

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 May 2013

India: Andhra Pradesh steel workers demand wages

Permanent and contract employees at privately-owned Brahmani Steel protested outside the Revenue Division office in Kadappa on May 20 to demand payment of six months' outstanding wages. Management told workers that they would be paid if they accepted voluntary retirement. The workers, who had been employed at the company for at least six years, rejected the "offer" and submitted a memorandum to the Revenue Division Officer demanding to be absorbed into the public sector unit, Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL).

Fishery workers in Andhra Pradesh protest

Fishery workers in the port city of Visakhapatnam in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated outside the Collector's Office on May 21. Members of the Visakhapatnam Fishing Harbor Workers Union demanded relief supplies for 200 fish net makers and repairers, who were being driven further into poverty by a 47-day government fishing ban. The ban is imposed in April and May each year, supposedly to protect marine life. Workers want 31 kg of rice as temporary relief during this period. The union submitted a memorandum to the District Collector.

Nepalese petrol pump workers on strike

Around 5,000 members of the Petroleum Workers' Association, Eastern Regional Committee at 500 petrol pump stations in Nepal have been on strike since May 15 to demand a salary rise and enforcement of an earlier agreement with the Petroleum Dealers' Association. Their demands also include appointment letters, insurance and provident fund facilities. Settlement talks are proceeding under the supervision of the Morang District Administration Office.

Protesting South Korean public servants arrested

At least 49 public servants, members of the Korean Government Employees' Union (KGEU), were arrested for holding a sit-in outside the Ministry of Security and Public Administration in Seoul on May 21. KGEU members had been protesting at the office since May 1 to demand recognition of the KGEU, and reinstatement of 137 workers sacked in

January for "illegal" union activity.

Philippines: Coca Cola workers in Laguna end strike

Some 250 workers, mostly delivery truck drivers, haulers and forklift operators, at the Coca Cola Bottlers Philippines Inc. (CCBPI) plant in Sta. Rosa City, Laguna ended a three-day strike on May 23 after the union and CCBPI reached agreement in the National Conciliation and Mediation Board. During the strike workers barricaded four gates of the bottling plant, preventing delivery trucks from leaving or entering.

The strike was part of a long-running dispute over the outsourcing of 430 jobs, impacting on workers who had been with the company for eight to ten years. The workers had been directly hired by the CCBPI until 2010, when they were hired as contractors through the Redsystem Company, a logistics arm of CCBPI. Strikers complained that benefits like the rice subsidy and the 13th-month bonuses were all removed and drivers' fixed monthly wages replaced by per-trip payments.

The agreement provided for the "absorption" of the 430 Redsystem employees as regular employees of CCBPI within three months of the signing of the new accord. They would be entitled to employees' benefits under the collective bargaining agreement and to tax-free financial assistance that consists of P15,000 in cash and a P9,000 rice allowance to be given on or before June 15.

Cambodia: Garment and shoe workers strike

Thousands of workers at various shoe and garment factories in Cambodia are currently on strike for better pay and conditions.

More than 4,000 Sabrina Garment employees in Kampong Speu province, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, protested outside the factory on May 21 for better pay and benefits. Their demands include a minimum wage increase and payments for transportation, accommodation and lunch. Management tried unsuccessfully to disperse the striking workers with a fire truck.

Meanwhile, in Takeo province in Cambodia's southwest, 200 workers at V-Masou garment factory threw stones at the plant, breaking windows and doors, and blocking National Road 3, following a week-long strike for better working conditions.

In the Samaky Meanchey district, central Cambodia, thousands of employees at the Taiwanese-owned Can Sport Shoes plant have been on strike since May 22 with 12 demands, including better working conditions and reinstatement of a suspended worker.

Burmese factory workers step up industrial action

Hlaingtharyar Industrial Zone workers in Yangon city (formerly Rangoon) walked off the job this month over various issues. The zone is one of Burma's largest industrial parks.

Over 1,000 employees at San Kaung Polyethylene are currently protesting outside the plant. The walkout was sparked when 49 workers were sacked for allegedly instigating a protest in the factory. Strikers have a charter of 43 demands, including the reinstatement of the sacked workers.

On May 11, 80 Hote Sein Polyethylene workers protested to demand an increase in salary to 85,000 kyats per month (about \$US100), an eight-hour working day, timely payment of overtime, and double rates for overtime.

Over 40 workers, including supervisors, at Lucky Shoes have been demonstrating since May 14 after the company broke an employment contract. Workers complained that overtime pay, living allowances and transportation fees have been cut from salaries since May 5.

Meanwhile, 800 workers at the Cho Cho Phyu Garment Factory in Shwepyithar have been on strike since April 6 over salary cuts. Around 700 workers from Bright June garments in the Dagon Myothit Industrial Zone have been protesting since May 5 in a salary dispute.

Australian shipbuilding workers strike again

Close to 700 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union at the heavy engineering and shipbuilding firm Forgacs, with plants in Newcastle, Sydney and Brisbane, walked off the job for four hours on May 22 in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. Around 250 workers at the Newcastle portside facility voted for another two four-hour stoppages on the two shifts on Thursday and to continue strike action totalling 16 hours each fortnight.

The action followed a four-hour strike on May 2 after negotiations to replace the work agreement that expired in March reached deadlock. According to the AMWU the main sticking points in negotiations were the addition of a new dispute settlement clause and the "consultation process."

Forgacs is building the \$8 billion Hobart Class Air Warfare Destroyers for the Australian military. The company operates seven facilities throughout New South Wales and Queensland, including three strategic portside facilities.

Victorian paper mill workers end strike

Over 120 maintenance workers at Australian Paper's Maryvale mill in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, returned to work on May 21 after the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) dismantled a picket that had been in place since May 9. The picket line was established after Chelgrave, a labour hire company at the mill, locked out 12 of its employees for taking protected industrial action. Maintenance workers, who were not on strike, had refused to cross the picket line affecting production at the plant.

The AMWU and AWU had been negotiating with Chelgrave for a new enterprise agreement for over 12 months. The unions wanted a 2.5 percent pay rise every six months for three years. Details of a tentative agreement

reached with Chelgrave in the Fair Work industrial tribunal have not been made public and negotiations between the unions and Chelgrave are still ongoing.

Queensland aged care workers oppose privatisation

Several workplace delegates of the Queensland Nurses Union (QNU) demonstrated outside the state-run Yaralla Place nursing home in Maryborough, on Queensland's Fraser Coast, on May 22 to oppose the National-Liberal Party state government's decision to transfer Yaralla Residential Aged Care Service to a private or not-for-profit organisation. Workers in 15 key positions in the facility have already been offered redundancy in preparation for privatisation and at least 15 catering and cleaning jobs are expected to be made redundant.

Last week, public hospital nurses rallied outside their respective hospitals in Townsville and Cairns, on Queensland's far north coast, to oppose the ongoing privatisation of public health by the state government. According to the QNU, up to eight far north Queensland hospitals, including Weipa and Cairns, could be privatised. Last month, Queensland Premier Campbell-Newman outlined the wholesale handing over of social programs—including health, education, welfare, community services, housing and public transport—to corporate, for-profit, providers.

General strike continues in New Caledonia

Thousands of workers throughout the French territory of New Caledonia are maintaining strikes and protests begun on May 15 when over 10,000 people joined street marches to protest the high cost of living and low wages. On May 21, 2,500 people marched in the northern city of Kone and flights to Australia were cancelled for the day. All domestic flights have been cancelled while access has been blocked to the port in Noumea and the fuel depots due to the general strike.

The high cost of living in New Caledonia has been a long-standing issue and triggered a three-day general strike of 25,000 workers in May 2011. Prices for general goods range between 30 and 60 percent higher than in France. Last week the government announced that it would drop tariffs on food stuffs from non-European Union countries but unions are demanding that the government implement reforms agreed to after a general strike in 2011.

New Zealand McDonald's workers protest

About a dozen Unite union members picketed the Bunny Street McDonald's fast food outlet in Wellington on May 22 as part of national campaign for higher wages in a new enterprise agreement covering 1,500 employees. Last month, police were called to McDonald's in Queen Street, Auckland to break up a picket by Unite members who walked off the job over the issue.

The action followed workers' rejection of a 25 cent per hour pay rise by McDonald's management. Unite, representing 1,500 McDonald's employees, has merely demanded pay parity with workers at the restaurant chain KFC. KFC workers get a \$1 pay rise six months into the job, as opposed to the 25-cent pay rise after six months' employment at

McDonald's.

Papua New Guinea public hospital staff strike

Staff at the Goroka Base Hospital, in the Eastern Highlands of Papua New Guinea, closed the gates to the hospital and held a sit-in protest on May 21 to protest over the deteriorating condition of patient care services. The National Doctors Association and other unions demanded the immediate removal of the board and management of the Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority (PHA) who they allege run down facilities at the hospital deliberately.

Staff told the media that the hospital looked alright from the outside, but inside it was “a skeleton.” Doctors said they are unable to perform most surgery due to lack of equipment such as sterilisers, x-ray and biochemistry machines. The hospital has 250 beds with 50 doctors.



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