

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 June 2011

Pakistan power workers' strike in fifth week

Thousands of Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers are continuing strike action begun on April 30 against the plans to transfer regular workers onto contracts. Workers are also opposed to the placement of over 4,000 KESC reinstated employees into a "surplus pool". They fear that the reinstated workers could be retrenched again and then rehired through a sub-contracting company.

KESC Labour Union members have established a protest camp outside the Karachi Press Club and are picketing KESC offices and depots. Three days of talks this week between KESC management and the union's Collective Bargaining Agent (CBA) failed after the company demanded strikers return to work and normalise power services. KESC has ignored a number of requests from the government, which is under pressure from Karachi businesses and residents over power blackouts, to transfer the 4,000 workers in the surplus pool back on to full duties.

KESC management has attempted to force the government to ban the strike by dragging out negotiations and falsely claiming that the escalation of power outages was caused by strikers sabotaging equipment.

Pakistani doctors sacked for striking

At least 127 doctors have been sacked and over 1,000 resigned in a two-month dispute with the Balochistan provincial government over wages and conditions. Members of the Balochistan Young Doctors Association (YDA) began limited strike action on May 1 affecting services at most hospitals in the province. The government ordered the health department to begin sacking striking doctors from Monday under the Essential Services Act 2000. On Wednesday the Pakistan Medical Association Balochistan chapter called for "complete" strike by doctors in all the province's hospitals.

The YDA wants pay and allowance parity with colleagues in the federal capital. Another issue is hospital security, which doctors want, improved. In April a colleague was abducted from the Bolan Medical College and murdered. YDA President Abdul Samad Panezi told a rally outside government offices in Quetta, "We are not afraid of losing jobs, and our protest will continue till our demands are met."

India: Andhra Pradesh power workers protest

Around 300 contract employees at AP Transco, the state's power distributor, protested outside at company's offices in Hyderabad on

Monday to demand a wage increase and the transfer of contract employees into 30,000 vacant posts. Police intervened and detained at least 290 protesters for several hours. The demonstration was organised by the United Electricity Employees Union.

Mumbai air cargo workers walk out

Around 8,000 cargo handling workers at the Sahar Cargo Complex owned by Mumbai International Airport Limited (MIAL) walked off the job for 24 hours on May 26. Their demands include increased staffing levels, improved infrastructure and an end to corruption. The strikes allege that they work until 3 a.m. daily to clear the consignments because of low staffing numbers.

A spokesman for the workers said that since MIAL took over Mumbai airport in 2006 there has been a 300 percent increase in import and export cargo but the infrastructure and storage capacity remains the same as it was in 1999.

Bihar doctors walk out after colleague bashed to death

Over 10,000 doctors in Bihar state-run hospitals and clinics walked off the job for 24 hours on May 31 to demand improved security for doctors working in dangerous conditions. The walkout was sparked when Bhudeo Singh, a prison doctor in Gopalganj district, was fatally beaten after he refused to issue fake certificates to seven prisoners stating they were too ill to be moved to another jail.

Health clinics were closed, hospital outpatient departments deserted and operations in state-run hospitals were postponed. The Bihar chapter of the Indian Medical Association supported their demands but did not join the strike.

Gorakhpur textile workers occupy factories

Hundreds of locked out VN Dyers workers have been occupying the company's yarn mill in Gorakhpur since Monday in a long-running dispute over wages. Other demands include reinstatement of 18 colleagues who were sacked during the lock-out and compensation for 19 workers hospitalised from injuries inflicted by company thugs who fired upon them on May 3 while they demonstrated in the factory compound.

The textile workers occupied the yarn mill after the owners announced

that they would restart the mill with new employees. A large number of workers are on vigil outside the factory and have been supplying food to the protesting employees inside. While armed police have been mobilised, the textile workers have refused to leave the mill until all the dismissed workers are reinstated and management announces it will restart the mills without any conditions.

Cambodian police block garment workers' protest

About 200 Phnom Penh police blocked a protest march by former June Textile garment employees on May 25. The workers have been demanding severance payments since the facility burned down in March. At least 100 workers, led by the Cambodian Confederation of Unions, planned to march from the remains of the factory in San Sok to government offices in Phnom Penh.

On May 8, eight workers were seriously injured and two union representatives arrested when riot police used electric batons in an attempt to disperse 1,000 June Textile workers protesting in the city.

At least 4,000 workers were laid off after the factory blaze. They have accepted a \$US36 redundancy payment for each employee but rejected an offer of an additional \$20 for every year of employment. The workers want this increased to \$150 for each year of service.

According to the Garment Manufacturers Association, the fire qualified as an "act of God" under Cambodia's Labour Law and therefore June Textile does not owe additional severance payments. It claimed the \$20 offer was a gesture of "compassion" and not a legal requirement. The sacked workers have vowed to continue protesting until their demand is met.

Sydney private hospital nurses vote on industrial action

About 130 New South Wales Nurses Association (NSWNA) members employed by Macquarie Hospital Services (MHS) at four private hospitals in Sydney are voting on whether to take industrial action to improve their pay rates and protect current allowances. The postal ballot is being conducted by the Australian Electoral Commission and closes on June 7. Industrial action under consideration by nurses includes 24-hour stoppages and a various work bans.

NSWNA general secretary Brett Holmes said the union has been attempting to secure a new work agreement with MHS since September 2009. The current agreement expired in March 2010. MHS has offered a pay rise of 6.5 percent over three years and reductions in allowances. According to the NSWNA, MHS wage rates are 12 percent below public hospital pay and 8.5 percent below other private hospital rates. MHS registered nurses earn \$7,500 less than their counterparts in other private hospitals.

Nurses want five percent annual pay rises over three years and the maintenance of all current allowances.

North shore medical staff protest

Medical staff from the Royal North Shore Hospital, including hundreds of doctors and nurses, marched through Sydney's CBD on May 31 to

protest against a \$1 billion redevelopment plan for the hospital. They rallied outside parliament to demand that the development plans, which were initiated by the former state Labor government and designed to deliver 434 medical and surgical beds, be upgraded to over 500 hospital beds. A petition with 14,000 signatures supporting the demand was presented to the NSW Liberal government.

Western Australian firefighters protest

Around 300 members of the United Firefighters Union (UFU) rallied outside the Western Australian parliament on Tuesday to protest over stalled negotiations on a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Firefighters want a 17 percent pay rise over three years and no change to current shift arrangements. The Fire and Emergency Services Authority has offered a 13 percent increase over three years and a change to roster arrangements that puts restrictions on back-to-back shifts citing fatigue and safety concerns.

Firefighters want to retain back-to-back shifts which allow them to make rostering arrangements and organise days off to attend family events or attend to private business. UFU state secretary Graeme Geer said there was no safety basis to remove or limit back-to-back shifts and no evidence that multiple shifts had ever been the cause of an injury or death in WA.

The union has banned participation in the planning and preparation of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting to be held in Perth in October. Negotiations for a new work agreement have been ongoing for three months.

Tasmanian power workers implement bans

At least 200 employees of the state-owned power utility Aurora Energy began state-wide industrial action on Thursday banning power reconnections to homes and businesses. Over 600 members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union voted last month for industrial action after negotiations for a new enterprise agreement reached deadlock.

The workers want a pay rise of up to 18 percent over three years to bring them in line with interstate workers and Aurora's contractors. The company has only offered 4.5 percent over the same period, claiming that the company had a duty to minimise costs to keep power prices for consumers low. Within hours of the bans being implemented Aurora told the media it intended to revise its offer and return to the negotiating table.

New Zealand university academics vote for strike

Over 300 academic staff at Auckland University (AU) have voted for escalating industrial action in their dispute for a new collective agreement. Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members are in favour of "lightning" strikes and withholding exam marks. However, the TEU has ordered no action to be taken until after the union meets with university management on June 20.

The university has offered a 4 percent pay rise, equivalent to the annual inflation rate, but academics rejected it because the agreement removes current agreements on key conditions, including research and study leave,

promotion and appointment criteria, and disciplinary guidelines. If the university's offer is accepted management could change these conditions without seeking agreement from staff.

TEU members have withheld their research portfolios from management. The ban will delay the university's application for continued funding under the government's Performance Based Research Fund. Under the PBRF, Auckland University received \$39 million in 2009, at a rate of \$24,000 per full-time academic.



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