

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 September 2017

Burmese factory workers demand minimum wage increase

Close to 1,000 workers from 15 factories demonstrated in the Mandalay region on Sunday with six demands, including an increase of the daily minimum wage from 3,600 kyat to 5,600 kyat (\$US4.11). Among the other demands were protection for labour unions, establishment of labour courts, worksite safety laws and rules to penalise employers over unfair dismissals.

Their protest followed a demonstration by 2,000 garment workers from factories in Yangon, Bago and Thanlyin Industrial Zones at Hlaing Thayar township on August 13 demanding the minimum wage be increased.

Protesters complained that they had been asking for 5,600 kyat since 2013 but the government only approved 3,600 kyat and then failed to review the rate in 2015 as demanded by law. Workers decided to protest after the government announced that the daily wage would be established in 2018 instead of this year.

India: Tamil Nadu railway sanitation workers protest

About 40 contract sanitation workers demonstrated at the Madurai Junction railway station on September 14 over unpaid wages. The Railway Contract Labour Union said workers had not been paid for nearly three months. There are 90 contract sanitation workers at the station who are mostly women and only paid 267 rupees (\$US4.14) per day.

The workers said that their employer was not paying basic entitlements, such as Employee State Insurance and Pension Fund, or providing personal safety protective equipment.

Mumbai Metro rail security workers strike

Around 650 security guards at 12 stations in the Mumbai Metro-One corridor walked out on strike on Tuesday demanding that their 11-month contract be abolished and they be made permanent. The guards said that they do not get sick leave and are constantly afraid that their short-term contracts would not be renewed.

Uber and Ola cab drivers in Mumbai strike

A majority of Mumbai's 45,000 Uber and Ola cab drivers participated in a sudden 24-hour strike starting midnight last Monday as part of a long campaign protesting steadily falling income, increased penalties and cuts in incentives. The Mumbai drivers first struck in March over these issues.

The Mumbai drivers' walkout is in parallel with strike action by Ola and Uber drivers in New Delhi and other Indian cities. Thousands of Uber drivers in major cities around the world have been holding strikes and protests over similar issues.

Communication workers at BSNL oppose privatisation

Workers from the giant state-owned communications provider BSNL demonstrated in Trivandrum, Kerala on September 16 against government plans to privatise the company's 72,000 mobile phone towers. The protest followed a joint forum the day before by various unions who held protests

outside state and district headquarters of BSNL.

The Indian government announced its privatisation plan in 2015 but deferred it in the face of strong opposition from BSNL employees. Workers fear that the loss of the profitable mobile towers will have a major impact on BSNL earnings and cause loss of jobs. The government action is in line with International Monetary Fund demands for the privatisation of other Indian state-owned assets.

Pakistan: Sindh Lady Health Workers strike

Lady Health Workers (LHW) in Mirpurkhas demonstrated outside the local press club on September 15 demanding immediate payment of three months' salaries and other overdue entitlements. They threatened to end their participation in the ongoing anti-polio drive and stop other services if their salaries were not immediately released and other demands met.

The Health Workers' Association called off the demonstration after officials from the health department made a vague promise that salaries would be released soon after the current round of the anti-polio drive finished. They said other demands would be considered on merit.

Karachi police continue vicious attacks against protesting teachers

For the second time this month, police used water cannon and batons against demonstrating teachers in Karachi on Monday. Teachers were marching from the Karachi Press Club to the chief minister's house to demand five years' unpaid wages. Twenty teachers were arrested. Police used batons and water cannon against the same teachers while they protested in Karachi on September 13, injuring two and arresting three.

The Sindh government, following protests in March and July, promised to pay overdue wages before the September Eid holidays. At least 7,500 teachers appointed in 2012 have been affected. The protesting teachers are ignoring a government promise to soon pay overdue wages and said they would keep demonstrating until the government pledge is honoured.

Power-loom owners in Toba Tek Singh lift lockdown

Hundreds of power-loom workers in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab province returned to work on Tuesday after power-loom owners lifted a five-day lockdown. The owners of 45 factories locked out workers on September 14 after they demanded wages be increased from 450 rupees for 12 hours work to the government mandated 665 rupees (\$US6.31) for eight hours work.

The Power-loom Workers Association called off the workers' five-day sit-down protest at the Shahbaz Chowk rail crossing after factory owners offered to increase wages by 7.14 percent and pay arrears from July. More than 7,000 workers are employed at 250 factories in the Toba Tek Singh district.

Sacked workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa protest

Workers from three major private companies in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated outside the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Assembly in Peshawar on Tuesday to protest their dismissal for trying to form a union. Sacked

workers from Philip Morris Pakistan, Frontier Sugar Mills and Pakistan Tobacco Company are demanding reinstatement and restoration of all incentives, including health and educational facilities. The workers, who had been at the companies for between 15 and 30 years, called off the protest after government labour authorities said they would “attend the issue.”

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa class-IV government workers protest

Class IV government workers in Shangla district demonstrated in front of the district administration office on September 15 demanding the payment of charcoal and firewood allowances due since 2016. The workers also demanded an end to the 24-hour duty schedule. The Class-IV Workers’ Association called the protest and warned that a strike would begin on September 26 if the government failed to resolve their issues.

Sri Lankan power utility workers end strike

The Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) Workers’ Union, representing power utility workers, called off their eight-day nation-wide strike on Wednesday after doing a deal with the CEB and government representatives. Under the deal, technical workers’ salary will increase by 10 to 13 percent and clerical staff by 10 percent. Around 22,000 workers are affected.

Power workers walked out on September 13 protesting that disparities increased for 90 percent of workers after they won a salary increase in 2015. The union pointed out that the ratio between lower employees and management salaries was 1:9 but that it should be 1:6.

However, other outstanding issues were not resolved. These were demands for the end to exploitation of national vocational trainees and repressive measures directed at the unions, along with the payment of risk allowances to technical workers and resolution of a fraud case involving the CEB employees’ provident fund.

Victoria: Melbourne airport workers protest

Over 20 workers from Aerocare demonstrated in the international terminal at Tullamarine Airport in Melbourne on Monday over low pay and working conditions. Ground crew, cleaners and catering staff complained of chronic understaffing, appalling conditions and cost-cutting which they alleged resulted in injuries among airport staff and a threat to public safety.

A spokesman from the Transport Workers Union (TWU) claimed workers were struggling with split shifts that forced many to sleep at airports and were paid reduced penalty rates for weekends and nights. Split shifts mean workers can spend up to 14 hours per day at the airport while they are only paid for six or seven hours, the union spokesman said. Protests had been planned for other airports around Australia.

In August the Fair Work Commission (FWC) rejected a proposed Aerocare enterprise agreement (EA), citing inadequate pay and overtime arrangements. The union claimed that workers voted to accept the company’s inferior proposed EA in a climate of intimidation and fear.

The TWU on Thursday made an application to the FWC to have the current Aerocare EA terminated. It claimed that pay and conditions in the current EA were below the industry award.

Queensland traffic signal electricians strike

More than 40 traffic-signal electricians from the department of Transport and Main Roads in South East Queensland walked off the job on Monday as part of their ongoing dispute over job reclassification and contract labour. Areas affected by the strike were the Gold Coast, Brisbane and the Sunshine Coast.

Negotiations between the Electrical Trades Union and the state Labor government began six months ago. The Queensland government wants

changes in the grading scales and a transition of labour hire employees onto full-time work. Workers alleged that reclassifying the grading scale would diminish pay and conditions.

Brisbane City Council bus workers reach agreement

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) and Brisbane City Council (BCC) have reached agreement on a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA), ending an 11-month dispute that included work bans and limited strike action. The RTBU accepted the council’s latest offer with very little variations from the original. RTBU members are yet to vote on the union deal.

The RTBU had demanded 3.5 percent annual pay increases for three years, an \$800 one-off bonus, replacement of the outdated pay structure and an increase in the hourly rates of lower-ranked drivers.

Under the tentative agreement workers will receive a \$500 bonus and 2.5 percent annual pay increases for two years and on the third year will receive the better of the 2.5 per cent increase or the inflation rate. Agreement was also reached on improved safety conditions.

Prior to the deal, the BCC ended negotiations with ten other unions and directly appealed to their members to endorse its original proposed agreement in a ballot that began on September 19 and end on October 6. Members of the Services Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trade Union, Professionals Australia, the Plumbers’ Union, the Australian Workers Union, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Transport Workers Union had rejected the council’s original proposed EBA.

BCC said it would now wait until RTBU members voted on the tentative agreement and then negotiate with the other ten unions separately.

Industrial court stops strike at Queensland university

The Fair Work Commission on Thursday accepted an application from James Cook University (JCU) management to prevent National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members participating in 24-hour stop-work action on Friday at JCU campuses in Cairns and Townsville. NTEU said the call to strike was in response to management’s failure to come back to the bargaining table with an improved enterprise agreement. The majority of staff who participated in a non-union ballot last week voted to reject JCU’s proposed enterprise agreement.

The NTEU accepted the FWC ruling and organised “community protests” outside the university in Cairns and Townsville on Saturday morning.

Fijian public sector workers to vote on strike action

Four unions under the umbrella of the Confederation of Public Sector Unions (CPSU) notified the Registrar of Trade Unions on Monday that a secret ballot would be conducted next week to decide on strike action by their members. Workers are in dispute with the government over civil service reforms.

Public servants on tenure or permanent basis have been forced to sign contracts limited to one or two years. Workers fear that it could be preparation for mass job cuts. The government claimed its public service reforms, which were started after the 2006 military coup by the then head of the Fijian Military Forces and current Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, were aimed at improving transparency and promoting appointments based on merit.

New Caledonia international airline pilots strike

Several pilots from New Caledonia’s international airline New Calin went on strike on Thursday in an ongoing dispute over pay and conditions. The sudden walkout caused the cancellation of return flights from Noumea to Sydney.

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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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