

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 May 2016

## Philippines: Sacked export zone workers occupy factory

Sacked workers from the Seung Yeun Technology Industries Corporation (SYTIC) in the Cavite Export Processing Zone south of Manila occupied their factory on May 6 after picketing it for two days.

SYTIC management previously closed the plant, dismissed all workers and then reopened it, declaring that it would only rehire non-union workers.

The sacked electronic workers have said they would continue the occupation to prevent machines and tools being transferred to a non-union location.

A spokesman from the SYTIC Workers Association accused management of planning to replace its regular, unionised workforce with non-union contract workers. A five-day strike in April by SYTIC workers ended in a victory with the reinstatement of 18 workers, who were illegally terminated for union activities. The company later filed for permanent closure in an attempt to bust the union.

The newly-elected Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte had previously threatened to have killed export-processing workers who attempted to form unions.

## India: Andhra Pradesh construction workers protest death of colleague

A violent demonstration by 400 construction workers on the Amarawathi government building site in Andhra Pradesh erupted on Tuesday, following the death of a 22-year-old worker from Jharkhand. He died instantly after being sucked into a cement mixer while cleaning it at the end of the night shift.

The protesting workers demanded improved safety and 25 million rupees compensation for Devandra's family.

The protest was triggered when site officials secretly tried to move Devandra's body to hide the circumstances of his death. Construction workers torched an ambulance, ransacked an office and then threw rocks at police when they arrived at the site. It was the second death at the project: on March 21 20-year-old Samrat Rout was killed after his rig collapsed on him.

Workers ended their protest after a government official announced that 2 million rupees (\$US30,000) in compensation would be paid to Devandra's family and that safety on the site would be improved.

## Health workers in Jammu demand job permanency

Hundreds of daily wage workers in the public health engineering department of Jammu Military Hospital blocked the Jammu-Srinagar highway on Tuesday to demand job permanency. They chanted slogans against health authorities.

Protesters said their grievances were repeatedly neglected by the previous government and that they were being treated in the same way by the BJP-led Jammu and Kashmir state government. The health workers have threatened to intensify their campaign if their demands are not addressed.

## Himachal Pradesh teachers boycott student evaluation papers

Teachers at 94 public colleges in Himachal Pradesh, in northern India, have begun an indefinite boycott of student evaluation papers to demand job permanency and higher wages. Nearly 7,500 students who have applied to enter universities have been affected by the industrial protest. The action, which was called by the Himachal Government College Teachers Association, remains unresolved.

## Brick kiln workers in Punjab end strike

Brick kiln workers in Sangrur, Punjab ended 12 days of round-the-clock protests outside the district administrative complex on May 7 after an official agreement between the workers' union and brick kiln owners' association.

A representative of the Lal Jhanda Punjab Bhatia Mazdoor Union said the owners had agreed to lift their pay offer for the moulding of 1,000 bricks from 583 rupees to 642.35 (\$US9.65), supply safe drinking water and electricity to workers at brick kilns and provide money for protective clothing.

## Pakistan: Fata teachers set to end three-week strike

Around 25,000 government school teachers in Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) are expected to end their three-week strike to demand service upgrades after the federal government agreed on May 10 to upgrade teachers in accordance with a July 2012 four-tier formula.

All Teachers Associations-Fata Mohmand Agency members walked out of rural schools with over one million students on April 20 to demand

upgrades in line with government teachers in other provinces and allowance for working in war zones.

The Pakistan government dropped its demand that teachers return to work before it would consider their demands. Full details of the agreement, such as when teachers will be upgraded, have not been reported.

### **Punjab teachers continue anti-privatisation protests**

Public school teachers in Punjab province are not letting up on an anti-privatisation campaign they began in January. Following a series of protests throughout the province, teachers in Gujranwala and Faisalabad demonstrated on Monday and Tuesday respectively to demand the government withdraw its privatisation plan.

Under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank the Pakistan government has implemented austerity measures forcing cash-strapped provincial governments to do likewise. The Punjab government has organised a public-private partnership deal and is handing management of public schools to the NGO-Punjab Education Foundation. According to the Punjab Teachers' Union it will impact on more than 5,500 schools.

The already inadequate and crumbling service is on the verge of collapse and teachers fear that the privatisation program will eliminate free education in Pakistan.

### **Sri Lankan mine workers strike**

More than 200 workers at the Bogala Graphite mine in Kegalle district, Sri Lanka stopped work on Tuesday over several demands. Fifty workers have begun a hunger strike inside the mine some 1,600 feet (500m) below the surface. They want a 5,000-rupee (\$US34) pay rise and provision of uniforms and safety equipment.

Management claimed the mine could not afford to pay a wage increase. Workers said they would continue their strike until demands were met.

### **Essential Energy workers strike again**

Workers at the New South Wales state-owned power distribution company Essential Energy struck for 24 hours at over 100 depots and control sites across the state on Wednesday in their dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The action followed two four-hour stoppages in April over the issue. Negotiations began 18 months ago with the Electrical Trades Union (ETU).

Workers have rejected management's enterprise "offer" that includes the axing of 800 jobs over the next two years and unlimited job cuts after 2018. The company also wants to maintain the current ban on re-employing redundant workers within two years except for casual or temporary positions; halve the amount workers are paid when called in for emergencies from a minimum four hours' pay to two; and cuts the wages and conditions of contractors.

Strike action was escalated after Essential refused to enter into further negotiations. The company has launched a case in the Fair Work Commission (FWC) seeking to terminate various agreements currently

covering its workforce. These include axing redundancy provisions, staff redeployment and salary maintenance. The FWC case is set down for a six-day hearing from June 14.

On Wednesday afternoon the ETU gave formal notice of an "escalation" of strike action commencing on May 23. This will consist of 20 consecutive four-hour stoppages at 120 depots and control centres. Unlike previous stoppages, the union said it will not provide a skeleton staff during the stop work period.

### **Sunshine Coast construction workers end strike**

Some 170 striking members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) at the Sunshine Coast University Hospital building site, on Queensland's south coast, returned to work on Wednesday after resolving enterprise agreement issues with their employer Nilsen. The workers took protected industrial action and downed tools on May 5 after six months of failed negotiations.

The company offered 5 percent annual pay rises for three years but wanted to include Building Code 2014 in the agreement. This was rejected by ETU members because electrical contractors who do not comply with the code could be excluded from securing government work if the government's building industry laws are passed after the July federal election. No details on the settlement have been released.

Around 400 Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members who walked off the site to protest the Turnbull federal government's plans to re-establish the Australian Building Construction Commission (ABCC) were ordered by the FWC to return to work on May 6. The ABCC has wide draconian powers that restrict workers' common law rights and can impose heavy penalties on unions and workers who fail to obey federal industrial laws.

### **Canberra garbage truck drivers on strike**

Thirty-nine garbage truck drivers employed by collection contractor SUEZ in Australia's capital Canberra struck work on Friday leaving kerbside garbage bins unemptied in 24 suburbs. The action follows failed negotiations between the Transport Workers Union (TWU) and SUEZ over a new enterprise agreement.

The company has offered 3 percent annual pay increases and a slight increase in severance pay. A TWU spokesman said severance pay was a sticking point. He said severance pay was reduced from three weeks' pay to two when the contract changed hands two years ago despite assurances from the ACT government this would not happen.

The waste management contract with the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) government is renewed every ten years, forcing workers to reapply for their job. The garbage truck drivers are concerned that older drivers who failed their medical test and are denied reemployment will lose their severance pay.

### **French Polynesian unions call off general strike**

Unions in the small Pacific colony of French Polynesia have withdrawn a general strike notice just hours before it was to be enacted on May 9. It

followed an agreement by the government to sign an accord.

The unions had listed ten points to be addressed in response to massive job cuts and the loss of purchasing power since the global financial crisis in 2008. Over 17,000 workers have lost their jobs and about 80,000 are living in poverty.

Union demands included, job security, better wages and creation of social welfare for unemployed workers, along with concerns about the viability of the pension fund. Unlike in France, there are no unemployment benefits in its Pacific colony.

After days of negotiations, the government agreed that social security provisions would be discussed in two meetings a week until the end of June.



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