Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Police assault rail Sri Lankan workers

Police assaulted a peaceful demonstration by rail workers and their supporters protesting against a decision by the Sri Lankan government to lease an 18-mile section of railway track to a private company, Holderbank. The company recently bought the state-owned Puttlam Cement factory that is serviced by the rail line.

More than 200 workers and local people picketed across the railway track earlier this week to block trains loaded with limestone from reaching factory when the police attacked. Eight people were badly injured.

The railway track runs from Noornagar in Puttlam (101 miles north of Colombo on the coastal line) to Aruwakkaru, where a lime stone quarry is situated.

This is the first time that a government has handed over a portion of the state-owned railway network. Workers believe that the government has already signed a 30-year lease worth US$70,420 giving control of the track to Holderbank.

The major losers from deal will be the casual workers who maintain the line and the local people who use the track for their day-to-day transport requirements. Holderbank said it would lay off the majority of the 80 workers and charge a fee each time a government train or railway cart uses the track. Local people and the railway workers say they are planning to continue the struggle.

Indian transport workers on strike

Over 250,000 truck drivers, belonging to 188 affiliated transport unions, went on strike last Monday in the mid-western Indian coastal state of Maharashtra. The drivers are protesting against the state government's decision to charge a toll on trucks entering or leaving the state to fund new road construction. The truck drivers complain that they are being hit with fees of between 50 to 100 rupees.

The drivers went on strike against the charges in July but called off the industrial action when the government said it would address the grievances. Even though some owner-drivers are still delivering fresh produce, traders say that a prolonged strike will soon cause food shortages.

Garbage collectors on strike

Garbage workers in the northeastern Indian town of Kanpur have been on strike since Saturday, demanding a pay rise and an increase in their housing allowance. When some of the striking workers attempted to hold a rally at university in Naga Nigam, they were violently attacked and driven away by a large contingent of local police who were barring the entrance to the campus.

City council leaders promised to pay the wage increase in November last year but reneged on the agreement.

Port Moresby workers threaten strike

Workers employed by the National Capital District Commission (NCDC) in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, threatened this week to take further action to force the Commission to meet their log of claims.

The NCDC workers took strike action last year demanding a 22 percent pay increase and the payment of entitlements owed to workers retrenched in 1995. They called for the resignation of the city administrator and a “shake-up” of the Commission.

Workers also want the dropping of the NCDC's claim for damages against the union arising from last year's strike.

The NCDC union president Jackson Sarea appealed to the newly-elected Prime Minister Sir Mekere Morauta, to intervene to settle the dispute to “avoid industrial unrest”.

PNG health services hit by strike

Community health workers throughout Papua New Guinea went on indefinite strike this week to demand

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that the government meet pay arrears. The workers ceased work at midnight on Saturday after receiving the results of a nationwide secret ballot that overwhelmingly declared for strike action.

The workers are demanding payment for the many services they carried out for the public health system before they were incorporated as public servants in the new public service structure. The workers claim that the health authorities owe over 40 million kina to them.

Over 6,000 union members voted for the strike after the union petitioned 14 provincial health authorities to honour their commitment and only seven provinces had responded.

Union leaders scotch power strike

Elcom union leaders called off a threatened nationwide strike by power workers this week after talks with the PNG government and the chairman of Public Service Conciliation and Arbitration Tribunal.

During the negotiations, the unions withdrew their original claim for a 30 percent wage increase and presented a revised claim based on parity with wage levels paid to workers in other commercial statutory authorities.

A Memorandum of Agreement signed by the union and the government said that both sides “recognised the serious economic situation faced by the country' and “had pledged to work together avoid the need for industrial action”.

Fearing the agreement would spark opposition from power workers, the union quickly issued a statement calling on its members to “understand that the strike is in fact delayed for only 4 weeks when this agreement expires on Sept 1".

Australian university staff take action

Academic and general staff at three major Queensland universities took industrial action this week over pay claims and work contacts.

Staff at the University of Queensland went on strike after rejecting a recommendation by the union that they accept an offer by management of a 7.5 percent increase spread over three years. A spokesman for the staff said the university's offer “fell far short” of the 15 percent being demanded. “Compare this with the offer at the University of Sydney where academic and general staff have been offered 16 percent over four years.”

University Chancellor Professor Hay warned that if the university was forced to meet the pay demand then “it would mean job losses".

Staff at two other universities have also launched a series of rolling stoppages over the slow progress of negotiations for new work contracts.

Firefighters re-impose bans

Professional firefighters in New South Wales re-imposed a series of work bans on Thursday after a further breakdown in negotiations with the state government over pension scheme entitlements.

The work bans, affecting around half of the state's 3,000 firefighters, were lifted on Monday, after the dispute came before a full bench of the Industrial Relations Commission. Those workers involved in the bans will report to their fire stations but refuse to go out on calls to fight fires.

The firemen are angry that only those men employed by the service before 1985 are entitled to a lifetime pension if they are injured on, or off the job. Those recruited after that date receive only a small lump sum pay-out or no payment at all.

This is the first time in 15 years that NSW fire fighters have taken industrial action.

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