

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia & the Pacific

16 July 2005

Indian tea estate workers on indefinite strike

Close to 500,000 Indian tea workers from 350 estates in Bengal launched an indefinite strike on July 11 to demand better wages.

As part of their campaign, the strikers are planning to blockade roads in several parts of North Bengal, including the highway that connects India's north-eastern states with the rest of the country. They are also planning to protest at the New Jalpaiguri railway station and restrict the movement of the Guwahati-New Delhi Rajdhani Express.

The tea workers' unions have declared the workers will not accept the productivity-linked wage rises that the Indian Tea Association (ITA) has demanded. Union spokesman Samir Roy said they wanted the daily wage rate in Bengal to be doubled and other benefits paid. Workers have also refused to accept an ITA demand for financial penalties against tea pluckers who fail to meet their quota.

"Enough is enough," Roy told the media. The workers can't let themselves be exploited endlessly."

Tea companies say the strike will badly hit Bengal's tea industry. It is now possible the dispute will spread to the neighbouring state of Assam. Talks between trade unions in Assam and the ITA over wages have broken down.

Bengal and Assam account for nearly 85 percent of the country's total tea output. According to the Indian Tea Association (ITA), losses could amount to 100 million rupees (\$US2.3m) per day.

Honda strike continues in India

Some 3,500 workers at the Gurgaon plant of Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) near New Delhi have been on strike for a month demanding the reinstatement of 24 suspended workers, including four union leaders. The company suspended the workers on various grounds after they demanded higher wages.

The All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) is planning a day-long dharna (sit-in protest) outside the Gurgaon Commissioner's residence in solidarity with the strikers.

The Honda plant was set up four years ago and has a production capacity of 2,000 units per day. The company has lost around \$US200 million due to the strike. Management is

trying to break the workers' action by using intimidation and threatening to sack the strikers. Police have been heavily deployed in the plant. According to the AITUC, Honda management "has resorted to large scale victimisation".

Pepsico workers continue strike in India

A strike by workers at the Pepsico plant in Bajpur, Uttaranchal, near New Delhi, has entered its second month. Around 100 employees began the strike on June 8 demanding the withdrawal of the transfer of a number of workers after they began to form a union at the factory.

Pepsico's plant in Bajpur has a capacity of 100,000 cases per day. Management has hired temporary staff to resume production.

Indian teachers protest

On July 6, thousands of teachers in the Ludhiana district protested outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Ludhiana, north of Delhi. Their demands included an end to the privatisation of schools, permanent positions for contract teachers, the hiring of 30,000 staff to fill vacancies and transfers based on merit.

Teachers held protest rallies in Jargon, Raikot, Sidhwan Bet, Khanna, Malout, Samrala and Machhiwara before traveling to Ludhiana for a joint rally. Heavy rain did not disrupt the protest.

Some 400 contract teachers from government schools in Chandigarh picketed in Matka Chowk on July 9 against the termination of their services. They demanded their reinstatement and permanent jobs.

Indian bank workers demonstrate

State Bank of Patiala (SBOP) employees demonstrated outside the main branch in Chandigarh on July 6 to demand the filling of staff vacancies and the right to hold welfare committee meetings inside the bank.

Addressing a rally after the demonstration, SBOP Employees Federation leaders condemned management's "callous" attitude and threatened further action. The union is planning to hold a dharna (sit-in protest) in front of the bank's head office in Patiala on July 20.

On July 9, staff from the Punjab Bank also demonstrated outside the SBOP head office to protest against the

government's decision to privatise a 49 percent stake of public sector banks. According to Indian Bank Employees' Association speakers, the government is also planning to allow up to 74 percent foreign ownership of private banks. Rallies throughout the country are being prepared for July 19 against the privatisation move in the financial sector.

Indian power workers stage protest

Contract power workers in Andhra Pradesh demonstrated on July 11 against the abrupt removal of four men from their jobs at a substation. According to union officials, the workers were removed for testifying against their employer who assaulted another worker.

The local police ignored union demands that the employer be arrested, allegedly due to government pressure. Instead, his contract with the power company was renewed.

Sri Lankan health workers picket

Hundreds of health workers picketed the health ministry in central Colombo on July 6 to demand an end to the privatisation of health services and the payment of a salary increase that was promised by the previous government.

The entire staff at Negambo hospital, some 40 kilometres from Colombo, joined a one-day strike on July 11 to protest against the intimidation of health workers by politicians.

New Zealand airlines staff prepare to strike

Some 1,000 Air New Zealand cabin crew are preparing to strike on July 18, 21 and 24 due to an unresolved dispute with the company over pay increases and improved annual leave. Three months of negotiations have failed to produce an outcome acceptable to the workforce.

Air NZ has announced it will cancel as many as 30 percent of its international flights next week due to the stoppages. Between 15 and 30 flights per day and 14,000 passengers will be affected.

Australian racecourse staff win pay rise

Staff at Melbourne's Sandown and Caulfield racetracks have called off threats of industrial action after the Melbourne Racing Club (MRC) agreed to maintain a long-standing clause in their workplace agreement that prohibits forced redundancies. The offer from MRC that the workers have accepted preserves the redundancy ban and delivers a pay increase of 4.5 percent each year for the next three years.

The MRC's initial demand that the redundancy clause be removed has left workers with doubts over the company's intentions. An Australian Workers Union official stated: "Our members still don't know what was the impetus to change the status quo and take away their job security."

Staff at racetracks operated by the Victorian Racing Club and the Moonee Valley Racing Club have been offered a pay increase of 13.5 percent over the next three years.

Saipan garment workers sue

One hundred and twenty one former employees of garment manufacturer La Mode Incorporated in the Mariana Islands' capital, Saipan, have filed a court action. The workers claim that La Mode closed its Saipan factory on April 25 this year without giving them 60 days termination notice, which is mandated by law, or paying outstanding overtime. They also claim that pay deductions for medical expenses and "employee processing fees" were illegal.

A lawyer representing the workers, Joe Hill, said that as well as seeking back pay and other monies owed, he has asked the court to impose a civil penalty of \$500 on La Mode for each day they failed to comply with their legal obligations.

Most of the workers are from China, with others from the Philippines, Thailand, Sri Lanka and Korea. They have been given until the end of July to find other employment after which time they will be forced to leave the island.

Telecom workers in PNG threaten strike action

PNG telecommunications workers voted at a stop work meeting on July 8 to strike if the state-owned Telecom Papua New Guinea continues to refuse to pay the 4 percent wage rise agreed to in the last Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.

The workers also want the removal of external advisers and Telecom board members who they believe are responsible for holding up the wage increase. The union has given the government and Telecom until July 15 to respond to their demands.



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