

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 August 2007

Indian workers demand permanency

Public sector daily-wage workers from Mysore, Mandya, Chamarajanagar, Hassan, Shimoga, Dakshina Kannada and Chikmagalur districts in Karnataka demonstrated on July 30 to demand permanency for 17,000 daily-wage employees appointed after July 1, 1984.

The workers have been holding district-level protests for the past 15 days and plan a hunger strike in Bangalore from August 15. The campaign is being organised by the Federation of Karnataka State Government Daily Wage Employees.

Indian sewerage workers' strike continues

Around 550 sewerage workers at the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board in Karnataka remain on strike. They walked out on July 24 to demand regularisation of their employment. Other demands include payment of allowances for January to May this year and job opportunities for family members of current employees.

The High Court had previously ordered the regularisation of workers' services but management have not implemented this directive. The 550 labourers have worked for the board for the past 18 years. A union spokesman said that the strike had affected 60 percent of the city and that drains were overflowing. Workers regularly check drains and clear blockages.

In a separate dispute, Beedi workers—makers of cheap cigarettes—in Karnataka demonstrated in Mangalore on July 27 to demand 4,500 rupees for each employee as an interim payment for outstanding dearness allowances. Beedi companies have only offered 1,000 rupees and want workers to accept this as full payment.

Sri Lankan postal workers begin sick note campaign

Postal workers launched a national sick-note campaign on July 30 over the contracting out of delivery services. Union members describe contracting out as “de facto privatisation” and are also protesting over alleged corruption and malpractices in the postal department.

The sick-leave action crippled services at Colombo's central mail exchange, most of the capital's post offices and other areas across the country. The Postal Services Union (PSU) and more than 15 other unions are involved in the campaign.

Minister of Post and Telecommunication Rauf Hakeem met with the PSU that day. He told the media that interviews would be held to fill vacancies and that “the problems of postal workers are well attended”. The union's response has not been reported.

In a separate dispute, staff at the Sri Lanka Standard Institute, Industrial Technology Institute, Atomic Energy Authority and several other state institutions began picketing their respective workplaces on August 1. They want a salary increase promised by the government more than 20 months ago.

E.Land workers in Korea resume protests

On July 29, nine days after police broke up a sit-in at a grocery store in the Gangnam branch of the New Core department store in Seoul, over 500 union members re-entered the store and resumed their protest. The store, Kim's Club an affiliate of the E.Land Group, was forced to close.

Union members at the retail outlets are protesting the dismissal of 350 part-time employees at E.Land, just prior to the implementation of new laws on July 1 that force employers to make permanent all part-timers that have been employed for two years.

E.Land is refusing to negotiate until the protest is called off. Union members are refusing to leave, claiming that management provoked the industrial action when it refused to enter genuine negotiations after two previous protests were broken up by police.

A union spokesman said the sit-in will continue until the company withdraws its contract with an outsourced labour firm and guarantees employment to all workers.

Korean healthcare workers locked out

Thousands of striking healthcare workers, who have been on strike since July 10, were officially locked out of the Severance Hospital in Sinchon, Seoul on July 31. Union officials have filed a court petition asking that the lockout be lifted. Severance Hospital is one of four hospitals in the Yonsei University Health System (YUHS).

About half of the 4,000 striking workers at Sinchon are holding a sit-in protest at the hospital lobby demanding regular work status for part-time employees who have worked for more than a year, a decrease in the nurse-to-patient ratio and an expansion of the number of wards with multiple patients.

Hospital workers in the YUHS group want a 4 percent pay increase but management has offered a 2 percent increase and is refusing to discuss the issue of short-term contract workers.

Chinese taxi drivers return to work

More than 10,000 striking taxi drivers in Zhengzhou ended a two-day strike on August 1 after the government pledged that it would “resolve the problems as soon as possible to protect the legal rights of drivers”. The drivers struck on July 30, forcing city authorities to put 500 additional buses on city routes.

The drivers were protesting over an ownership and management rights dispute with taxi companies, frequent fines issued by taxi administration authorities, and “privileged taxis” whose drivers are supported by local officials.

Hong Kong Disneyland staff demand better pay and conditions

Seventy-seven of the 90 kitchen cleaners employed at Disneyland's Lantau Island theme park in Hong Kong late last month began petitioning for a pay rise, more rest days and better working conditions. Kitchen cleaners salaries start at only \$HK6,660 (\$US853) a month compared to starting salaries for most other workers at the park of \$HK9,000.

Anxious to avoid industrial action which has plagued Disneyland's Honk Kong operation since it opened in September 2005, management immediately met with a union representative and 23 kitchen cleaners. While Disneyland has agreed to increase staffing levels and introduce a better scheduling system with two rest-days a week where possible, it has not made any decision on a pay rise.

Indonesian teachers continue protests

About 17,000 teachers from Indonesia's West Nusa Tenggara district

rallied outside the governor's office in Mataram on July 31 to demand increased government funds for education and improvements in teachers' welfare.

Association of Indonesian Teachers local official H.M. Syubki addressed the demonstration, calling on the government to pay teachers functional allowances amounting to 100 percent of their current salaries. Syubki also called for "Law No. 116—Re-evaluate Governor Decree," which grants a salary increase to the governor, his deputy and civil servants, to be revoked. After security guards blocked teachers from seeing the governor they marched to the Legislative Council building two kilometres away.

The rally is part of a national campaign by Indonesia's 1.7 million teachers to demand the government increase the education budget. A teachers' demonstration in Jakarta on July 19 called for wage increases, a social protection scheme, on-skills certification and national exams to be abolished as the sole factor determining student graduation.

Workers strike over new agreements

Striking employees from the Esselte stationary warehouse at Minto in southwestern Sydney protested outside Prime Minister John Howard's Sydney office on August 1 over the government's WorkChoices industrial relations laws. Esselte management is using the new laws to try and force employees onto individual contracts or AWAs.

David Rogers, a long-term employee at the warehouse, told the local media that the company was trying to force employees to sign AWAs or individual work contracts. "We know if we sign the AWAs we will be disadvantaged probably around \$40 to \$50 a week," he said. Esselte employees, who have been on strike for the past seven weeks, currently earn only \$A17.20 (\$US14.70) an hour.

In a separate dispute, 250 defence manufacturing workers at Thales in the Victorian regional city of Bendigo walked out for 24 hours on Friday over a new collective agreement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union members are opposing company attempts to include individual contracts in the new agreement. The walkout is the tenth twenty-four-hour strike since the dispute began at the plant.

Australian jockeys strike over workers' compensation

Jockeys in the Australian state of Tasmania went on strike from midnight July 31, after rejecting an interim offer from the Tasmanian Thoroughbred Racing Council (TTRC) on workers' compensation.

Tasmanian Jockeys Association secretary Kevin Ring said the offer did not ensure that injured riders would have all medical costs covered and failed to address whether riders with long-term injuries would receive continuing benefits.

Ring complained that professional horse riders in Tasmania were forced to pay their own medical costs and then wait to be reimbursed. The TTRC offered to cover the costs of general insurance as well as grant them a one-off subsidy toward private health cover.

The jockey's union has said that the offer was far short of workers' compensation packages for jockeys in other Australian states.

New Zealand teachers to stop work over pay

New Zealand secondary school teachers will begin a series of national stop-work meetings on August 6 after pay talks with the Ministry of Education stalled. A spokesman for the Post Primary Teachers' Association (PPTA) said 15,000 teachers felt betrayed and may take industrial action.

The union suspended bargaining for a 12 percent pay increase over 3 years plus limits on class sizes. The ministry is offering 9 percent and refusing to negotiate on class size. Teachers say the government's offer was about \$100 million short.

New Zealand doctors vote for industrial action

Doctors at five stop-work meetings in New Zealand have voted unanimously to reject pay offers by the District Health Boards (DHBs). While another 21 scheduled meetings are yet to occur an Association of

Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) spokesman said that the turn-out at the first meeting surpassed expectations. He said the meetings voted to condemn the DHBs' failure to negotiate genuinely and to hold a national ballot on industrial action.

A recent survey showed that 254 specialist positions—almost 8 percent of the total workforce—were vacant due mainly to substandard pay and conditions. New Zealand doctors' salaries are currently about \$NZ33,500 behind Australia for a first-year specialist, increasing to over \$55,000 behind after seven years. The DHBs have offered a 46-month agreement with an annualised increase of 3.8 percent, barely covering the rate of inflation.

The stop-works are being held over a two-week period with 2,700 doctors expected to attend. National collective agreement negotiations started over a year ago. The ASMS wants a two-year agreement with a salary rise of 6 to 7 percent in the first year, and half of that again in the second year. It is also seeking an increase in doctors' expenses for continuing education and a rise in pay rates for on-call work. These demands, however, will not bring doctors' salary entitlements up to equivalent Australian rates.

New Zealand hospital workers settle pay dispute

About 3,000 New Zealand hospital cleaners, orderlies and kitchen staff have agreed to accept a new starting wage of \$14.25 an hour. Australian-owned Spotless Services abandoned a nine-day lockout of 800 cleaners after the Employment Court ruled it unlawful and agreed to pay the \$14.25 starting rate.

A Service and Food Workers Union negotiator said Spotless had wanted to pay new employees \$1 an hour less than the rate agreed by other contractors, with a provision that their rate would go up to \$14.25 and they would get back-pay if they "proved themselves" after six months. The new rate is just \$3 an hour above the minimum wage of \$11.25.

The other three cleaning contractors, all European-based, ISS, OCS and Compass and the District Health Boards (DHBs) which employed their own service workers, agreed to the same starting rate several weeks ago. The union has dropped its initial bid for a single multi-employer collective agreement for the four cleaning companies and DHBs. While a multi-employer deal was agreed with the DHBs, the union wants separate agreements with each cleaning company.

New Caledonia doctors take industrial action

Emergency physicians in New Caledonia are taking industrial action over employment conditions. At Noumea's main hospital, 13 of 23 emergency doctors are classified as assistants, and have no security of tenure. While doctors are providing emergency medical services they are boycotting meetings and administrative tasks.

Emergency doctors' contracts can be ended if they fail to attain the position of house surgeon within six years. Elevation to this position is not automatic and often depends on union pressure.

By contrast, specialists are given a permanent position after two years. Doctors recruited from France have no guarantee of employment on their return. Employment insecurity provoked a series of stoppages in 2003.

Military arrest union leader as Fiji public sector workers strike

More than 10,000 government workers in Fiji walked out on August 2 to oppose a 5 percent pay cut imposed by the military regime's "interim administration" and a reduction of the compulsory retirement age from 60 to 55 years. They joined 1,600 nurses who have been on strike for nine days in defiance of threats that they will be sacked.

Fiji's public sector is the country's largest employer and those on strike include members of the Fijian Teachers Association (FTA), the Public Employees Union (PEU) and the Viti National Union of Taukei Workers (NUTW).

Workers insist they will stay out until the pay cuts are restored and a 10 percent wage rise promised by the previous deposed government is honoured.

A day before the strike, NUTW general secretary Taniela Tabu was arrested in a joint police-military dawn raid on his home after he called for the sacking of Finance Minister Mahendra Chaudhry on national television. Tabu told the media that he was beaten during his interrogation and told that he would be killed if arrested again. Police have also threatened workers with arrest if they picket in public places without a permit.

Self-appointed prime minister and military commander Frank Bainimarama has instructed the minister for labour not to order any arbitration in the strikes. The education ministry also announced that school holidays would commence on August 6, in an attempt to undermine teachers' industrial action.

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