

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 August 2004

Day of protest in India

Workers throughout India joined a nationwide day of protest on August 20, fighting for seven demands. They include higher interest returns on the Employees Provident Fund; a roll back of proposed increases in foreign direct investments in certain sectors such as Telecom, aviation and insurance; pensions for workers in the unorganised sector; and a revival of the ailing Public Sector Undertakings program.

Demonstrations and dharnas (sit-in protests) were held in all state capitals. At Jantar Mantar in New Delhi, hundreds of workers picketed and shouted slogans. Members of at least seven major unions participated in the protest. A one-day strike is planned as the next step in the campaign.

Bank workers strike for salary increase

More than a million bank employees throughout India went on strike for one day on August 24, demanding a 20 percent salary increase. Banking operations across the country were paralysed, including cheque clearing, Forex transactions and trading in government securities. Major banks claim the strike cost them an estimated 5 billion rupees (\$US100 million).

The previous wage pact, agreed to by bank unions and management in 2000, expired in October 2002. The United Forum of Bank Unions has been negotiating for a new agreement with Indian Banks Association since July 2 but has failed to reach a settlement. Bank workers have threatened a two-day strike in September if the pay demand is not met.

Telecom employees on hunger strike

Telecom workers in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite hunger strike in front of the company's main office on August 21. Their action follows that of Telecom workers in New Delhi who began a hunger strike on August 17.

Their demands include the removal of all wage anomalies on the basis of seniority and an end to the misnamed Voluntary Retirement Scheme. Workers also want the central government to provide group insurance and pay all outstanding bonuses for 2003. They are threatening continued action until all demands are met.

Sri Lankan health workers strike for overdue pay increase

Thousands of health workers in the North West and Sabaragamuwa provinces of Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on August 23, demanding a salary increase that the government earlier promised would be awarded from the beginning of August. The strikers include nurses, minor staff, clerks, drivers and health sector auxiliary workers.

Around 15,000 workers in 75 health establishments across the North West province are on strike, while in Sabaragamuwa province 100 establishments are affected. Health workers in the country's northeastern province have also decided to strike. The workers are

members of the Health Services Trade Union Alliance.

Railway workers continue fight against privatisation

Around 2,000 Sri Lankan railway workers picketed in front of the Transport Ministry in central Colombo for more than one hour on August 24, demanding the withdrawal of the Railway Authority Bill. The Bill is aimed at transforming the rail system into a profit-making corporation with the loss of thousands of jobs. Before the election, the now-governing United Peoples Front Alliance promised to scrap the legislation.

Demands also include the immediate payment of salary arrears, guaranteed positions for casual workers and legal action against corrupt sections of the rail management.

The campaign is being organised by the Movement to Protect the Rights of Railway Workers and Railway Property, with 25 rail union affiliates. Large police contingents were deployed on the day of the protest.

On August 18, 2,000 railway gatekeepers protested in front of the Transport Ministry demanding confirmation of their jobs. They threatened to launch a fast-unto-death campaign unless the demand is met.

Medical laboratory workers work to rule

Sri Lankan medical laboratory technologists launched a work to rule on August 20, protesting against non-payment for services they provide after official working hours. Medical laboratory technologists, including physiotherapists, electro-cardiogram technicians and radiation technicians, supply services to teaching hospitals, base hospitals and the Central Blood Bank.

The workers are also protesting cuts in the training and education of technologists and demanding the filling of all staff vacancies. They are concerned that the government may be moving to privatise laboratory services.

Korean union accepts pay freeze

The union at textile manufacturer Kolon Inc in South Korea this week accepted a wage freeze in exchange for the company dropping legal action against striking workers. On August 25, a majority of the 1,400 workers who had been on strike for two months voted for the union's recommendation to accept the deal and return to work.

The workers went on strike on June 23 seeking a 6 percent pay increase and a 100 percent increase in bonuses. They also demanded that the company drop restructuring plans that would lead to layoffs. The restructure included downsizing a polyester-yarn-producing facility that produces 60 tonnes of yarn daily so as to concentrate on the production of high-end yarn products and electronics materials. Kolon argued it was suffering from rising costs resulting from increased competition from China.

On August 18, the management barred strikers from entering the

premises and called for increased police numbers around the plant.

Distillery workers end industrial action

The union at South Korean rice liquor distiller Jinro Ltd this week shut down industrial action in a dispute over wages and working conditions. Unionised workers at the plant had imposed a work-to-rule before beginning rolling stoppages across shifts on August 20.

The union has already dropped its original claim for a 12.8 percent pay increase in favour of 7 percent offered by management. Issues over working conditions remained unresolved.

There is now a “tentative agreement” over the introduction of a five-day working week and other conditions. A union spokesman said “specific conditions of the employment terms” would be disclosed after workers had voted on the deal.

The company—which operates three soju distilleries in Icheon, Cheongwon and Masan—has been under court receivership since May 2003 with a debt of about 2.9 trillion won [US\$2.5 billion].

Contract company advertises for strike breakers

Workers on strike at the Muja and Kwinana power plants in Western Australia’s southwest voted this week for a third time to defy an Australian Industrial Relations Commission order to return to work.

The 120 workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, are employed by contractor United KG/ Siemens to carry out maintenance work for state-owned power provider Western Power.

The men have been on strike for seven weeks and are now threatening to picket the plants to prevent United KG/ Siemens using scabs, after it advertised for replacement labour. The strikers are demanding improved working conditions, including a pay increase and the introduction of a 36-hour week in line with contract workers elsewhere in the state.

Defence contractor lifts two-week lockout

Around 300 workers at the Wadsworth Army Barracks near Wodonga, Victoria returned to work on August 2 after being locked out for nearly two weeks. They are employed by defence industry contractor Tenix to refurbish tanks, armoured personnel carriers, trucks and other vehicles for the Commonwealth Defence Department. The lockout began about two weeks ago after the workers rejected conditions in a new work place agreement proposed by the company. The company has now offered a 12.85 percent wage increase over three years plus a \$450 bonus. Workers had earlier claimed that they were earning \$100 a week less than workers employed in the engineering sector in Australia’s major cities. Tenix lifted the lockout after the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the National Union of Workers agreed to the deal.

Auto parts workers fight for pay increase

Workers at auto parts manufacturer Air International in South Australia imposed overtime bans this week in support of a new enterprise work agreement, including a 15 percent wage increase over three years.

During negotiations for the previous two work agreements at the plant, management assured workers that if they showed “restraint” they would receive improved offers in future agreements. However, Air International has refused to meet even the present minimal wage demand.

Workers have warned that if the wage increase is not granted they may begin rolling stoppages. Air International supplies vehicle parts, car seats, climate control systems and pedals to car manufacturer General Motors Holden.

Hospital workers strike over staff

Orderlies at Tasmania’s state-owned North-West Regional Hospital’s emergency and accident department went on strike on August 27 over the lack of adequate security.

The workers are demanding an increase in security staff on all three shifts. The union said it approached management about lax security earlier this year when one of its members was assaulted by a patient, but the issue was not resolved.

North-West Regional Hospital spokesperson Mary Blackwood claimed that planning has been completed for the introduction of 24-hour security at the hospital, but added, “it will start as soon as it can be arranged”.

New Zealand teachers to vote on pay deal

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) in New Zealand this week brokered a deal with the Ministry of Education for its 15,000 members. The agreement will mean pay increases of between 8.47 percent and 13 percent over three years. Also included is a once-off bonus of \$500 to encourage teachers to accept the three-year agreement in ratification meetings next week.

While the union is recommending the deal to its members, PPTA Canterbury Region chairwoman Jacinta Grice said the pay increase, which at the higher scale amounts to a little more than 4 percent a year, “would not rock your socks off”. Canterbury PPTA members will vote on August 30.

Solomons timber workers to strike over broken promises

The Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) has issued a 28-day notice of intention to strike to logging company Sylvania Products Limited. The union, which covers 200 Sylvania workers, claims the company is not fulfilling its obligation to contribute to the building of the government-supported Vangunu Palm Oil project.

SINUW general secretary Tony Kagavoi said the government gave tax relief to the company to buy machinery for the project but the machinery was being used for clear felling in other areas of the island. He also claimed Sylvania was awarded a licence for clear felling on the condition that the cleared land was planted with oil palm, but in most cases this was not happening.

The union charged that the oil palm fruit in Vangunu in the Western Province could not be harvested because Sylvania has not constructed a factory to process it. The nursery there is overgrown with weeds and seven plots of oil palm are not being maintained.



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