

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 May 2013

India: Kerala airport workers strike

International flights operated by seven airlines at the Trivandrum airport in Kerala were disrupted on May 13 when cabin-cleaning and baggage-handling contractors for Air India and Air India Express International Flights, staged a wildcat strike. It followed the failure of negotiations over wages and conditions with their employer India SATS Airports Services (AISATS).

Airport authorities used scab labour to move cargo and demanded that AISATS replace the striking workers. AISATS is a joint venture between Air India and the Singapore Airport Terminal Services.

Andhra Pradesh auto dealer workers protest over sackings

Jasper Auto Services workers in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh demonstrated outside the company's premises on May 14 to oppose the sacking of 50 employees and the transfer of four others. Almost all workers had been at the car sales outlet for 25 years. They claimed to have been victimised for demanding a wage rise.

The protest was organised by the Stalinist CPI-affiliated All India Trade Unions Congress which urged workers to demand the Labor Department intervene on their behalf.

Bangladesh garment workers demonstrate

Thousands of garment workers from scores of factories in Ashulia, in the Savar industrial belt on the outskirts of Dhaka, staged street demonstrations on May 12 and 13 to demand better wages and job security. The protests blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway. Several workers were injured by baton-wielding police. Some workers, whose factories were located in the collapsed Rana Plaza building, demanded payment of outstanding wages.

Factory owners closed most of the plants in the area on Tuesday fearing the growing anger of workers over the death of 1,000 garment workers at the Rana Plaza building. Ongoing protests since the catastrophe have reduced garment production in Ashulia to 80 percent capacity. These plants account for 30 percent of Bangladesh's total garment exports.

On May 13 hundreds of garment workers of MBM Garments in the Mirpur area of Dhaka blocked the Mirpur road for several hours over

the sacking of 13 fellow workers. Police detained five workers during the protest.

Cambodian garment workers walk out

About 5,000 employees at the M&V garment factory in Kampong Chhnang province walked off the job on May 8 to protest the sacking of a factory manager who one employee said, "Would always help the workers when we had problems, we need him back at work."

Meanwhile, 700 workers from the Pine Great (Cambodia) garment factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district blocked the road outside the plant for half an hour, demanding due wages. A union official said workers had been promised wages the day before, but when they arrived at the factory the equipment and factory staff were missing.

In Kandal province's Ang Snuol district, 800 workers at Master&Frank protested outside the plant to demand management rehire eight employees they sacked for allegedly inciting fellow workers to protest.

Contract workers at Australian defence facilities demonstrate

On May 15, 50 contract employees of Serco Sodexo Defence Services (SSDS), from six Australia Defence Force (ADF) facilities in Australia's capital Canberra protested outside the Royal Military College in a dispute over working conditions.

The United Voice (UV) union alleged that SSDS, which has held the local ADF services contract since 2006, breached national employment standards by not providing all shift workers a fifth week of annual leave. Workers, including cleaners, chefs and security guards, have also complained that security workers are prevented from taking meal or toilet breaks due to understaffing, and that modifications to existing rosters meant employees were unable to make long-term plans.

Victorian paper mill workers strike

Over 120 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) at Australian

Paper's Maryvale mill in the Latrobe Valley east of Melbourne, walked off the job on May 9 after Chelgrave, a labour hire company, locked out 12 of its employees for taking protected industrial action.

Around 140 plant maintenance workers have refused to cross the picket line at the plant's main entrance, affecting paper production and work on the mill's new recycling plant. An attempt by Australian Paper to force strikers back on site through a Federal Court writ on May 10 failed.

The AMWU and AWU have been negotiating with Chelgrave for a new enterprise agreement for over 12 months. The unions want a 2.5 percent pay rise every six months for three years.

New South Wales nurses and midwives protest

NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members held lunchtime protests outside the Armidale Hospital and Inverell Hospital in rural New South Wales on May 14 and 15 to demand guaranteed minimum nursing hours in general wards on par with the larger hospitals in Sydney. This equates to a minimum of six hours per patient per day or one nurse for every four patients.

Other demands include minimum nursing and midwifery levels to hospital emergency departments and high dependency units and that midwives have a maximum of four hours per shift contact time with patients, leaving four hours to attend to associated duties.

The current Public Health System Nurses & Midwives (State) Award expires on June 30 this year. The NSWNMA has restricted its pay demand to 2.5 percent annual increases in exchange for guaranteed staff-to-patient ratios.

Queensland public hospital nurses rally

Public hospital nurses rallied outside their respective hospitals in Townsville and Cairns, on Queensland's far north coast, on May 16 to oppose the ongoing privatisation of public health by the National-Liberal Party state government. According to the Queensland Nurses Union (QNU), up to eight far north Queensland hospitals, including Weipa and Cairns, could be privatised by the government.

Last month, Queensland Premier Campbell Newman unveiled a far-reaching offensive against the public sector, on top of the destruction of social programs and more than 14,000 government jobs. Newman outlined the wholesale handing over of social programs—including health, education, welfare, community services, housing and public transport—to corporate, for-profit, providers.

While tens of thousands of public sector workers have demonstrated against the Newman government's job cuts in the past nine months, the unions have enforced the job destruction while attempting to divert workers' anger into a bogus "1,000-day" campaign for the return of a Labor government in 2015.

New South Wales coal loader workers strike

About 200 members of five unions at Australia's largest coal export terminal Port Waratah in Newcastle stopped work for four hours on May 15 in a dispute with Waratah Coal Services (PWCS) for a new workplace agreement. Workers demands include job security and improved safety while PWCS wants to widen the use of contractor labour at its terminals. The unions have endorsed further industrial stoppages and overtime bans.

Negotiations between the PWCS and the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, the Maritime Union of Australia, the Transport Workers' Union, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union and the Australian Workers' Union have been ongoing for over nine months.

General strike in New Caledonia over high prices

Thousands of workers throughout the French territory of New Caledonia took general strike action on May 15 and 16 over low wages and the high cost of living. Unions involved in the walkouts complained that high import levies and taxes along with other government imposts had made New Caledonia's cost of living higher than in France. The protest was organised by the Caledonian Union, a pro-independence party.

Around 10,000 people marched through the island's capital Noumea calling for lower prices with many workers protesting outside supermarkets accused of charging excessive prices. A road block was set up in the north of the territory's main island and a number of boarding schools closed. Flights to Australia were cancelled during the strike. The high cost of living in New Caledonian has been a long-standing issue and triggered a three-day general strike of 25,000 workers in May 2011.



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