

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 May 2012

## Tamil Nadu sugar mill workers' strike continues

Around 6,000 workers at 15 cooperative and two public sector sugar mills in the Vellore district have been on strike since April 4 to demand a pay rise and dearness allowance on par with government employees. After 15 rounds of talks between the Tamil Nadu Federation of All Trade Unions of Cooperative and Public Sector Sugar Mills and the Directorate of Sugars, workers rejected a 25 percent pay rise offer, far short of the 41 percent they have demanded.

On May 1, strikers picketed mills in Thanjavur, Salem, Coimbatore, Tirutani and Karaikudi and began two days of fasting. Mill workers struck twice last year over the issue, and again in February. The sugar unions, supported by the Labour Progressive Federation, called off the strikes as soon as the government issued meaningless commitments to resolve the issue.

## Tamil Nadu noon meal-workers on hunger strike

The Tamil Nadu Noon Meal Employees' Association called a state-wide three-day hunger strike from April 26 to demand better wages and pensions for tens of thousands of workers who provide daily meals for over 120 million children in the state's public schools.

The meal workers currently receive between 4,000 and 6,000 rupees (\$US110) a month, based on seniority, and a 500-rupee pension. The association also wants a better stipend for people working in remote schools and hill stations. Protesters in several cities were arrested for holding unapproved demonstrations.

## Jammu and Kashmir government employees strike again

For the fifth time in nine months, over 400,000 government employees of India's northern border state of Jammu and Kashmir will strike for two days on May 8 in a three-year dispute over pay and conditions. Their demands include payment of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and arrears, 7 percent dearness allowance, the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60, regular employment for 50,000 daily wage workers and ad hoc employees, and increased payments for Anganwadi (childcare) workers.

Despite full support from workers in all government departments, including teachers and health workers, the Joint Consultative Committee of Employees' Associations (JCCEA), representing 50 unions and associations, has called only limited stoppages. The JCCEA has called off strike action whenever the government has threatened to invoke the

Essential Services Maintenance Act, which bans strikes and can impose heavy fines or imprisonment on strikers.

## Bangalore University employees protest

Members of the Bangalore University Non Teaching Staff Union and the Teachers' Council protested at the university on April 30 to demand basic amenities on campus, health insurance, filling of vacancies and promotions. In addition, protesters demanded an end to the outsourcing of basic administrative functions and projects. More demonstrations are planned.

## Taiwan higher education teachers protest

On May 1, members of the Taiwan Higher Education Union, including part-time lecturers and research and teaching assistants, rallied in Taipei to protest the widening wage gap between themselves and their full-time colleagues. A petition was presented to the minister for education.

Protesters complained that when full-time faculty positions are reduced, university management replaces them with part-time instructors who are not entitled to pension and insurance.

## Cambodian garment workers strike

On May 2, thousands of garment workers from three factories in the Phnom Penh municipality struck to demand higher wages and fees for transportation and housing. Workers burned tyres and a union leader was allegedly punched and struck with an electric baton by factory supervisors.

At the SH clothing factory in the Choam Chao commune more than 700 workers have been on strike since April 19 in defiance of an Arbitration Council order for them to return to work. A Free Trade Union official said the strikers want a \$US10 a month transport allowance, \$10 rent assistance, a food allowance for overtime work, and a basic salary of \$70 a month. The official monthly minimum wage for Cambodian garment workers has not been revised since it was set at \$61 in July 2010.

Close to 700 workers protested outside the Lim Line factory in Russey Keo district with almost a dozen demands, including a \$10 accommodation allowance and the dismissal of a supervisor. In Kandal province 2,000 employees at the New Archid factory demonstrated

outside the factory to demand a \$10 transport allowance and better ventilation.

## **May Day in Asia**

Thousands of workers and students participated in May Day rallies throughout Asia on May 1. However, instead of calling for a wider movement to unite workers around the world, the union-led demonstrations directed workers' anger against poverty and social inequality into empty appeals to individual national governments. Processions usually ended with rallies at government buildings and petitions presented to politicians.

In **Bangladesh** hundreds of rallies were organised by unions and human rights groups calling for labour rights and immediate reform of the anti-democratic Labour Law-2006.

In **Hong Kong** over 3,000 people marched over the widening gap between the rich and poor. An estimated 1.3 million people in Hong Kong, or about 18 percent of the population, live below the poverty line. Workers called for the minimum hourly wage to be increased from \$US3.60 to \$4.20.

In **South Korea** 20,000 protesters marched through Seoul condemning President Lee Myung-bak and the government's big business policies. Journalists and production staff at Korea's largest public broadcasters, MBC, YTN and KBS have been on strike for the past four months protesting alleged political bias by management appointed by Lee.

In **Taiwan** over 2,000 people, mainly government employees, rallied in Taipei to protest poor working conditions, poverty and rising living costs.

In **Cambodia** nearly 10,000 workers marched to the National Assembly in Phnom Penh and presented petitions calling for factory workers' minimum monthly wage to be lifted from around \$US70 to \$131, better working conditions, lower fuel prices and other demands.

In **Malaysia** tens of thousands demonstrated in Kuala Lumpur where they were confronted with riot police, tear gas and more than 500 arrests. Protesters rallied at Independence Square calling for a minimum wage for all workers—not just the lowest paid—and democratic reforms of the electoral system.

In a separate protest almost 2,000 bank employees demonstrated for basic employee rights and called for the newly announced 900 ringgits monthly minimum wage to be increased to 1,500 ringgits (\$US300).

In **Indonesia** at least 160,000 people participated in rallies across the country, demanding better pay and working conditions, an end to outsourcing and more consideration from the government. Two thirds of the nation's police force was mobilised to monitor the rallies.

In **East Timor** police fired warning shots at 500 protesters calling for higher wages in Dili. More than 80 were arrested for holding an illegal demonstration. The half-island nation of 1.1 million people ranks is one of the world's poorest countries with 40 percent living in abject poverty. Unemployment in the country's two cities is over 20 percent and the national average is 50 percent.

## **Queensland public servants protest**

On May 1, the public sector union Together held rallies across Queensland over the state government's plan to retrench workers on temporary contracts. According to the union, more than 30,000 of Queensland's 250,000 public servants were on temporary contracts—most

of them employed on that basis for over 10 years. Temporary contracts have not been renewed since the Liberal National Party came to power on March 24.

Health, community and education departments are expected to face the highest jobs losses. A majority of workers will have their contracts up for renewal on June 30. The job destruction is part of government plans to cut \$2.8 billion from the state budget in the next 12 months.

## **Victorian mental health workers continue industrial action**

On May 2, over 350 psychiatric nurses, mental health clinicians and support staff from across Victoria met in Melbourne and voted to escalate strike action in their dispute with the state government for better wages and conditions. Industrial action that began on April 10 has involved a series two-hour rolling stoppages.

This week's vote follows months of failed negotiations since the current enterprise bargaining agreement expired on November 1. On top of an 18 percent pay rise over three years, the Health and Community Services Union (HCSU) wants more staff for night shifts and high-dependency units, and better training. The government has offered annual 2.5 percent increases over three years. Victoria's consumer price index for the last quarter of 2011 was 3.1 percent.

The HCSU said action would include escalation of their community and political campaign and a statewide ballot for longer rolling strikes.

## **Victorian public school teachers to vote for strike**

The Fair Work Australia industrial court has approved an application by the Australian Education Union (AEU), representing 32,000 teachers in Victoria's public schools, to hold a ballot for industrial action in their eight-month dispute with the Baillieu government for a pay increase. The AEU wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years and a reduction in the number of contract teachers in a new work agreement. The government is offering 2.5 percent per year, with any further increases offset by productivity gains.

The AEU told the media it was anticipating teachers would "overwhelmingly" vote for strike action, which would include a statewide strike in the first week of June ahead of a series of stop-work meetings.

## **New Zealand meat workers' strike continues**

Workers at meat processing plants of Affco on New Zealand's North Island have voted to maintain strike action after mediation talks with the Meat Workers Union (MWU) failed to reach agreement on a new collective agreement on May 1. Affco lifted a lockout on 300 employees at two of its plants but workers have refused to return. Around 500 remain locked out at the company's other plants.

Affco locked out workers at five of its eight plants on February 29 in response to strike action. The remaining workers have been on strike since April 13. Mediation talks will resume on May 7.

Affco workers oppose management demands for "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in the new agreement. The company aims to smash up longstanding work practices and alter manning levels and tally rates on

a shift-by-shift basis. Workers are covered by a core collective contract, with site agreements determining additional terms and conditions.

### **Nurses and doctors resign in Mariana Islands over budget cuts**

At least 30 nurses and four doctors at Saipan's Commonwealth Health Center (CHC) in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) have resigned in protest against hospital budget cuts. They are also demanding secure termination entitlements and pensions. CHC's director of nursing said that many nurses working off-island would also resign if their allowances were eliminated or reduced.

A health official told the media that the Commonwealth Health Care Corporation was only given \$5 million to cover personnel and operations at the hospital when they took over that responsibility from the Department of Public Health in October 2011. He claimed that the hospital's 600 staff would have to be reduced by 45 percent.

The budget cuts to the north-west Pacific US territory are part of the Obama administration's austerity measures. In March, six Mariana Island schools had their electricity cut because they could not pay their bills. Public servants' monthly hours were reduced by 16 hours from mid-2010 with a corresponding cut in wages. Food stamp benefits were cut by 13 percent on May 1, following a 34 percent cut in May last year.



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