

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 June 2006

Asia

Bangladesh teachers strike over pay and conditions

Around 180,000 primary school teachers from 37,000 government primary schools in Bangladesh began an indefinite national strike on June 17. They have 21 demands, including elimination of salary discrimination and the introduction of a school-based examination system at the primary school level.

A Bangladesh Primary Teachers Association spokesman said that government high school teachers were paid 5,100 taka (\$US75) a month while primary school teachers earn only 2,600 taka (\$US38). Both have the same qualifications.

Thousands of striking teachers carrying banners and placards rallied in Dhaka on June 15 and presented a memo to Acting Speaker of the Parliament Akhter Hamid Siddiqui. Police later blocked a planned march.

The indefinite strike follows a series of actions by teachers, including two work stoppages in June and a protest in March. Teachers will remain on strike and are planning hunger protests if their demands are not met.

Bangladeshi garment workers demand unpaid wage

Workers at Youngone, a South Korean company in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone, demonstrated outside the factory on June 12 over non-payment of salaries. Hired thugs attacked them.

When Brigadier General Ashraf Abdullah Yusuf, the newly-appointed executive chairman of Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority, met with Youngone management, strikers blockaded the factory and prevented him from leaving for an hour. More police and the Rapid Action Battalion officers have since been deployed in the area.

Workers allege that wages at Youngone are poor and payment is often late. Youngone is one of the world's largest sportswear manufacturers and one of the biggest single investors in Bangladesh with seven factories with a total of more than 20,000 employees.

Sri Lankan health employees work-to-rule

More than 1,000 health workers at Sri Jayawardanapura Hospital on the outskirts of Colombo began a work-to-rule on June 19. They have banned overtime and working during holiday periods. Their demands also include the release of distress loans to staff, no outsourcing of hospital duties, no increase in hospital fees and an end to cuts in staff concessionary rates for prescriptions.

Sri Jayawardanapura Hospital is government-owned and was a gift of the Japanese government. Unlike other government hospitals it charges for services.

In a separate dispute, voluntary teachers from Sri Lanka's Eastern Province began a hunger protest outside the Zonal Education Department of Kalmunai on June 19. The teachers, some with ten years service, are demanding confirmed appointments.

Indian state workers continue protracted strike

A protracted strike by Manipur state employees that began on April 20 is continuing. While talks between the government and the Joint Administrative Council, which represents a range of government employee organisations, have failed to reach an agreement, the Manipur

Secretariat Services Association, the peak-union body of state secretariat employees, is planning to join the strike.

Workers have a 12-point charter of demands, including the rectification of pay anomalies for Manipur secretariat workers and an increase in the retirement age from 58 to 60 years. Because of poor retirement benefits many workers seek to extend their length of service.

The workers have called for the payment of outstanding Dearness Allowance instalments, the restoration of two advance increments and a payment for Xerox operators. They also want the release of three arrested strikers.

Indian doctors protest pay anomalies

Government hospital and public health centre doctors in Kerala are continuing protests they began in April. The doctors' action, which includes a "non-cooperation" campaign, could be extended to bans on a range of duties.

The protest is over anomalies in doctors' revised pay scale introduced in March by the state government. Doctors contend that they have been given "a raw deal" and in some cases their pay scales are lower than those of administrative officers, secretaries and other state department officials.

A doctors' spokesman said that, "A large number of the doctors, specialists in particular, are leaving the service for better jobs in the private sector. This is pushing the health sector into a severe crisis."

Daily-wage workers agitate for restoration of jobs

Sacked daily-wage workers from Bhadrawah forestry department in the North Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir demonstrated for the seventh consecutive day outside the District Forestry Officer's premises on June 20.

The low-paid workers, who had been employed at the department for 18 years and are now suffering serious hardship and even starvation. They are demanding immediate reemployment. The protestors burnt the effigy of forestry department commissioner secretary Najam Saqib. Further protests are planned if the government fails to address the problem.

Indonesian police break up security guards' occupation

Around 150 sacked security officers have established protest tents in the grounds of Securicor Indonesia in Jakarta. On June 16, just four days after the guards occupied the Securicor offices, around 200 men in Group 4 Securicor uniforms along with several truckloads of police broke up the occupation.

More than half of the company's 500 security guards were sacked on April 2005, after striking over job security. On June 8 this year, the Supreme Court ruled against the sackings and ordered Securicor to reemploy them. The company continues to defy the court's order.

Australia and the Pacific

Tooheys brewery drivers oppose pay cut

Public Service Association members banned the serving of Tooheys Brewery products in the NSW state parliament on June 22 in support of a protest blockade earlier this week by 57 owner-drivers contracted by transport company Linfox to deliver Tooheys beer.

Linfox wants the drivers to sign work agreements that cut the drivers'

wages by up to 42 percent. Tooheys originally told the drivers that they would no longer be needed after July 31. Negotiations between the Transport Workers Union (TWU) Linfox over the past two days failed to resolve the dispute.

The drivers returned to work on June 20 after briefly blockading Tooheys Brewery in the Sydney suburb of Lidcome following a directive from the NSW Industrial Relations Commission. The commission also ordered Lion Nathan chief executive Rob Murray to meet with the drivers, something the company had so far refused to do.

Teachers strike over jobs and wages

About 4,000 public school and TAFE college teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) will strike on June 26 for four hours. They are opposing the ACT Labor government's plan to slash 135 teaching jobs and close 39 schools. The plan also involves extending teaching hours.

The teachers plan to march through Canberra, Australia's federal capital, and will continue their campaign with rolling work stoppages in August.

The dispute erupted over three months ago when the government demanded teachers accept job cuts as part of a pay settlement. The government agreed to a 12 percent wage rise over three years but teachers refused the offer.

Firefighters demonstrate for pay and conditions

Around 600 United Firefighters Union (UFU) members protested outside the Western Australia state parliament on June 21 in an ongoing campaign for a pay rise, improved staffing levels and better working conditions. Protesters took turns in the parliament's public gallery symbolically turning their backs to the chamber during question time.

The firefighters had earlier in the week agreed to lift overtime bans anticipating an improved pay offer from the state Labor government. The offer, however, was the same 8.5 percent over two years they had already rejected.

The UFU members are angry that while they were offered a pittance, in April this year the Salaries and Allowances Tribunal awarded pay rises of up to 24 percent to the state's most highly paid government bureaucrats. A government firefighter's base hourly rate is just \$19.33 and many are leaving the service for better paying jobs in the private sector.

They have voted to re-impose overtime bans and extend industrial action to include only responding to triple 0 emergency calls. They are also boycotting all training programs and exercises.

Aged-care nurses oppose job cuts

Aged-care workers will hold four rallies across Victoria on June 26 to oppose proposed redundancies. Aged Care Services Australia Group has threatened to axe 49 nursing jobs at five Victorian facilities. The company also wants to cut 1,042 nursing and personal care hours from weekly rosters.

Australian Nurses Federation spokesperson said staff nurses have "unanimously voted to continue to work their current hours" regardless of management demands. The proposed cuts affect Mirridong Nursing Home in Bendigo, Kelaston Nursing Home in Ballarat, Narracan Gardens Aged Care Facility in Moe, and Balmoral Grove and Ronnoco Private Nursing Homes, both in Geelong.

Talks resume after NZ doctors strike

The union representing New Zealand junior doctors entered talks after ending a five-day strike on June 20. The 2,400-strong Resident Doctors' Association (RDA) agreed to a request by 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) to meet before a mediator following the collapse of talks last week. While the RDA had hinted that further strike action was under consideration it later revealed that it had not served the required 14-day notice.

The strike over long working hours was the first-ever national strike by resident doctors and affected all public hospitals. Senior doctors were paid \$200 an hour, more than triple their average hourly rate, for working

weeknights and at the weekend during the strike. The senior doctors' union approved the strike-breaking deal.

The main sticking point has been a DHB demand for a committee made up of health board and union representatives that would make ongoing decisions on employment conditions and working hours. The doctors have so far rejected the concept, claiming it would give the DHBs a "blank cheque" to cut conditions, override contracts and impose regional variations. In the resumed talks, however, both parties are considering a revised fourth version of the so-called "memorandum of understanding" over the committee.

Fishing crew calls for help over working conditions

Protesting Burmese crew members on a fishing vessel in the New Zealand port of Timaru have called for help in their fight against appalling working conditions. Their appeal was made in a letter made public last week from the crew of the Korean-registered Sky 75, operated by New Zealand firm Poseidon.

Workers claimed that the ship's officers kicked and hit them with sticks. They are owed two months' wages and are forced to work sometimes 20 hours a day, despite an agreement specifying only an 8-hour day. They are not paid overtime. The cost of safety and working equipment is deducted from salaries and the meals provided are insufficient and irregular.

The crew has also called on the port authority to examine the seaworthiness of the vessel. A NZ union spokesperson who co-ordinates investigations into complaints by foreign crews said that "third world" conditions were becoming the norm in parts of the New Zealand fishing industry. A Department of Labour inspection has been requested.

New Zealand metal workers agree to pay deal

Workers covered by the Metals and Manufacturing Industries Collective Agreement last week voted to accept deal for a 4.25 percent pay increase. The new agreement, covering 2,000 workers at 180 companies, will run for 12 months. The settlement includes lifting youth rates from 70 percent of the adult wage to 80 percent.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union national secretary Andrew Little boasted that the pay deal was "well ahead of inflation, and continues our campaign to lift the real value of wages". Last year's Metals settlement gave a 5 percent wage rise and a 15-month term. For the past five years, however, workers have been underpaid while companies reaped record profits.

PNG university staff return to work

Academic and non-academic staff at the University of Goroka in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands Province returned to work after a weeklong strike. They walked out on June 14 over the sacking of several university council members by the Minister of Higher Education Don Polye.

The strike ended after interim council members reported that they had completed investigations into disputed administrative issues dating back ten months and will make recommendations to the minister.

PNG TV workers end five-day strike

Striking EMTV employees returned to work on June 19 after an intervention by the Industrial Registrar Lemeki Sipelia. The dispute is over a 14-point log of demands, which includes a pay rise to meet CPI increases over the past five years, housing and shift allowances and a height payment for riggers.

The 30 striking workers are members of the Communication Workers Union and comprise 50 percent of EMTV's staff. They returned to work after Sipelia advised the Employers Federation to represent EMTV management in a compulsory conference set for June 21 to look into workers' demands.

New Caledonia union revises demands in port blockade

New Caledonia's Kanak USTKE union, which has been blockading of Port Noumea for the past four weeks, has stepped back from its original demand over port entry to overseas companies vying for a place on the

Noumea to Sydney (Australia) shipping route. The union believes increased competition by the more efficient international shipping companies will cost 200 locals their jobs.

A heavy police presence at New Caledonia port has allowed the Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) vessel Maersk to unload cargo and thus render the union blockade ineffective. The union is now calling for a quota system limiting the number of containers offloaded by MSC to 100 a week. The French Ministry of Transport called for a meeting on June 14 between representatives of USTKE, non-union port workers and MSC to help resolve the dispute.



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