

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 May 2011

Pakistan: Karachi medical staff escalates strike action

Doctors, paramedical staff and nurses at Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Center (JPMC) and the National Institute of Child Health (NICH) in Karachi escalated two weeks of rolling one-hour stoppages on May 16 and walked off the job indefinitely against the government's plans to transfer the administrative control of both federally-controlled hospitals to the Sindh provincial government. Only emergency services and treatment for life threatening ailments are being provided.

According to the JPMC-NICH Joint Action Committee (JAC), the government's plan would degrade health services. A JAC spokesperson said the strike will continue until the federal government reverses its decision.

Karachi power workers strike in third week

Thousands of Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) workers have been on strike since April 30 to oppose the utility's plans to transfer regular workers onto contracts. Workers are also opposed to the placement of over 4,000 KESC workers into a "surplus pool". KESC Labour Union (CBA) members have set up a protest camp outside the Karachi Press Club and several are on a hunger strike.

In January, the government pressured the former state-owned KESC to reinstate over 4,000 employees made redundant following privatisation of the company. The sacked workers, however, were not fully reinstated and have been placed in the surplus pool. They fear they could be retrenched again and then rehired through a sub-contracting company.

The government has criticised KESC management over power shortages and ordered the company to fully reinstate the 4,000 workers in the surplus pool. On Thursday, KESC said it would establish a "Human Resources" committee with company representatives and union representatives to "seek a resolution" to the issues.

Indian wheel manufacturing workers' strike continues

At least 900 assembly line workers at Wheels India in Ranjangaon, Maharashtra have been on strike since March 11 over wages and conditions. The Wheels India Employees' Union, an affiliate of Shramik Ekta Maha Sangh, has accused the company of violating the Contract Labour Act, which bans employment of contract workers and trainees on the same assembly lines as full-time employees.

Wheels India has 159 regular employees and over 800 contract workers and trainees. The union wants increased wages with a "productivity content" and equal remuneration for contract employees engaged in regular work. The company is one of India's leading manufacturers of steel wheels for cars, trucks and heavy duty vehicles for the Indian and export markets.

Sri Lankan university teachers impose bans

After a one-day national stoppage on May 8, Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA) members have banned voluntary duties as part of their claim for a 200 percent pay rise to 168,000 rupees (\$US1,531) per month. The teachers want separation also from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka's salary structure and a special professional category created. FUTA also wants the government to spend 6 percent (\$US830 million) of the nation's Gross Domestic Product on education.

In an attempt to force the teachers to end their industrial action the University Grants Commission has instructed vice chancellors to not pay May salaries to teachers involved in the bans.

Western Australian hospital support workers stop work

At least 100 hospital support workers at the Royal Perth Hospital held a 90-minute stop-work meeting on Monday following threats that they will be reprimanded, and

possibly sacked, for “failing to wear their staff uniforms correctly”. The United Voice (UV) union members have been wearing t-shirts while on duty with the printed message, “Mr Premier, don’t privatise our hospital”.

UV members voted to accept a deal between the union and management to cease wearing the t-shirts and instead wear anti-privatisation badges on their uniforms. The limited action was initiated by the union in March, after the Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission ordered Perth hospital workers to lift protest bans against the state Liberal government’s plan to privatise a range of services at the new Fiona Stanley Hospital. Although the Industrial Relations Commission order against bans expired on April 4, the UV has not called for new industrial action.

Tasmanian municipal council workers strike

About 30 members of the Australian Services Union at the Glenorchy City Council voted on Wednesday to hold rolling stoppages every day for two weeks to demand a new enterprise agreement. According to an ASU official, members’ real wages have not kept pace with other municipal employees in Australia doing the same work.

Glenorchy Council has offered a 9 to 10 percent wage increase over three years, depending on the consumer price index (CPI), but workers want increases that give them wage parity with other municipal employees. Workers are yet to vote officially on the council’s offer.

Queensland maintenance workers strike over wage freeze

More than 400 maintenance contractors employed by Clyde Babcock-Hitachi (CBH) across Queensland walked off the job on Thursday over a wage dispute. An Australian Workers Union official said members planned to remain on strike until Monday.

CBH, which has workers at Queensland Alumina Limited, NRG power station and Rio Tinto Alcan in Gladstone and at Tarong Energy, wants to freeze wages for the next 12 months in a new work agreement. The cost of living index for Queensland is currently 3.6 percent and expected to increase in the next 12 months.

Queensland construction workers walk out

On Wednesday, up to 1,000 workers at the Gold Coast University Hospital construction site in Southport, 70km south of Brisbane, walked off the job for the fifth time this year, amid allegations of “sham contracting”, unpaid superannuation and other entitlements.

A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) official said many workers were being paid the minimum EBA rate and no other entitlements. The workers voted to maintain a daily picket line at the site until the issues are resolved.

In February, thousands of CFMEU members at construction sites of Bovis Land Lease and Multiplex on the Gold Coast and in Brisbane walked off the job for 48 hours, accusing both companies of hiring contractors who failed to pay workers’ superannuation, redundancy, site and travel entitlements. According to the CFMEU, at least 50 percent of subcontractors are not paying correct rates.

New Caledonia workers strike over cost of living

Six of New Caledonia’s seven trade unions led by the Union of Workers and Employees in New Caledonia (USOENC) called three days of strikes and protests across the territory commencing on Monday over inflation. Industrial action began with widespread strikes in the Southern Province and a large protest of 10,000 workers in the capital, Noumea. Strikes spread to the Northern Province on Tuesday with a rally of 1,500 in Kone, and to the Loyalty Island Province on Wednesday.

The unions demanded local, provincial and territory authorities act to immediately reduce food, housing and transport prices. The government, working with major retailers, has lowered the price of some basic items but the unions claim the reductions are not enough. The unions also want more transparency in the tax system, and more competition among importers.

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