

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 May 2014

Caltex petrol station workers strike in Cambodia

About 300 employees at 18 Caltex petrol stations in Phnom Penh struck for 24 hours on May 12 to demand a minimum monthly wage of \$160 and an annual \$160 bonus. Cashiers currently earn \$US130 a month, service staff \$110 and cleaners \$100.

A Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation (CFSWF) spokesman said that despite four months of meetings with Caltex this year, the company only raised the monthly salary in April from \$90 to \$100 for cleaners and \$110 for service staff and drivers. The union filed a complaint with Caltex's board of directors two months ago but had not received any response.

Outdoor workers have also demanded that Caltex increase the annual health care allowance from \$100 to be on par with indoor workers who receive between \$200 and \$300.

Cambodian beer brewery workers walk out

Some 200 workers at the Angkor Beer brewery in Sihanoukville walked off the job on May 8 to demand a wage increase and an end to the non-payment of commissions. The strike began after company directors said they would not discuss workers' demands until June.

Machine operators said they were paid \$US30 under the industry standard of \$150 a month. Marketing employees complained that Angkor was only paying commissions on small sales while withholding commission payments on their large sales. In 2011 workers struck for two weeks over unpaid overtime.

Tibetan contract teachers continue protests

On May 7, over 100 contract (substitute) teachers from rural areas in north-western China's Qinghai province, Tibet began a march to the provincial government's headquarters in Xining to demand better pay and benefits. The protest was sparked after the government ignored a two-day pay protest that began on April 30 by 160 rural contract teachers in the Malho prefecture.

Last week's march stopped on the second day after county officials and principals of area schools met the contract teachers on the road and said their concerns would be addressed.

According to teachers, they only receive one-sixth of the salaries

paid to full-time employees. In the Rebgong-area, central Qinghai, full-time substitute teachers claim they are paid just 500 to 1,000 yuan (\$US160) per month, compared to full-time teachers who receive up to 5,000 yuan. The contract teachers do not receive any benefits or compensation for their full-time work.

India: Tamil Nadu power loom workers' strike in third month

Hundreds of power loom workers in Tirunelveli, Tamil Nadu have been on strike since March 10 to demand a 75 percent wage rise for factory- and home-based loom workers. The strikers are also demanding 300 rupees (\$US5) per day for festival and national holidays for home-based workers. Police temporarily detained 365 strikers on May 10 to break up a street protest.

The Master Weavers' Association has only offered a 23 percent wage increase to factory-based employees and rejected all the demands of the home-based workers. Power-loom strikers have called for the Tirunelveli district administration to intervene into the dispute and resolve their demands.

Bollywood technicians walk out

Production at film and television studios in Bollywood, Mumbai stopped on May 13 when 2,000 technicians struck following an alleged assault on three of their colleagues by Balaji Productions officials at Film City.

The assault occurred a day earlier after a lighting technician cut the studio lights after the regulatory 12-hour shift. He was allegedly beaten by one of the production members. Committee members of Film Studios Setting and Allied Mazdoor Union were also physically assaulted when they arrived at the production. Work resumed on May 14, after the union and producers reached an agreement.

Production workers, including lighting technicians, carpenters and assistants, complained that they are not paid on time. Others said that they were forced to do overtime beyond the regulatory 12-hour shift. According to the union, members are paid anywhere between 650 rupees to 800 rupees per day, with around 150 rupees for travel and meals.

Pakistan power and water utility workers strike

Hundreds of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers demonstrated in several districts in Pakistan's Punjab province on May 13 over the suspension of four Hydroelectric Union Pakistan senior officials at the Muzaffargarh thermal power station. The union leaders were suspended after an anti-privatisation protest during a government minister's visit to the plant.

Under International Monetary Fund directives, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government has made privatisation of public sector utilities a priority.

The Muzaffargarh protest followed multiple protests on May 9 in several Punjab districts as part of a long-running national anti-privatisation campaign by state-owned utility workers.

The union has restricted the campaign to limited strikes, protests and other techniques aimed at preventing the development of a genuine unified industrial and political action by all public sector workers against privatisation and the government's social austerity demands.

Islamabad education workers demand job regularisation

More than 500 teaching and non-teaching staff in Islamabad, Pakistan's capital, have been demonstrating outside the National Press Club since May 5 to demand immediate job regularisation and the payment of two months' unpaid wages. Many of the education workers are daily wage employees with low monthly salaries between 7,000 rupees (\$US71) and 10,000 rupees.

Pakistan federal and provincial governments keep hundreds of thousands of workers, including those in crucial services such as health and education, as non-regularised employees to cut costs.

Western Australian tug boat workers vote for strike

Around 50 tugboat deck hands at Western Australia's Port Hedland voted this week to take strike action during a 30-day protected industrial action period granted by the Fair Work Commission (FWC). The vote for a 24-hour strike was unanimous while 98 percent voted for stoppages ranging from 48 hours to a week. The dispute over a new enterprise agreement for Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members has been ongoing since July 2013.

The deck hands are employed by American-based Teekay Shipping. It is contracted by BHP Billiton to provide tugboat services for all mining companies using the port, including the Fortescue Metals Group and Atlas Iron.

The MUA wants four weeks' annual leave and a pay rise to bring their members into line with what tug masters are paid at the port. The original pay claim was a 20 percent annual increase but this was dropped to an undisclosed figure by the union during negotiations.

Tugboat deckhands work 12-hour days, seven days a week, on a four-week on, four-week off roster but receive no annual leave. An MUA spokesman said that members want similar leave entitlements to other workers in the industry who receive up to six weeks' annual

leave. The MUA and Teekay are due to appear at the FWC on May 20 for further negotiations.

Tug boat engineers (represented by the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers) and the tugboat masters (represented by the Australian Maritime Officers Union) are also in dispute with Teekay Shipping over a new workplace deal. Both unions have applied to FWC for protected industrial action.

Victorian TV production workers take limited action

Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA) members on the set of popular television soap "Neighbours" stopped work for 15 minutes on May 16—their first industrial action in 25 years—in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The MEAA said it called the "symbolic" action after a year of failed negotiations with Fremantle Media Australia (FMA), the show's production company.

The union wants 3 percent annual pay increases, calculated on paid rates for each year of the new agreement. FMA are only offering 3 percent on minimum wages. Other claims include up to one week additional annual leave and opposition to FMA attempts to have sick-leave based on a working day of 7.6 hours, as opposed to the regular 10-hour shift. Union members also want long-time employees recognised in the enterprise agreement.

New Zealand petrol drivers' strike in third week

Six truck drivers employed by Toll Carriers, which is owned by the Australian Toll Group and contracted to deliver petrol to BP service stations in Northland, have been on strike since May 1 to demand pay parity with other drivers in the industry. The drivers, who are members of FIRST Union, have been bargaining unsuccessfully since January with Toll. FIRST Union suspended pickets at petrol stations this week after Toll agreed to restart negotiations on May 16.

According to the union, Toll Carrier drivers were paid between \$20 and \$25 an hour compared to the industry average of \$30 an hour and not paid overtime. FIRST Union, however, is not seeking full pay parity but demanded a 2 percent pay rise, to an average of \$26 an hour. Toll offered the \$26 an hour rate but only if workers moved to individual contracts.



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