

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

10 September 2005

Tamilnadu transport workers strike for pay rise

Thousands of state transport workers in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu struck for 24 hours on August 31. They want a 20 percent wage increase but the government has only offered 9 percent. With 20,000 buses off the road, public transport ground to a halt.

Chennai, the state's main city, was hit hard by the strike. The Metropolitan Transport Corporation runs about 3,000 buses in and around the city transporting some four million people daily. The transport workers are members of the Centre for Indian Trade Unions.

Railway workers demonstrate in Tamilnadu

Railway workers from the Southern Railways of India held a protest at the Tambaram railway station near Chennai in Tamilnadu on September 6. They are opposing Running Allowance Committee (RAC) plans to slash pay.

The RAC aims to cut an allowance of 84 rupees (\$US1.68) for every 100 kilometres traveled by personnel to 75 rupees. It has also proposed a reduction in workers' pensions and the introduction of longer working hours. Running staff, drivers of passenger and good trains, guards and locomotive inspectors are involved in the dispute.

Nurses protest over long hours and privatisation

Nurses in the Indian state of Kerala, staged a *dharna* (sit-in protest) in Kozhikode on September 1 in support of a slate of demands. They claim that the government has ignored complaints by nurses at *taluk* (municipality) hospitals and similar State Health Department institutions that were forced to work up to 14 hours per daily. Authorities have failed to fill nursing vacancies over the past four years.

The nurses are also opposed to moves to privatise government nursing schools and colleges.

College workers and teachers protest in the Punjab

Non-teaching employees at private colleges in the northwestern Indian state of Punjab and the union territory of Chandigarh took mass leave on September 5. The action was to support payment of an outstanding 50 percent dearness allowance (DA) in basic salaries. Workers have not been this allowance since April last year. They also want salary parity and the introduction of a number of incentives.

Non-teaching staff from private colleges in six districts—Patiala, Sangrur, Bathinda, Mansa, Ropar and Fatehgarh Sahib—attended a mass rally at Modi College in Patiala. On September 6, the workers staged a *dharna* (sit-in protest).

On September 5—India's national "Teachers' Day"—Punjab government teachers boycotted official celebrations and protested outside the state government's Mini Secretariat building in Ropar. They were opposing privatisation of government schools, official indifferent to teachers' problems, and the failure to pay outstanding salary for three months.

Indian railway workers fight salary cuts

On September 5, Central and Western Railways workers went on strike in protest over wage cuts. Strikers and their families staged a 10-hour protest inside the Central Railway Headquarters in Mumbai, hanging red banners bearing slogans on the building.

The wage cuts are being implemented despite an increase in the railway budget. Workers have vowed to campaign in Delhi over the issue. N.P. Yadav, a locomotive inspector on the northern long-distance line, said the protest was in response to railway plans to cut pay and increase workloads. "This is the first time the railways are witnessing a downward trend in the salaries," he said.

Shankarprasad Ghirgole, a motorman, said: "We are underpaid. Now with this salary cut, I will face a tough time with my children's education." Shrikant Berothe, a guard with four years service on the Mumbai-Pune route, said: "Salaries have been reduced and the responsibilities have been increased. This is injustice towards the employees."

Rural bank workers protest for pay and conditions

Rural bank workers from the Sahyadri Grameena Bank protested outside the bank office in Shimoga city in the south Indian state of Karnataka on September 5. They were demanding pay increases, pension facilities and benefits on par with workers in urban branches of the federal government-owned Canara Bank (promoter bank).

Three die in quarry explosion near Bangalore

Three quarry workers were killed at a stone quarry in Hebbugodi, a rural district near Bangalore in Andhra Pradesh, on September 6.

The three men—Narasappa (45), Shekarappa (25), both from Kustagi municipality in Koppal district, and Murugan (25) from the Salem district in Tamilnadu—had been placing explosives to break up rocks.

The men were killed instantly after they went to inspect explosive charges that had failed to denote. An explosives expert investigating and a case registered against the quarry proprietor.

Sri Lankan state sector workers demand jobs confirmation

Casual and contract state sector worker picketed the Ministry of Public Administration in Colombo on August 31 demanding confirmation in their jobs. The protesters came from the agriculture and health sectors, the Road Development Authority and the Timber Corporation.

There are about 45,000 casual and contract workers in the state sector and most have 10 to 30 years service. The United Peoples Freedom Alliance government failed to honor its promise made in the run up to the 2004 parliamentary elections to confirm the workers' jobs.

National action is planned if the government does not fulfill its pledge within one month. The campaign is being organised by the Ceylon Union Federation and supported by 80 unions.

Sri Lankan doctors strike for pay increase

Registered and Assistant medical officers (doctors) began indefinite national strike action on September 7 demanding salary increases in accordance with the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government's 2005 budget proposals. The striking doctors picketed the health ministry in Colombo. The strike—organised by the Society of Registered and Assistant Medical Officers (SRAMO)—has affected more than 900 district and rural hospitals.

Four die in building collapse in Beijing

Four workers were killed and 22 seriously injured when a 400-metre

section of the sixth floor of a building collapsed on September 5. The building was under construction in Beijing's Xidam district. The injured, suffering broken bones and head injuries, were rushed to hospital as workers searched through the rubble for five missing colleagues.

A Beijing Municipal Construction Committee official said there had been a disregard of safety procedures and that steel scaffolding had not been strong enough to support a platform holding 40 workers

There have been 47 construction site accidents, claiming 50 lives, in Beijing this year. Following the latest incident, authorities ordered the suspension of nine unlicensed construction sites.

Taiwan bank employees to strike for job security

Nearly 5,000 unionised employees in 100 nationwide outlets of the partially state-owned Taiwan Business Bank have given notice that they will strike on September 9. The Taiwan Business Bank Industrial Union is demanding a guarantee of three-years' job security prior to full privatisation later this year.

Minister of Finance, Lin Chuan, said the government would give only a two-year guarantee, but negotiations between the government and the unions are continuing.

Transport workers campaign against fuel prices in the Philippines

A coalition of three transport organisations is planning a transport strike in the Philippines city of Davao on September 12. The organisers are expecting a high turnout by transport operators and drivers, including tricycle operators.

The groups—Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (Bayan), Transport of Southern Mindanao for Solidarity and Nationalism-Pinang-isang Samahan ng mga TsUPER at Operator Nationwide—are protesting against fuel price rises and calling for the suspension of deregulation laws that allow oil companies to dictate prices at the pump.

The coalition is demanding a 6.67 pesos (\$US0.12) per litre cut and full suspension of an expanded value-added tax. Transport operators and drivers went on strike nationwide on April 18 this year over fuel price rises claiming they had risen 15 times since September 2003.

Mass lay-offs in Indonesia's rattan industry

At least 32,000 rattan industry workers in the City of Cirebon—200 kilometres east of Jakarta—have been laid off over the last two months following a 60 percent decrease in exports. Manufacturers expect further lay-offs. Over 400,000 currently work in the industry.

Indonesia's rattan-furniture industry began to lose orders in July this year, after the government allowed producers to export raw rattan to China and Vietnam where the furniture can be produced more cheaply with modern manufacturing processes and low cost labour.

Suspended Australian Boeing workers still picketing

About 35 maintenance engineers employed by Boeing Australia at the RAAF base at Williamstown, near Newcastle NSW, are maintaining a picket at the main gate. The men were suspended on May 19, after implementing work-bans. They want wage parity with workers at other Boeing workshops and a union-negotiated Enterprise Agreement.

They are currently employed under individual Common Law contracts drawn up in 2003. Repeated requests to the company over the last 18 months to renegotiate and improve the contracts were ignored. Up until November 2004, the only forum available to the maintenance engineers to voice concerns over the work contracts were management-initiated team briefs. In December, workers at the site joined the Australian Workers Union (AWU).

Boeing employs about 55 specialist engineers at Williamstown to maintain RAAF FA18 Hornet fighter jets. The company is paying replacement workers from NSW a \$20 daily bonus to cross the picket line. Out-of-state labour replacements are paid \$80 extra. The union has taken the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission three times but the company refuses to negotiate.

Auckland technology university staff plan further action

Lecturers at Auckland University of Technology held a stop-work meeting last week to discuss further action if the university fails to make an improved salary offer. The Association of Staff in Tertiary Education confirmed that its members—who struck on August 30—had supported further industrial action after they rejected a management pay offer of 7 percent over two years. They seeking a 13 percent increase over the same period. Industrial action will include lightning strikes and lecturers will continue to “withdraw goodwill” affecting the university's recruitment, marketing and promotional activities.

In a separate contract dispute at New Zealand's seven main universities, unions and vice-chancellors formally signed a national agreement to work on a “collaborative basis” under the University Tripartite Forum. The forum was recently established by the government to, “address major funding and salary issues facing the university sector”.

The unions, which were campaigning for a multi-employer contract covering all the universities, claim the accord will help settle separate employment agreements currently being negotiated. The deal ended the dispute just three weeks before the country's general election. Academic and general staff had engaged in national and local strikes for pay rises of up to 20 percent.

Striking NZ miners return to work

The NZ Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) ended a strike and picket by miners at Ohai in Southland on September 1 after reaching agreement with Ohai Mining over contract negotiations. The settlement was reached during a meeting with an industrial mediator.

About 20 miners, some employed by Solid Energy but on strike in support of their workmates, had been picketing for more than a week. The miners are seeking pay parity—including overtime rates—with similar sites throughout the country. Ohai Mining was the last employer in the country to agree to a multi-employer contract agreement (Meca) negotiated by the EPMU throughout mine sites nationally.

While the terms of the agreement have not been released, Ohai miners will meet on September 5 while EPMU members nationally are due to vote on Meca.

Plastics workers reject pay offer

New Zealand plastics workers have overwhelmingly voted down an employers' pay offer. Employees were offered an immediate 5 percent pay rise with another 3 percent in 15 months' time.

An Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman said the offer was rejected because it included unacceptable conditions relating to annual leave and sick leave. Workers wanted a larger pay rise to counteract rising petrol and electricity prices. Stop-work meetings to discuss the dispute were held in Auckland on September 6 and in Wellington and Christchurch the next day. The plastics multi-employer contract covers 50 companies employing 1,300 workers.

NZ manufacturing workers strike after lockout

Workers at Southward Engineering in the Hutt Valley went on strike and picketed the plant after 13 of their colleagues were locked out on September 6. The 13 workers want a 5 percent pay increase but the dispute has now escalated with 140 workers on strike following the lockout. About 20 employees at the company's Auckland plant also stopped work.

The lockout was in retaliation for a two-and-a-half-week truck-loading ban. The company has offered 4.2 percent increase but wants to cut shift workers' pay by \$2 an hour.

PNG power workers to vote on strike

Over 400 Papua New Guinea Power employees will vote for strike action in a nationwide secret ballot on September 8. Industrial Registrar Helen Saleu approved the ballot after power unions and management failed to resolve differences during mediation talks she called on August 22.

The PNG Energy Workers Association is demanding the company

renegotiate the 2003 enterprise agreement, introduce a staff housing scheme and subsidy, improve salary increments and entitlements and guarantee union rights. It is also calling for the removal of PNG Power board chairman John Jeffry and the termination of the services of consultancy firm Korda Menta's Services. Association president Willie Kelis said the government still had time to negotiate before a strike date is set.

Fiji union leader calls off strike action

Planned strike action on September 8 by over 200 Fiji Electricity Authority Workers Association members was called off by the union's general secretary Daniel Urai just hours before it was to begin.

In last-minute discussions with Labour Minister Kenneth Zinck and Works Minister Savenaca Draunidalo, Urai agreed to cancel the strike and resume negotiations after he returns from overseas trip. He is reportedly leaving for Brussels on September 13.

Two days prior to the meeting, Zinck claimed the union had not given a mandatory 28-day notice and declared the strike illegal. He said the matter would be reported to the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions Office would be notified to lay charges against the association's executive.

Three unions represent Fiji Electricity Authority (FEA) workers. Most of the 231 members of the FEA Workers Union and the 46 members of the Fiji Electricity Trade Union were expected to join the strike. The FEA Workers Association is protesting the government's failure to discuss matters relating to a 2003-2004 log of claims. The Fiji Electricity Workers Union is unhappy over differences in the Cost Of Living Adjustment (COLA) allowance paid within FEA.

Air Vanuatu fires 26 striking employees

On September 5, the state-owned Air Vanuatu sacked 26 of the 100 workers who struck for five hours on August 22. The industrial action occurred following a breakdown in negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement and after the government indicated that it wanted to reduce or eliminate workers' social benefits.

The company gave no explanation for the sackings and sent letters to employees claiming that it was acting under Section 49 of the Employment Act. The *Vanuatu Daily Post* reported that sacked workers were all union members and said that "the Board and management are now targeting those thought to be ringleaders."

Samoa public service doctors threaten to strike

The Samoa Medical Association has given the government until September 9 to meet their pay demands or face industrial action. Doctors say that their pay is well below that of other public servants and have demanded more than the government's current 40 percent offer. They want new doctors' starting salary to be \$US11,000.

Association president Dr Viali Lameko confirmed on September 5 that there would be no further negotiations with the government and a strike meeting would be held on September 9.

Tonga civil servants end 44-day national strike

The Tonga government signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Public Servants Association on September 3, bringing to an end a 44-day strike by 3,000 public employees.

The MOU, which was aimed at restarting commerce and heading off demands for major constitutional changes, gives public servants 70 to 80 percent wage rises, phased in over two years. Casual workers will receive 30 percent pay increase and workers' pensions will be lifted by 10 percent. In response to demands for constitutional reforms, King Taufa'ahau Tupou IV sent a message to the strikers saying he accepted that there would have to be political reform.

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