

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 September 2001

Indonesian teachers strike over back pay

Teachers in Purbalingga, Central Java, struck on August 24 to demand payment of a wage increase granted in January. The government promised to pay the outstanding amount by July but reneged on the agreement. The strike has closed down classes across the region. On the first day of the action, teachers, supported by their students, staged protests in front of their schools. Classrooms and staff rooms were locked.

Philippine airport workers ordered to pay back allowances

Mactan-Cebu International Airport Authority employees took protest action on August 27 over the forced payback of allowances and bonuses they won between 1998 and 2000. The Authority's finance department said it had been ordered by the government's Commission on Audit (COA) to instruct all employees to refund 85,000 pesos (\$3,100). The COA claimed the bonuses, which included four allowances and six one-off payments, were "a waste of government funds".

Airport authorities told the employees after the protest that they should direct their grievances to the COA because its own appeals to have the order rescinded had failed.

Hospital management threatens closure in the Philippines

Employees of the Lopez District Farmers Hospital in the Philippines filed a strike notice this week after hospital management refused to negotiate a new collective work agreement and threatened to close the hospital on August 31. The current work agreement expired in 1999.

The union is hoping that the National Conciliation and Mediation Board, which governs industrial disputes, will support the claim that the hospital had engaged in "unfair and illegal practice" by threatening closure to avoid contract negotiation and severance pay issues.

Taiwan workers protest against rising unemployment

Hundreds of workers and unemployed people protested outside the Taipei International Convention Centre on August 25 during a meeting of the government's Economic Advisory Conference. The workers carried banners

demanding labour rights and shouted slogans condemning the ongoing destruction of jobs.

Unemployment in Taiwan reached an all-time high of 4.92 percent in July, with the full-year jobless rate standing at 4.3 percent. Many companies across the island are closing operations and moving to mainland China to take advantage of lower pay rates and other concessions.

Pakistan public workers demonstrate against restructuring

Public sector workers in Pakistan demonstrated in Hyderabad on August 26 against the restructuring of the country's public enterprises. Dictated by the International Monetary Fund, privatisation and downsizing has resulted in the wholesale destruction of jobs and the slashing of benefits for tens of thousands of state sector workers. The government has banned union activities and taken other measures to suppress protests. The weekend rally was organised by the Workers of Pakistan Trade Unions Defense Campaign.

Sri Lankan doctors strike over extra hours payment

Doctors at the National Hospital in Colombo struck on August 29 to demand an increase in overtime rates. The doctors are demanding that overtime payments be raised from the current 55 rupees (\$US60 cents) an hour to 100 rupees. The government doctors are responsible for providing around-the-clock service and are called in, on average, five times during a 24-hour period.

Doctors had also claimed transport allowances and a salary increase for interns but these demands were dropped after the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) held discussions with the Health Ministry.

Estate workers clash with police in Sri Lanka

Some 2,000 workers at the Rattota Estate in Matale, 142 kilometres north of Colombo, struck on August 28 and demonstrated to prevent police arresting a tractor driver falsely accused of assaulting an estate supervisor. The police, firing warning shots into the air, were forced to retreat and abandon the attempted arrest. The estate workers are demanding that the supervisor withdraw the false complaint against their colleague.

Australian car workers strike for wage increase

More than 4,000 workers at General Motors' Holden assembly plant in Elizabeth, South Australia voted for strike action over wages on August 31, rejecting the advice of Australian Manufacturing Workers Union officials that they stay on the job. The workers will not return to work until September 3.

Both the day and night shifts voted for the walk-out after the company only offered a 15.1 percent pay rise over three years. The union originally lodged a claim for a 24 percent pay increase but dropped this to 20 percent in negotiations the day before the mass meeting. Further industrial action, including rolling stoppages, may be taken if the pay offer is not significantly increased.

Nurses walk off job at Sydney hospital

Nurses at St George Hospital in Sydney walked off the job for two hours on August 31 as part of an ongoing campaign against nursing shortages. The hospital has been forced to close 150 of its 680 beds due to lack of staff. Currently there is a shortage of 1,500 fulltime nurses at public hospitals in the state of New South Wales. The nurses union has launched a "What's a Nurse Worth?" campaign, demanding improved wages and conditions to stop the flow of nurses leaving the profession and encourage others to enter it.

The state government has so far rejected pay demands declaring that nurses are locked into a general public sector award agreement that still has three years to go. It has also declared a nurse pay rise could result in wage claims by teachers, fire fighters and police officers. So far, about 1,000 nurses have had their pay docked for taking part in protests during the campaign.

Police called to break up theme park protest

Management of Wonderland theme park in Sydney called the police on August 26 to remove a group of cleaners protesting at the front gates over pay rates. The workers were talking to hundreds of people attending a charity day and handing out balloons with a printed message, "Support the cleaners". When the police refused to make arrests, the company called in its own security guards to break up the protest.

The workers are demanding equal pay for all cleaners. Presently, 12 cleaners are paid only \$14.08 an hour, while nine others receive \$15.61. A spokesman for the cleaners explained that the pay difference came about because Wonderland found they couldn't attract new workers at the lower rate. "They were advertising the jobs at the lower rate, but no one applied so they were forced to advertise the jobs at a higher rate".

The day after the protest Wonderland warned the cleaners that if they take further industrial action, they would be sacked.

Paint workers continue strike

More than 150 workers at Taubmans paint factory at Villawood in Sydney's west have extended their seven-day long strike indefinitely. The workers went on strike on August 23 for improvements in wages and working conditions. They are also demanding measures to protect sick leave, holiday and long service leave and other entitlements in the event of a factory closure.

Workers end wage campaign at Cascade Brewery

Workers at Cascade Brewery in Hobart ended industrial action this week and accepted the latest company offer of a 4 percent pay rise for two years, 4.5 percent rise in the third year and a 1 percent yearly increase in superannuation payments. The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union told the brewery workers to accept the offer, even though it falls short of the 5 percent yearly rise originally sought. The agreement is expected to come into force by the beginning of next month.

Industrial action hits New Zealand hospitals

About 1,200 New Zealand health workers in the Canterbury District Health Board (CDHP) began industrial action on August 29 over a pay claim. The nurses, mental health workers, social workers and dental staff have rejected the 4 percent pay offer by the CDHP and are refusing to work overtime or outside their normal rostered areas. The action has forced the CDHP to close up to 80 beds.

The health workers are seeking a general wage increase of 6.5 percent, improved allowances and changes to their hours of work. Due to the Labour government's hospital funding regime, the CDHP has already been forced to budget for a \$20 million deficit and says it cannot afford to increase its pay offer without making cuts to services. The health board claims that workers demands would cost about \$48 million.

Industrial action is expected to expand throughout the Canterbury area over the coming month and may involve up to 3,000 health workers. Unions representing 1,200 nurses and support staff at Princess Margaret and Hillmorton Hospitals have already served notices of industrial action this week. Nurses in other areas are due to meet soon.



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