Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 September 2000

Indonesian Adidas workers strike for improved conditions

On September 11, 9,300 workers employed in Adidas footwear plants in Indonesia went on strike for 24 hours. The mainly women workers are demanding to be paid for overtime work, a lunch allowance and menstruation leave. Most of the women, who work long hours doing intense and repetitive jobs, suffer from nausea, stomach cramps and pains in the back and other limbs during menstruation.

The fight for official menstruation leave is widely supported by workers across the industry. At present footwear companies intimidate those women who apply for leave by forcing them to submit to humiliating medical examinations by company doctors.

The Adidas workers are also demanding that the company implement government regulations and introduce minimum severance pay in cases of retrenchments and factory closures. Nearly 300,000 workers have been laid off from Indonesia's footwear industry in the last three years.

The workers warned that they will hold further work stoppages and strikes if Adidas does not meet their demands.

This week Indonesian footwear companies called on the government to scrap minimum wage regulations, claiming that wage levels were “unfair” and too high. The minimum monthly wage for footwear workers in Indonesia stands at only 286,000 rupiah or less than $US70.

Guest workers protest fee hike in Hong Kong

Filipino guest workers staged a protest outside the Philippines Consulate General in Hong Kong on Wednesday against the introduction of a new annual $US194 fee imposed by the Philippines government. The fee hike is aimed at raising $30 million a year from guest workers in Hong Kong.

The workers were also protesting against a $42.50 increase in other administrative fees at the consulate general, such as for notary work and the processing of employment contracts.

The Overseas Workers Welfare Administration in Manila delayed the implementation of the new fee following protests by Filipino guest workers around the world but plans to bring it into effect by the end of the year. The fee was previously paid as a one-off welfare contribution.

Secretary-general of United Filipinos in Hong Kong, Eman Villanueva, said that workers received little welfare assistance from the Philippines government.

“Only 11 percent of the fees will go to direct services, such as airport assistance or burial assistance, while the rest will go to administrative services, such as officials' salaries and their travelling fees,” she said.

It is estimated the Philippines government reaps $US780 million a year in fees and other fund repatriations from the four million Filipinos working overseas. More than 150,000 Filipinos work in Hong Kong.

Indian teachers continue strike over pay

A strike by university and college teachers in the Indian city of Patna in Bihar has entered its eighth week. The teachers are demanding that the state government pay the money they are owed as a result of the introduction of a revised salary scale. Teachers have been denied the increase and are seeking to have payments backdated to January 1, 1996. They have called on the state government, which is obligated to pay for 20 percent of the rise, to immediately provide its share of the funding. The government has refused, claiming that the state treasury did not have sufficient funds.

Indian shipping workers protest against privatisation

Around 200 workers from the Shipping Corporation of India (SCI) gathered outside a meeting of the company's directors in Mumbai on Tuesday to protest against the government's plans to privatise the SCI, the country's last public sector shipping company.

The workers entered the building and stormed the directors' meeting, which had been called to finalise plans to split the company into three entities as recommended by the financial firm Price Waterhouse Coopers.

Hospital workers work-to-rule in Sri Lanka

Workers at the state-owned Sri Jayawardanapura hospital near Colombo are engaged in a work-to-rule campaign for a 13-item log of claims. The claims include a 900-rupee ($US11.50) general pay increase, further salary increases for workers with over 15 years service and the reinstatement of a cancelled easy payment scheme for patients. Pharmacists, paramedical, auxiliary and clerical staff in the campaign have imposed a ban on overtime and are refusing to work beyond 4pm each day.

Doctors in Sri Lankan war zone demand payment of risk allowance

Nearly 800 doctors in the war-torn North and East of Sri Lanka have decided not to report to work from September 20 because the payment of a risk allowance for working in dangerous areas has been delayed for nine months.

The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) has been discussing the matter with the health ministry since June but failed to achieve any results. Doctors in the war zone are already suffering poor living standards and are under stress from working in “sensitive security situations,” a spokesman for the GMOA said.

New Zealand nurses vote to strike

Nurses employed by Capital Coast Health (CCH) in Wellington have issued a strike notice for October 1, after rejecting a five-percent pay increase proposed by the employing authority and their union. The strike, which will involve over 500 nurses, will be the region's first since 1992.

A previous stop-work meeting in August erupted in anger when the union indicated it would be seeking a seven-percent increase, with many nurses saying this was too low. The union failed to act on demands from union members that it fights for a larger increase.

Nurses have now called for the union to begin new negotiations to demand a pay increase of at least 10 percent. Nurses condemned the union for not pushing hard enough, and lashed out at the government for not putting up any extra money so that health employers could meet wage increases.

While Nurses' Organisation officials admitted to being “over-awed” by the level of opposition against the union, they are still actively working to suppress the dispute. The union will seek mediation in an effort to avert the strike and has indicated that it is prepared to settle for a seven-percent increase.

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CCH has been forced to cancel hundreds of operations since the start of the year due to an acute shortage of staff. Wellington nurses are among the lowest paid in the country.

Niue teachers continue strike

The Ministry of Education on the Pacific island of Niue has begun advertising four vacant head of department positions at Niue High School after last week's resignation by 10 striking teachers. The teachers resigned in protest at a government ultimatum that they either return to their jobs or be sacked. While some teachers from the school have returned to work, the majority are continuing their three-week strike for pay increases.

The government has attacked students' parents who have opposed the use of volunteer staff and other public servants to keep classes going. This week Premier Sani Lakatani issued a statement condemning 80 parents who recently protested outside parliament in support of the teachers. He claimed that the parents were turning the teachers' dispute into a “political issue” and accused them of trying to “adopt the Fijian way of doing things”. A parents' spokesman said Lakatani was “going over the top” in comparing their small protest in front of parliament with the armed coup in Fiji last May.

The premier said the government was not going to be “held to ransom” by the teachers and that a “jobs and regrading review” was being undertaken by a government consultant. He told TV Niue that if the teachers wanted their jobs back they would now have to apply when vacancies at the 250-pupil High School were advertised.

Toyota technical staff strikes over victimisations

Up to 400 Toyota technical and supervisory staff took strike action on September 13 in Melbourne, Australia, over the victimisation of 10 workers. The workers were sacked after an internal investigation by the company allegedly uncovered pornography had been downloaded from the Internet and sent on the company's email system.

The Australian Metal Workers Union (AMWU) said that it was concerned that the company had not followed proper procedures in investigating the allegations. Several of the sacked workers had received unsolicited emails and other people could access their computer terminals. Over the past few months several companies, including telecommunications carrier Telstra, have alleged misuse of company Internet facilities in order to dismiss staff.

Toyota immediately took the dispute to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC), claiming that the industrial action was illegal.

Union moves to contain Commonwealth Bank dispute

Two weeks ago thousands of workers employed by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) staged work stoppages and demonstrations to demand an improved pay offer and to oppose CBA management attempts to impose individual work contracts on its 28,000 employees.

Despite demands by union members for further stoppages, the Finance Sector Union (FSU) is preparing to divert the campaign into legal proceedings.

On Wednesday, the union launched a Federal Court action charging that the CBA had breached two provisions of the Federal Workplace Relations Act when it offered individual contracts to employees. The provisions supposedly protect collective bargaining and freedom of association.

The CBA responded to the union's move by issuing a statement declaring that the bank would not improve its 6.5 percent pay increase over two years or withdraw its plans for individual work contracts.

CBA management made clear that they were prepared for a drawn out court case. A spokesman for the bank said this week that the company had sought legal advice before offering the contracts. “We're confident that we have met all our obligations under the law,” he said.

Australian miners strike over wages

Mineworkers from BHP's Tower and Cordeaux mines at Appin on the South Coast of New South Wales will go on strike for 72 hours from September 24. The workers voted to strike after negotiations for a 15 percent pay increase over two years broke down.

The miners are seeking the wage rise to compensate for increased workloads created by the continuous job cuts in mines over the past two years. Throughout this time the mining union has worked closely with BHP to reduce its national coal workforce by 2,148, or 38.4 percent, and drive up the productivity of each miner by 54 percent.

There are 23 more retrenchments pending at the Tower colliery by the end this month. A spokesman for the mining section of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union said, “there is little the union can do to prevent the latest retrenchments”. BHP has refused to negotiate and placed the dispute before the Industrial Relations Commission.

Airport contract workers seek wage parity

Contract workers who operate x-ray baggage screening equipment at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport carried out a series of rolling stoppages on Monday as part of a campaign for wage parity with baggage handlers employed by the airport authority. The workers are employed by the private security firm Chubb and are paid $A11.96 per hour. Airport baggage handlers are paid $14.80 per hour.

Bank IT workers oppose outsourcing

About 200 IT workers at Westpac in Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours this week after learning that 700 to 800 IT jobs would be contracted out.

A spokesman for the workers said that the bank had not offered any severance payments, guarantees of employment after the transition date, or confirmation about which company had been chosen for outsourcing.

The strike ended when the FSU recommended that workers accept an Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) directive for a return to work. The workers ended the stoppage after being told that job delegates could attend the conciliation conference.

FSU state secretary Geoff Derrick said that the union had accepted the IRC direction because it was “committed to try and avoid any disruption, particularly at the Olympics where Westpac is the sole provider of services at the Homebush venue.”

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