the government failed to address their demands.

Bangladeshi rock miners end strike

Nearly 300 striking hard rock miners at the Madhyapara Granite Mining Company (MGPCL) in Dinajpur ended a three-day strike begun on May 23 after management agreed to implement their demands within twelve months. The MGPCL Sramik-Karmachari Union wants regularisation of all jobs and payment of salary and allowance arrears.

Around 100 management and administrative staff were trapped in the administrative block by picketing workers during the strike action.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers demonstrate

Workers of privately owned jute mills in the Khulna-Jessore region rallied at Shiromoni in Khulna on May 23 for a wage increase and other demands. Workers complained that their basic monthly wage of 560 taka (\$US8.00) had not been increased in 26 years while wages at state-owned jute mills had increased three times during this time.

Their other demands include reintroduction of festival allowance, same wage for same work, the payment of all benefits to sacked or retired workers, group insurance for workers, medical allowance and the regularisation of casual workers. Private Jute, Textile and Rope Mills CBA Coordination Action Committee speakers proposed further action if demands are not met.

More attacks against garment workers by Bangladeshi authorities

On May 25, over 25 garment workers were hospitalised when police fired 30 tear gas shells and rubber bullets at several hundred workers from different factories who had gathered on the Dhaka-Sylhet and Dhaka-Chittagong highways in Kachpur, Narayanganj to oppose house rent increases.

On May 22, in two separate incidences, around 20 garment workers were injured in clashes with authorities. Several hundred Setara Garments employees in Ashulia, Dhaka were attacked by security guards assisted by the police and the Rapid Action Battalion when they walked off the job in protest over the sacking of a colleague. On the same day, 100 workers of AJ Garments in Ashulia were violently attacked by hired goons, when they struck to demand removal of a supervisor for assaulting two employees.

Sri Lankan nurses protest

Around 150 nurses from the National Hospital together with university students picketed the hospital on May 25 to demand the University Grants Commission (UGC) revoke its decision to reduce the duration of the Nursing Degree. Nurses said that they would extend the protest to the

other hospitals, such as Kurunegala and Kalubowila Teaching Hospitals, and hold a national protest if the UGC failed to meet their demands.

Last month the UGC reduced the nurses' four-year degree program to three years. The All Ceylon Nurses Union claims this has lowered the quality of the nursing degree.

China: Honda auto worker on strike

Honda was forced to close two plants in China's Pearl River Delta region's Guangdong and Hubei provinces this week after a walkout by over 2,000 workers demanding a pay increase on May 17. The walkout is the first to affect Honda production facilities in China. The factories make transmissions and engine parts for the Accord, City Odyssey and Fit models. The auto workers are demanding monthly pay increases of between 2,000 and 2,500 yuan. They are currently paid 1,500 yuan per month.

South Korean teachers sacked for political activities

South Korea's Education, Science and Technology Minister announced this week the government's plans to sack 134 of 183 teachers who have been indicted by the Seoul Central District Prosecutors' Office for paying monthly membership dues to an opposition political party. Fifty of the teachers, who publicly denounced the government last year, will be dismissed without pensions and other benefits due to civil servants. South Korean law bans teachers from involvement in political activities.

According to authorities, over 1,700 teachers are members of the Democratic Labor Party. Around 17,000 unionised teachers were disciplined last year on accusations of violating the Civil Servants' Law after signing a Korean Teachers and Education Workers Union (KTEWU) petition criticising the Lee government's education policies and its attacks on civil liberties.

Earlier this month, 5,000 teachers rallied in Seoul against President Lee Myung-bak's education policies. The KTEWU, which represents 80,000 teachers, wants education reforms to include less dependence on private education, strengthening of welfare in education and an end to education policies that create "unnecessary" competition. The KTEWU is also at odds with the administration over state-run standardised exams for elementary and secondary school students, and teacher evaluation programs.

Malaysian cable workers picket

About 200 members of the Electrical Industry Workers' Union (EIWU) are picketing Federal Power Cables, a high voltage cable manufacture in Shah Alam, 40 km from Kuala Lumpur. The union reported that a "heavy police presence" has been monitoring the picket since it was established on May 19.

Workers claim that the company has refused to grant the contractual bonus and annual wage increments to more than 300 workers. The EIWU has accused the company of union busting by offering workers better conditions if they resign from the union.

Western Australian health workers locked out

Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members were temporarily locked out by Peel Health Campus management in Mandurah, south of Perth, for wearing t-shirts in the work place which read “Lowest paid hospital worker in WA” and “Privatisation stinks” on May 24. The workers include enrolled nurses, patient care assistants, orderlies, kitchen staff and cleaners. They were allowed to return to work after they removed their t-shirts.

The 181-bed hospital, with a staff of over 300, is owned by Health Solutions WA and part of a private/public partnership. The hospital is run privately as part of the public hospital system for the Western Australian government. LHMU members, who have not had a pay rise for 17 months, rejected the hospital’s latest pay rise offer of 9.25 percent over three years with no back pay and the loss of sick leave penalties.

Following the lockout, workers said they would accept the limited wage rise offer if it includes nine months’ back pay and retention of their sick leave penalties. This will be a pay decrease in real terms. The current consumer price index annual inflation rate for the state is 3.4 percent and projected to be over 4 percent for the next 12-month period. The union originally demanded a wage increase of 12.5 percent over three years and a 13 percent increase in superannuation entitlements.

Canberra bus drivers’ union calls off industrial action

Industrial action by the Australian Capital Territory’s 600 government bus drivers, set for May 24, was called off at the last minute by the Transport Workers Union (TWU) after ACTION Bus management threatened to deduct 70 percent of drivers’ pay if they implemented a proposed ban on fares collection. The TWU said it would wait for a ruling from Fair Work Australia (FWA) on the legality of the bus company’s threat before going ahead with the bans. Meanwhile, FWA has called for further meetings between the parties.

Canberra bus drivers won permission from FWA in April to hold a strike ballot after reaching an impasse in enterprise bargaining negotiations but ruled that the union must give the company five days’ notice before taking strike action.

Melbourne cemetery workers on strike

About 80 grave diggers, gardeners and other staff walked off the job at the Springvale Botanical Cemetery, Melbourne on May 27 to demand pay parity with other cemetery workers. Australian Workers Union (AWU) state secretary Cesar Melhem said Springvale workers were paid 17 percent less than workers at the adjacent Fawkner Cemetery.

Earlier, at a Fair Work Australia hearing, Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust offered to increase its pay offer from 12 percent over three years to an amount that will put Springvale workers on par with the Fawkner workers, but insisted on reducing conditions in return.

The Springvale cemetery is one of Australia’s largest and performs about 2,000 burials a year and about 6,500 cremations. Workers continued the strike into the next day while talks proceeded.

New South Wales coal train drivers call off proposed strike

Forty-eight hour strike action by 350 Pacific National train drivers has been called off. The coal train drivers were due to walk off the job at midnight May 28 in the Hunter Valley, Lithgow and the Illawarra in a dispute over pay negotiations.

Rail, Tram and Bus Union members voted to stay on the job after the union reached an in-principle agreement for a 15 percent pay rise over three years. The union currently has the same in-principle agreement covering other divisions in Pacific National.

Virgin Blue engineers’ union accepts pay offer

The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association this week recommended its members at Virgin Blue accept the company’s latest pay offer which it says includes a 4 percent pay rise for this year and offers job security. Details have not been released to the media.

In April, the engineers endorsed industrial action to demand a 4 percent annual pay increase and an extra week’s leave as part of a new collective agreement. Engineers were also concerned that management want to use baggage handlers in roles previously carried out by engineers.

New Zealand electrical retail workers maintain industrial action

JB Hi-Fi employees struck and picketed stores in Wellington and Auckland on May 21 and 25 respectively to oppose a zero percent pay rise. The Auckland store picket was restricted by Westfield management who forced the Unite union members to keep their protest within the JB Hi-Fi store.

The workers are only paid 75 cents above the minimum wage of \$12.75 (\$US9.00) an hour. A campaign of “rolling, sporadic industrial action” has been on-going since April 9 and Unite has pledged to continue until the company offers to raise wages. JB Hi-Fi has nine retail outlets in New Zealand.

Solomon Islands teachers issue strike notice

About 20 teachers at the Lata Community High School, in the Solomon Islands’ Temotu province, issued a 14-day strike notice on May 19, after ending a two-day sit-in protest to demand payment of housing allowances. The teachers say the allowances have not been paid since 2004.



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