

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 July 2006

Asia

Police attack Indian power workers

On July 20, police attacked power workers protesting outside Central Power Distribution Company offices in Singareni Bhavan, Hyderabad in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. Some workers were injured, more than 300 arrested and a number of protest leaders were charged.

The workers want linesmen who have been employed on contract for more than a decade to be given permanent jobs as junior linemen.

Indian health workers protest

Workers from Group C and D government hospitals demonstrated at Bharathi Park in Pondicherry on July 21. Sit-down protests were also held in the Karaikal, Mahe and Yanam regions. The workers went on strike on July 19 demanding that authorities rectify a 20-year pay disparity and award a backdated pay rise.

The state's chief minister had previously earlier assured hospital employees that the issue would be settled "without delay" but nothing was done.

Indian jute mill workers march

Workers from the East Coast, Aruna and Bobbili jute mills in Andhra Pradesh marched to the Vizianagaram Collectorate on July 24 over a government order banning strike action at the three mills. The order would make the five-month strike by 12,000 jute workers for a wage rise illegal.

Months of negotiations between the government and the Indian Federation of Trade Unions have failed to resolve the dispute. The no-strike order was bought down despite further talks having been scheduled for August 10.

Indian bank workers oppose outsourcing

Bank workers in Gulbarga, Karnataka, held sit-down protest on July 25 to demand the withdrawal of a Reserve Bank of India circular outlining plans for outsourcing banking services.

On the same day, the Vizianagaram District Bank Employees Coordination Committee in Andhra Pradesh organised a demonstration at the State Bank of India main branch in Vizianagaram protesting outsourcing in the banking sector. The committee wants 100,000 vacant posts filled.

The demonstrations were part of a campaign by All-India Bank Employees' Association (AIBEA), which will include a one-day national strike. The workers believe that outsourcing is a step by the Indian government towards privatisation of the banking sector.

The Gulbarga District Bank Employees' Association, an AIBEA affiliate, claims the outsourcing plan includes a range of basic banking services. The AIBEA is also opposed to government moves allowing 74 percent foreign direct capital investment in India's private banking sector.

Indian midday meal workers protest privatisation

Cooks and assistants employed in the government's school midday meal program (Akshara Dasoha) protested in Davangere on July 23 over a district administration decision to hand the meal service to private agencies. The move affects around 3,000 mainly women workers. The protestors formed a human chain at the busy Gandhi Circle obstructing the

flow of traffic.

The protest follows a July 17 march to the Deputy Commissioner's office in Gulbarga in Karnataka. Workers presented a memo to Chief Minister, including the regularisation of employment and improved pay.

The memo stated that workers had been employed as casuals in the midday meal program for the past five years but did not receive the basic pay rate or dearness allowance. It called on the government to introduce a pay scale and benefits equal to those of permanent employees, a fairer recruitment scheme and the appointment of female supervisors.

Under the present scheme the government allocates on average 100,000 rupees per school for midday meals. Workers contend that privatisation of the program will lead to an inferior service.

Sri Lankan petroleum workers on strike

Hundreds of employees from Ceylon Petroleum Corporation petroleum storage facilities in Sri Lanka went on strike on July 24 against privatisation. The workers demonstrated outside company storage complexes in Kolonnawa and Muthurajawela.

The CPC was initially divided into three separate companies in 2002. Workers believe that new moves to place the units under a newly appointed chairman of the Ceylon Petroleum Storage Terminal Ltd (CPSTL) are in preparation for privatisation. The government has already sold one-third of fuel-pumping facilities to Indian Oil Corporation and allows it to determine fuel prices.

Bangladeshi teachers' strike passes third week

On July 23, thousands of striking non-government teachers demonstrated in Dhaka, the Bangladesh capital and held sit-down protests across the country, as the strike entered its 19th day.

Around 500,000 teachers from 30,000 private high schools, colleges and madrassas are on strike in support of a 17-point log of claims, including a 100 percent basic salary increase, improved house rent allowances, full medical and festival allowances and other benefits in line with UNESCO and International Labor Organisation recommendations.

National Teachers and Employees Front members plan to barricade roads and highways in many districts on August 1 and hold mass sit-ins on August 22. They are also attempting to organise a hartal (a total close down of services) in Dhaka on August 23.

Chinese rural worker sets himself on fire

In a horrifying protest over unpaid wages Wang Cong'an, a 53-year-old rural migrant worker, set fire to himself in Tiananmen Square on July 20. Wang Cong'an, who was employed by a construction company in Yuanan County, had travelled to Beijing to seek the assistance of authorities to obtain outstanding wages.

Thousands of Chinese workers defrauded by companies of pay, pensions and other entitlements travel to Beijing each month to petition the authorities for help. Frustration leads many to desperate protests, including suicide. In fact, the practice has become so common that police at Tiananmen Square are on constant alert to stop self-immolation attempts.

In separate incident, on July 19 company thugs assaulted several

migrant workers when they asked for back wages at the Huaen Building construction in Beijing. Two were seriously injured and hospitalised. The workers have been on strike since June 28, claiming they had never been paid since being employed by the company.

Construction companies often withhold wages or only pay a small daily amount, claiming that the outstanding amounts will be paid when the project is completed.

Australia and the Pacific

Bus bans disrupt services

Bus services in Sydney's eastern suburbs were disrupted on July 28 after State Transit drivers put bans on about 60 buses. The bans are aimed at forcing State Transit authorities to modify outside safety buttons on 800 buses.

Drivers contend that youth gangs have sometimes used the buttons to break into buses on night runs and terrorise passengers. The bus authority claims that the buttons cannot be disabled for safety reasons. State Transit is looking at an alternative but it requires official approval.

Union ends strike at ailing car parts company

Strike action by the 200 workers at the Huon Corporation's FRN plant in Frankston, Victoria ended on July 28. FRN workers, together with employees from two of the corporation's other autopart plants, Empire Rubber and Mills Elastomers, walked out on July 14 over 122 workers being made redundant without being paid entitlements. The company went into voluntary administration last month.

Empire Rubber workers returned to work after Ford agreed to partly underwrite a \$10 million "rescue package" for Huon. The union had ended strike action at Mills Elastomers earlier. FRN supplies parts mainly to Holden, which has now agreed to sign off on the rescue package.

The deal, brokered by the National Union of Workers and the administrator, neither protects jobs nor ensures the full payment of entitlements. When Empire Rubber workers returned work, 86 were immediately laid off. A further 150 jobs will still be axed at FRN.

Those made redundant will be paid \$1,000 a week for just one month with further payment dependant on the administrator recovering additional capital. More than 100 creditors, however, could have first call on these.

New Zealand workers protest employment bill

Over 1,500 New Zealand workers protested outside parliament in Wellington on July 20 against the employment probation bill. Around 80 protested in Dunedin and rallies and leafleting occurred in Nelson, Hamilton and Auckland. About 100 workers from the Fonterra cheese factory workers marched through the rural town of Eltham.

The private member's bill, introduced by opposition National MP Wayne Mapp, imposes a 90-day probation period during which employers will be able to dismiss workers without providing reason. The bill has passed its first reading and is now before a parliamentary committee.

The Council of Trade Unions and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union launched the anti-Bill campaign but are intent on confining all opposition to lobbying and petitions. While the unions have dubbed the legislation a "National Party attack on workplace rights" it is being backed by two of the Labour government's coalition partners, NZ First and United Future. Prime Minister Helen Clark has not condemned the move and three of the Maori Party's four MPs voted for the legislation.

Auckland casino workers strike

About 1,200 workers at SkyCity Casino in Auckland, members of SEA Unite and the Service and Food Workers Union, began rolling strikes on July 21 establishing pickets outside the casino's main entrance. Contract negotiations broke down after SkyCity rejected a 5 percent pay claim.

Employees maintain the company can afford far more. SkyCity's CEO was recently awarded a \$1.5 million bonus and the company has made over \$100 million in the last 12 months. Most casino staff only receives about \$30,000 a year.

At the same time cuts to conditions have been relentless with job losses, increased workloads workers and cuts in pay. The original employment terms and conditions of long-serving staff have been unilaterally "capped", with no pay rises for many years.

NZ technicians extend ban on broadband installations

Some 320 New Zealand Transfield telephone technicians involved in a lengthy pay dispute are refusing to install new ADSL broadband connections. The ban was extended this week to Wellington and Horowhenua.

The workers want a 5-percent pay rise and time-and-a-half overtime payments. Telephone technicians, once paid on par with electricians, now earn \$5 an hour less.

Negotiations between the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and Transfield failed to settle the dispute. Telecom, the country's main telecommunications supplier has used its monopoly position to force contracting companies competing against each to cut prices. The cuts are inevitably extracted from the pay and conditions of the workforce. Talks between the union and Transfield are due resume in September.

NZ university pay deal to go to ratification

Academics and support staff at New Zealand's seven main universities have overwhelmingly voted to send proposed new pay deals to ratification. The deals include salary increases for this year of between 4 and 5.5 percent for general staff and between 6 and 7.5 percent for academic staff.

The proposal is a result of tripartite discussions with vice-chancellors, staff unions and the government organised by the Association of University Staff (AUS). The union claims the result is a major victory but the deal is only just above inflation, currently running at nearly 4 percent. This represents a fraction of the 30 percent increase AUS has previously claimed as necessary to bring academic salaries in line with overseas universities.

Fiji education workers strike over unpaid entitlements

About 400 staff employed by the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) struck on July 24 over management's refusal to pay the cost of living adjustment (COLA) owed since 2003. The workers are members of the Public Employees Union, Fiji teachers Union and the Fiji Public service Association.

Management claims that COLA payments only apply to public servants and because FIT is an autonomous institution its employees are not entitled. Labour minister Krishna Datt has ordered all parties to meet with him before the issue goes to arbitration.

The unions have formed a strike coordinating committee and say workers will stay out until the issue is resolved to their satisfaction.



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