

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 August 2016

Vietnam: Private hospital workers on strike

Around 200 doctors and nurses at the Thanh An-Saigon private hospital in the Nghe An Province capital Vinh, north Vietnam, walked off the job on July 31 over unpaid wages, forcing the hospital to temporarily shut down all clinical rooms and the pharmacy. All doctors and nurses participating in the strike have not received their salaries for 7 to 10 months.

Some workers complained that even after paying a “deposit fee” of between \$US2,450 and \$4,900 in May 2015 to work at the hospital for \$75.5 a month, they had only received 4 months’ pay for 14 months’ work. Some 100 workers are demanding their deposit fee back.

A hospital representative admitted that the deposit fees were being held to force workers to remain at the hospital for a “long-term period.” The provincial health department warned the hospital that if the issue was not resolved by August 10 it would be closed down.

More chemical poisoning in Cambodian garment factories

Forty-nine garment workers fainted at the Ly Chiang factory in Kampong Cham’s Batheay district on Monday after farmers sprayed pesticides on crops nearby. A witness said that at about 7. 30 a.m. the workers began to experience headaches, had difficulty breathing, felt weak and fainted one after another. The workers were released from hospital in the afternoon.

Last month, there were two mass faintings in one week at Grand East Footwear Factory in Kandal province and at the Garbotex Development factory in Takeo province, affecting over 150 workers. According to a National Social Security Fund report, nearly 2,000 workers in 32 factories from the garment and footwear industry fainted in 2015, which was the same as the year before. The report said several factors caused the fainting, including excessive overtime worked, poor health and chemicals used in production and pest control.

Taiwan journalists protest for shorter working week

Journalists from six different news outlets and represented by 16 unions, demonstrated outside the Executive Yuan in Taipei on Tuesday to demand the implementation of the “one day off for every six days worked” policy stipulated in the Labor Standards Act. They accused President Tsai Ing-wen’s administration of caving in to pressure from corporate-owned media outlets and treating journalists like “sweatshop workers.”

Under former legislation, media, transportation and tourism industry employees could be forced to work for 12 days in a row before being allowed to take two days off. Journalists from United Daily News, Central News Agency, Eastern Broadcasting Co, Next TV, Public Television Service Foundation and Radio Taiwan, among others, attended the demonstration demanding the government immediately hold talks with them.

Bangladeshi textile mill workers demonstrate for wage increase

At least 300 workers of state-owned Sundarban Textile Mills, Satkhira District, demonstrated on the Khulna-Satkhira highway on Monday demanding a wage rise. They had been calling for their daily wage to be increased from 120 taka (\$US1.50) to 300 taka for the past year.

Workers complained that their monthly wage of between 2,500 and 3,000 taka was too low and their families are suffering. They threatened to strike indefinitely if their demands were not met.

Bangladeshi spinning-mill workers walk out

Several hundred workers of Kasem Spinning Mill Ltd at Gazaria in Munshiganj, close to Dhaka, held a demonstration on Wednesday July 27 after management failed to distribute unpaid wages and overtime as promised. They temporarily blocked the Dhaka-Chittagong highway.

They ended the blockade after management assured them that they would get the wages and overtime. A contingency of police has been deployed in the factory premises.

India: All India Radio workers protest

At least 700 All India Radio casual workers demonstrated at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Monday. Close to 3,000 workers joined the protest and hunger strike on the third day of the protest. The Akhil Bharatiya Casual Announcers and Compere Union is demanding job permanency and better working hours and wages.

Maharashtra teachers and students protest closure of night schools

Close to 4,500 teachers and students demonstrated in Mumbai on Monday evening to protest the state government’s plan to close Maharashtra’s night schools and replace them with online “open schools.” There are about 150 night schools in Maharashtra with 35,000 students and 900 teachers. In the first phase of the proposed shutdown, the government has already fired around 250 teachers.

A spokesman for the teachers said the students would still have to buy books and appear for exams. “The government must explain how those who can barely afford schooling will study online,” he said. Teachers accused the government of cutting costs at the expense of the poor instead of providing more funding and facilities.

Tamil Nadu government convinces fishermen to end strike

Fishermen in the Tamil Nadu coastal town of Rameswaram on Monday decided to end a nine-day strike after talks with Indian government representatives, who assured them it would “protect their livelihood.”

Members of 11 mechanised fisherman associations began their strike on July 22 and threatened to hold a hunger strike on July 28 to demand the central government secure the release of 77 of their colleagues detained by the Sri Lankan navy and currently jailed. At least 113 boats have been impounded by the Sri Lankan government.

This is not the first time these fishermen have struck over the border dispute issue. More than 200,000 fishermen from seven districts of Tamil Nadu refused to go to sea on January 25, demanding that 75 fishing boats

be retrieved from Sri Lanka. Fishermen said the boats were confiscated by the Sri Lankan navy from March 2015 onwards and that at least 18 had been destroyed.

Sri Lankan university workers' national strike continues

The national strike by 130,000 non-academic university workers is in its second week. Following their two-day strike and mass rally in Central Colombo on July 13–14, non-academic workers at universities throughout Sri Lanka walked off the job on July 27. The strikers are demanding an increase in the monthly compensation allowance, a 2,500-rupee salary rise, medical insurance, reinstatement of the language-proficiency allowance, the pension age increased to 60 and a new agreeable pension scheme.

The strike followed several unsuccessful appeals to the Sirisena-Wickremesinghe government. Officials have refused to meet with the striking workers. A representative from the University Trade Union Joint Committee said the strike would continue until the workers' demands were met.

Sri Lankan railway gate keepers strike again

More than 2,000 railway crossing gate keepers walked off the job for the second time in three weeks on July 31 after the government failed to honour its promise to fulfil their demands. Gate keepers of Northern Sri Lanka demonstrated on rail tracks blocking trains for several hours.

The gate keepers walked out on July 12 to demand a 5,000-rupee monthly wage increase and that they be absorbed into Sri Lanka's railway department. They are currently attached to the police department. There are around 620 unprotected railway crossings in Sri Lanka. The keepers are only paid 250 rupees per day, are not entitled to leave and have to work seven days a week to earn 7,500 rupees (\$US51.3) per month.

The gate operators, who have been fighting for their demands since March this year, are members of the Collective of Keepers of Unprotected Railway Crossing Gates.

Unions end Coles-Polar Fresh warehouse strike in Melbourne

Facing court injunctions against their pickets and heavy fines, striking workers at the Polar Fresh warehouse site in Truganina succumbed to pressure from their union and accepted a strike-ending compromise deal that fell far short of their demands in a new enterprise agreement.

Around 650 National Union of Workers (NUW) members at the distribution centre for the Coles supermarket chain walked out on July 27 to demand a \$3 pay rise to increase their wages to \$30 an hour and for an end to the increasing casualisation of the workforce. They also called for a "zero-casual site," saying that casualisation was a "model of under-employment" which leaves casual workers struggling to survive on short shifts and unpredictable rosters.

Workers picketed the company's warehouse and two secondary sites established by Coles, severely affecting deliveries. As supermarket shelves began to empty of fresh food, Supreme Court injunctions against the pickets were issued on Thursday that remained in force for three days. The union accepted the injunctions.

While the NUW-Polar Fresh deal improved by an average 4.75 percent a year over the life of the deal, the \$30 per hour increase will not be reached for two years. Only 50 fulltime positions will be made available and just 70 labour hire agency workers will be converted into direct employees. These workers gain paid breaks, rostered days off (RDOs) and double time for overtime after two hours.

Picket at CUB brewery entering tenth week

Sacked Carlton & United Breweries (CUB) maintenance workers are maintaining a "community protest" outside CUB's Abbotsford plant in Melbourne to win reinstatement.

CUB's entire maintenance workforce, 32 fitters and 22 electricians, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) respectively, were terminated on June 10 without notice and told they could all reapply for their jobs through a new contractor on vastly reduced wages.

Programmed, the new contractor, offered the minimum safety net award rate, plus 50 cents—to just \$19.50 an hour. This amounted to a 65 percent cut in real wages.

CUB has employed semi-skilled scab workers from interstate in an attempt to maintain some production and wear down the sacked tradesmen into accepting their old jobs on much lower pay and conditions. The AMWU and ETU have isolated the sacked workers, refusing to mobilise union members in a concrete industrial campaign to defeat the attack on wages and conditions.

The unions have initiated a harmless "boycott CUB products" campaign and called for workers and their supporters to send emails to the company and collect signatures on a petition calling on CUB's multinational owner SABMiller "to reinstate the workers."

Queensland public hospital maintenance workers on strike

About 25 building and engineering maintenance staff at the Princess Alexandra Hospital in Queensland's capital Brisbane walked off the job on Tuesday in a dispute with Metro South Health in a dispute over job security.

Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union members are demanding the government end its use of labour hire and temporary employment.

Border security workers at Australian airports to strike

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members at the Australian Department of Immigration and Border Protection (DIBP) will walk off the job for 24 hours at Australia's seven international airports from midnight on Friday August 12. Quarantine and airport biosecurity workers will also strike for an hour on the same day.

The protected industrial action will affect operations at airports, sea ports, container examination terminals, client services, visa processing centres and international mail centres.

It is the first strike action by CPSU members since the Fair Work Commission in April suspended industrial action by border protection workers for 90 days, claiming the airport strikes "posed a serious and compelling" risk. The suspension order followed rolling stoppages on March 28 at international airports in Cairns, Townsville, Perth, Darwin and Adelaide.

The DIBP walkout is in line with strike action and bans by thousands of federal public sector workers during their long-running enterprise agreement dispute with the federal Liberal-National government. After two-and-a-half years of negotiations, almost 75 percent of the total federal public sector workforce of 160,000 still do not have a new enterprise agreement. At least 100,000 government employees have not had a pay increase for three years.

The CPSU and other unions have reduced their original pay demand from 4 percent annual pay increases for three years to between 2.5 and 3 percent with no loss of conditions.

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