

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 August 2008

Indian cardamom workers strike for pay increase

About 80,000 workers employed on cardamom plantations in the southern state of Kerala remain on strike after walking out on August 13 demanding the daily wage be increased from 100.48 rupees (\$US2.31) to 175 rupees.

Workers claim that wages have not been revised for the past six years. August is the peak harvesting time and the strike has also brought farm management activities to a standstill.

The Kerala Cardamom Growers' Union said if the strike continues for another week the losses will be high with a kilogram of cardamom currently at 779.50 rupees (\$US18).

Indian tyre workers locked out

Around 4,000 workers at the Apollo Tyre factory in Perambra, Kerala were locked out on August 16 after taking action over increased workloads. The workers have banned bridging idle time between shifts, which is required to keep machinery running to fulltime specifications.

The strike is costing the company 500 million rupees (\$US 11.5 million) a day in lost production and the government is down 7 million rupees in excise duty.

Management claims that its decision to increase daily production from 280 to 318 tonnes of cross-ply tyres for tractors and commercial vehicles is needed to mitigate high prices of natural rubber, crude-based raw materials and increases in transportation and energy costs.

Contract medical workers demand permanency

Contract paramedical workers in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh protested on August 18 outside the Collector's Office in Vizianagaram for job permanency.

They are planning further protests from August 28, including an indefinite hunger strike, if their demand is not met. The workers are members of the United Medical and Health Employees' Union.

Hyundai workers in Korea strike in pay dispute

On August 19, around 45,000 unionised workers at three Hyundai Motor Company auto plants in Korea began a series of rolling four-hour strikes over four days after rejecting a company pay and conditions offer. The strike action is the fifth in the past two months in a campaign that has cost the company 240 billion won (\$US233 million) in lost production.

Workers want a 9 percent pay rise and the union is seeking a position on the board of directors. Management has offered an

82,000 won (\$US79) increase with bonuses equivalent to five months' salary. It has ruled out a union board position.

The union is also calling for Hyundai to invest more in local plants. The company has plants in the United States, China, India, Turkey and the Czech Republic and is expanding into Russia and Brazil. In the first seven months of this year over 50 percent of Hyundai's vehicles sold were produced outside of Korea.

Thai garment workers continue protests over union official's sacking

Nearly 4,000 workers at Body Fashion Thailand in the Bang Phli industrial estate, Samit Prakin, are continuing strike action after walking out on August 4 to protest the sacking of union official Jitra Kotchadej.

Blockades have been established outside the factory and rallies held at the company's headquarters in Bangkok and at Government House where workers threw bras into the grounds after officials refused to accept a petition demanding Kotchadej's reinstatement.

Kotchadej was sacked on July 8 for publicly wearing a t-shirt with the slogan, "Not standing is no crime. One who thinks differently is not a criminal". The slogan refers to people who refuse to stand for the royal anthem, which is regularly played before the showing of films, plays and live music in Thailand.

In an attempt to intimidate workers to end the campaign the company told the media it may close the factory and move production overseas.

Victorian TAFE teachers strike for pay

Thousands of TAFE (Technical and Further Education) teachers across the state of Victoria went on strike on August 19 in their first walkout in 13 years. TAFE teachers want pay parity with their public-school counterparts but the government and TAFE directors are refusing to budge on a 3.2 percent annual offer.

Victorian TAFE teachers currently start on an annual salary of \$42,000, around \$9,000 lower than other entry level teachers. Those at the top of the scale earn \$62,500 compared with \$75,500 paid to their secondary school equivalents.

Teachers at a packed stop-work meeting in Melbourne voted overwhelmingly for a campaign of rolling 24-hour and four-hour stoppages and about 2,000 later rallied outside state parliament. One striking teacher said: "I'm doing the same

work as a secondary school teacher but I'm being paid \$13,000 less to do it."

An Australian Education Union spokesperson said that TAFE teachers had not had a pay rise for almost two years and warned that unless the pay issue was resolved by the end of the year teachers would "leave in droves". Victorian TAFE Association chief David Williams raised the possibility of legal action against teachers if strike action continues.

Further strikes threatened in South Australia's public schools

Negotiations between the teachers' union and the South Australian (SA) state Labor government in a long-running pay dispute remain deadlocked. Teachers are demanding a 21 percent pay rise over three years but the government will not move from its offer of just 9.75 percent over the same period.

The Australian Education Union (AEU) is also calling for the government to abandon a controversial school-funding model, which the union claims will result in one in three schools losing up to \$250,000 in funds.

Thousands of teachers walked off the job earlier this month in a series of four-hour rolling stoppages and the union is again threatening strike action if the government does not improve its offer by September 8. The union's SA branch council also voted for bans on teachers supervising out-of-school-hours activities and on performing administration and data collection duties.

TransAdelaide workers stop work over a pay deal

On August 19, around 60 TransAdelaide tram crew employees stopped work for four hours after rejecting the state Labor government's latest pay offer of 12.5 percent over three years. The government also wants trade-offs, including workers agreeing to fixed-term employment clauses and the removal of conductors from shuttle services.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members want a 15 percent pay increase over three years and preservation of existing working conditions.

New Zealand food workers demand pay increase

Food workers at the Eurest-run Fonterra dairy company's two sites in the rural town of Eltham have gone on strike in support of a pay claim.

The Service and Food Workers Union, which has been in negotiations for one month with the Compass Group, Eurest's umbrella company, want the hourly rate increased to \$14.25 but the company is only offering \$13.50. Eurest workers at other sites in Taranaki province start at \$14.62.

Workers supporting the strikers have been protesting in Eltham's main street and encouraging other dairy employees to boycott kitchen food at the two sites.

NZ Sky Chefs refuses to make decent pay offer

Air New Zealand's catering contractor LSG Sky Chefs has been served with a 14-day notice of industrial action after the company failed to make a decent offer in recent pay talks. Sky Chefs has also refused to include basic conditions covering

hours of work in a collective agreement meaning that working hours would be determined solely by management.

A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said the strike notice was a sign of members' frustration because, after six weeks of negotiations, the company has offered a pay rise considerably less than inflation and was refusing to discuss other claims, including allowances for people taking on responsibilities beyond their job classification.

New Zealand aircraft engineers to impose bans

Over 200 workers at Blenheim-based aircraft engineering firm Safe Air have served a 14-day notice of industrial action after reaching an impasse in bargaining. The workers will impose bans on overtime, off-site work and shift work.

A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said the move is aimed at "moving the bargaining along" and the union "remained hopeful" the dispute could be resolved through mediation.

New Zealand cinema workers vote to accept contract

SkyCity and Rialto cinema workers voted last week to accept a new employment contract. The settlement follows strikes in June this year when workers rejected an earlier wage offer by NZ's largest cinema operator.

The company's original offer was a 3.5 percent wage increase for senior positions and a staff discount on ice-cream. Improvements in the new offer include service pay for cinema attendants, a 6.5 percent increase for senior positions, security of hours and rostering protocols and increased staff discounts. Further pay increases will be considered in 2009.

Samoa work stoppage delays flights

On August 15, Polynesian Airline cargo employees at Faleolo International Airport in Samoa decided to stay home until overdue overtime was paid. The stoppage delayed flights, including one Air New Zealand service. Employees returned to work after the airline's CEO promised to meet their demand.

Strike hit services in Moorea in French Polynesia

Public administration and fire services employees on French Polynesia's island of Moorea walked out on August 13 to demand the payment of overtime.

Meanwhile, unions called off a planned strike due for this weekend at Air Tahiti in French Polynesia after several days of negotiations resolved 13 out of 16 workers' demands. These included restructuring of company management. The remaining grievances are still being discussed.

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