

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 September 2004

Filipino fisherman return to work

Over 200 Filipino fishermen and crew, who had seized 15 fishing vessels and sailed them into Papua New Guinea territorial waters, ended their strike on September 5 after the canning company they supply with fish agreed to negotiate their grievances.

The workers are demanding that RD Tuna Ventures (RDTVI), which operates a canning plant in Papua New Guinea, match the salaries and conditions paid to international seafarers. The strikers returned to work after a deal was brokered between the company and the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs.

The company has agreed to look into a new salaries and compensation package for the crewmen, with the view to a possible increase, and to ensure that their fishing vessels have an adequate supply of medicine, portable water and food. The fishermen are also seeking shore-leave rights after seven months of continuous duty.

Indian teachers demonstrate against contributory pensions

Hundreds of teachers in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated in cities and towns throughout the state on September 4. They were protesting the state government's decision to introduce a Contributory Pension Scheme for employees from September 1. Teachers will have to pay part of the cost of the scheme. Despite promises to the contrary, the government has brought forward the new scheme to cut expenditure on teachers' retirement.

The teachers were also protesting against the planned abolition of several benefits paid to government employees.

Indian postal workers protest

Postal workers in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated outside the main post office in Vellore on September 2. Workers claim the government has disregarded the recommendations of several committees established to study extra-departmental (ED) employees' conditions. This includes, the Chiranjit Talwar committee, which was constituted in 1993 and recommended salary increases, gratuity and the provision of pensions.

The main demand of the demonstration was that ED workers be put on postal department rolls, in line with the recommendations of the Talwar committee.

Indian telecom workers begin fasting campaign

Telecom workers at Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL) in Tamilnadu began an indefinite relay hunger strike near the Madurai Telecom general manager's office on September 1.

The workers are protesting against the cancellation of an annual local transfer arrangement for staff at the Central Telegraph Office and other city telegraph offices and the contracting out of telegram deliveries.

Sales representatives demand improved conditions

Sales and medical representatives held a sit-down protest outside the

District Labour Officer's premises in Cuddapah, Andhra Pradesh, on September 7.

The protesters submitted a memorandum to the Labour Commissioner calling for the prosecution of all companies refusing to the pay minimum wages or engaging in illegal labour practices. The campaign was organised by the Medical and Sales Representatives Union.

Indian drivers campaign for improved conditions

Andhra Pradesh drivers who operate lorries, auto-rickshaws and various other passenger vehicles in Proddatur held a sit-down protest on September 2.

The drivers want a minimum wage, establishment of a provident fund, and continuation of an insurance scheme and bonuses. They are also demanding the scrapping of user charges on highways and a roll back in license fee increases. Fees have risen from 50 rupees to 450 rupees. The workers also want compensation payments for drivers killed in road accidents.

Bank workers demand wage increase

Bank workers in the southern Indian state of Kerala protested outside the Indian Bank in Kollam on September 8 to demand a wage increase. They are planning to organise another demonstration on September 15 and launch a week of protests on the issue, building up a two-day strike on October 5.

Pakistani power workers oppose privatisation

Power workers at the Karachi Electricity Supply Corporation (KESC) in Pakistan protested at the Press Club in Karachi on September 3. They called for an end to the proposed privatisation of the corporation.

Speakers at the demonstration accused the government of trying to sell the company on the directive of international financial organisations and warned that privatisation would cut KESC jobs and. The meeting demanded the lifting of the five-year ban on trade union activities at KESC.

KESC workers are also campaigning for a wage increase, the payment of all salary arrears and the restoration of a medical treatment scheme. They are seeking the reinstatement of workers sacked for a range of reasons and the abolition of the Industrial Relations Ordinance 2002, which is viewed as detrimental to workers' interests.

Sri Lankan health workers march against pay anomalies

Around 1,000 Sri Lankan health workers marched from Colombo National Hospital to the health ministry in the city centre on September 8 to demand a solution to salary anomalies.

The demands include the provision of paid days off, overtime payments and permanency for alternative workers. Recently, the Health Ministry issued a circular limiting overtime payments for health sector workers, in particular for technical personnel, including

paramedics. The marchers submitted a memorandum outlining the demands.

In another dispute, Medical Laboratory Technologists (MLTs)—physiotherapists, electro-cardiogram technicians and radiation technicians—held a two-day sick note campaign on September 8 and stayed away from work. They were protesting cuts to training and education programs for technologists and demanding the filling of all staff vacancies.

The MLTs are concerned about staff shortages and government moves to privatise laboratory services. They claim that there are currently only 910 personnel when 3,000 are needed. The technicians have been “working to rule” since August 20.

Estate sector workers oppose privatisation

Office workers, drivers, factory staff and medical officers at the State Plantation Corporation (SPC) and the Peoples Estate Development Board (JEDB) held a sick note protest on September 6. The workers, who are employed on 60 estates in the Kandy and Matale districts in Sri Lanka’s Central province, were protesting against the planned privatisation of the estates. They are threatening stronger action if the government does not provide a reassurance by September that it will not proceed with the privatisations.

Teachers demand job confirmation

On September 1, teachers in the Kurunegala District in the North West province of Sri Lanka held a sit-down protest at the education ministry in Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, to demand the government confirm their positions.

The protest went for five hours until the ministry secretary met with a teachers’ delegation. The teachers said they were temporarily suspending further action after the meeting because they expected their demand would be dealt with.

More than 250 teachers in the Dimbulagala Education Zone in North Central Province demonstrated outside the education ministry on August 25 over the same issue.

Australian auto company hit by stoppages

Rolling strike action late last month by 230 workers at Air International in South Australia, an auto-parts manufacturer, has forced General Motors-Holden to scale back national production.

The dispute is over a new work agreement, including a 15 percent pay increase over three years. While the workers ended the stoppages on September 6 they plan further action. Overtime and work bans have been in place at the plant since late August.

The company, situated at Edinburgh Park, supplies GM-Holden and Mitsubishi with car seats, climate control systems, carpets and pedals. A spokesman for Mitsubishi said this week that the dispute had not affected production at its South Australian plant so far.

NSW school cleaners rally at state parliament

About 2,000 public school cleaners from across New South Wales demonstrated outside state parliament house on September 8. More than 6,500 school cleaners walked off the job for four days last week opposing the state Labor government’s refusal to guarantee their jobs and hours when contracts with private cleaning companies come up for renewal next year.

A union spokesman said the cleaners were insisting that the government “guarantee jobs and guarantee existing hours”. State Industrial Relations Minister John Della Bosca said this week that the government would not underwrite a fixed number of working hours at individual schools. “What we can’t accept... is that for five years there’ll be no changes [to working hours],” he told rallying workers.

New Zealand nurses reject pay offer

Negotiations between the NZ Nurses’ Association and the combined District Health Boards (DHBs) over a pay increase for 20,000 public sector nurses broke down this week. DHB representatives claimed to have put their “best deal” on the table but the nurses’ union said the offer was not good enough and warned that its members would strike if health boards refused to budge.

The \$NZ329 million offer raised the range of a registered nurse’s base pay from \$31,294-\$45,000 to \$40,000-\$53,000. The union, which had pushed for a scale of \$40,000-\$54,000, said nurses were disappointed by the attitude of the DHBs and their “take it or leave it” offer.

Under the proposal, almost 75 per cent of nurses would still be paid less than police and secondary school teachers. Nurses have voted previously to authorise the union to call strike action when required.

New Zealand port workers strike over casualisation

Port workers mounted a 100-strong, round-the-clock picket at Ports of Auckland’s container terminals on September 8, at the start of a four-day strike. They want to establish “benchmark” employment conditions. About 260 workers walked off the job after last-ditch negotiations between the Maritime Union and port employers failed to reach a resolution. The parties have been in mediation for five weeks.

A Maritime Union spokesman said the ports employed large numbers of casuals, despite the capacity for more full-time jobs. While the union agreed there was “a place” for casual workers, it stated the ratio needed to be “in proportion” and linked to a career path that led to full-time employment.

The union, however, has already signed an employment agreement allowing for up to 25 percent casual hire. Casual workers at Ports of Auckland represent about 10 percent of the total workforce and are paid less than permanent workers.

Casualisation is now endemic, and on the increase, throughout the industry. Port companies claim they need a casualised workforce because the global shipping trend is for bigger ships to call at fewer ports and that they are unloaded immediately on arrival. This has created bigger peaks and troughs in port activity.

A port spokeswoman said the present strike would cause major disruption as it affected both terminals at the biggest container port in the country. While the union claims the dispute is to set a benchmark for conditions at all New Zealand ports, port workers operating non-container wharves have not been involved.

Strike cuts New Caledonia news service

On September 7, television and radio audiences were still without local news services as a strike by the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers entered its third week. Union pickets are preventing staff from France’s overseas network television and radio broadcaster (RFO) from working.

The industrial action was triggered when RFO attempted to force a technician returning from overseas to sign a new contract with conditions that both the technician and the union opposed.



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