

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 August 2006

Asia

Nepal tea workers strike

Some 25,000 tea garden workers in Nepal went on strike on August 13 over a 21-point log of claims, including a monthly minimum salary increase from 3,300 rupees (\$US44.3) to 5,000 rupees. They also want medical facilities, bonuses and provident fund provisions, payment of salaries during the Jana Andolan celebrations, 90-days maternity leave, an end to the contract system, permanency for temporary workers and reinstatement of sacked workers.

The strike affects 32 tea estates and 37 tea-processing centres. In Jhapa district alone, 500,000 kilograms of tea is going to waste each day.

A leading executive from Tea Private Limited, one of the country's major tea producers, told *Nepalnews* that employers could not pay 100 rupees for eight hours work because tea workers in neighbouring India were only paid 81 rupees.

The strikers are members of three unions—the All Nepal Tea Garden Trade Union, the Nepal Independent Tea Workers Union and the Nepal Tea Garden Workers Union.

Punjab teachers demand pension scheme

Teachers from government-aided, private colleges in the Indian state of Punjab went on strike on August 11 to demand pensions.

Teachers from Sangrur, Patiala, Bathinda, Ropar, Mansa and Fatehgarh Sahib submitted memoranda to the districts' deputy commissioners to be forwarded to Punjab Chief Minister Captain Amarinder Singh. They want the government to honour an election promise to grant a pension-gratuity scheme.

Professor P.K. Sharma, secretary of Punjabi University area union and Chandigarh College Teachers Union, warned that unless the government acted on its promises there would be further industrial action, including a protest march from Barnala to Patiala.

Indian telecom workers protest over conditions

On August 10, employees from Bharat Sanchar Nigam (BSNL), one of India's major telecom providers, held a sit-down protest outside the BSNL Bellary Telecom District general manager's office in Karnataka.

They want a 50 percent dearness allowance included in the basic wage, removal of discriminatory tax on gratuity, constitution of a wage revision committee and removal of the ceiling on gratuity and bonus payments. The protest was organised by the Sanchar Nigam Executives Association, as a part of a national campaign by the National Confederation of Officers Association.

Indian childcare workers demonstrate

Childcare (Anganwadi) workers demonstrated in Kurmool in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh on August 14 over increasing workloads and poor conditions. Addressing the rally, an Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Association spokesperson said that while childcare employees' wages had improved nominally, workloads had increased many times over.

Workers were expected to maintain 31 different types of records and are given additional work by other departments. As result, the Integrated

Child Development Scheme, for which they are responsible, suffers. Childcare employees are also angry over a recent government decision to retire Anganwadi workers at 58 years of age and want this policy reconsidered.

Sri Lankan transport workers strike over unpaid wages

Transport workers at Kandy South bus depot in Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on August 14 over non-payment of July salaries. Operations on more than 50 bus routes, including the Kandy to Colombo route, were halted by the strike. Workers also want the bus depot management replaced.

Sri Lankan volunteer teachers begin hunger protest

On August 7, six volunteer teachers from Sri Lanka's North Central Province began an indefinite hunger protest outside the government secretariat in Anuradhapura, 270 kilometres north of Colombo. The protest is part of a campaign by hundreds of volunteer teachers demanding permanency. Volunteer teachers previously held a 107-day hunger strike at the same location.

They claim that while volunteer teachers have worked for years in remote villages under great hardships they have never been offered permanent jobs. The teachers plan to intensify the campaign in the coming weeks, with many others planning to join the protest.

Indonesian police shoot striker

On July 31, the police shot Samsir Hasibuan, a striking furniture worker from PT Cipta Mebelindo Lestari, in the knee. Samsir and two other workers were arrested and remain in jail. While police claim that Samsir was shot when damaging property, there is evidence that he was actually dragged from his home and assaulted.

Over 800 workers have been on strike at the factory since April 16 over employer abuse and low wages. They have been maintaining a round-the-clock protest outside the north Sumatra council to demand its support.

PT Cipta Mebelindo pays below the minimum wage and does not provide insurance benefits or bonuses that workers are legally entitled to. The strikers are demanding the regional minimum wage, insurance benefits, set holidays and an Idul Fitri (religious day) bonus.

Protest coordinator Rudianto said workers had complained to the company over poor conditions for more than two years but been subjected to "intimidation" and beatings by company thugs.

In a move to force an end to the current strike, the company announced that it plans to sack 447 union members. The police attack on strikers makes clear that local authorities are backing the company.

Hundreds of Korean construction workers arrested

Police in Seoul, South Korea forcibly detained over 730 construction workers on August 17 following a protest over the police killing of fellow worker, Ha Jeung Keun. Among those arrested were leaders of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, Korean Democratic Labor Party and the Korean Federation of Construction Industry Trade Unions (KFCITU).

They were part of a 1,000-strong march on the national police headquarters over the construction worker's death. Keun died on August 1, after being attacked by riot police at a July 16 protest called by the

KFCITU in support of striking workers at POSCO, a major South Korean company.

The POSCO strikers, who are mainly employed by sub-contractors, were demanding a 15 percent wage increase, a five-day working week and better working conditions.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian auto parts workers occupy

Workers at auto-component manufacturer Ajax Fasteners in Melbourne occupied the plant yesterday morning after being stood down by administrators Price Waterhouse Coopers. The company was placed in administration on August 8.

The auto parts workers were stood down after administrators failed to persuade major car manufacturers to underwrite a rescue package for the company. An Australian Workers Union spokesman said employees had decided to maintain the occupation until administrators secured funds to pay all entitlements.

Ajax is one of a string of car component companies that have collapsed or laid off workers this year.

Amcor workers defy return to work order

Around 100 workers at Amcor Flexibles in Melbourne have been on strike since August 1 over the forced retrenchment of five workers, including two union delegates. The sackings are part of a company plan to slash its workforce by 15 through a voluntary redundancy scheme approved by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU).

Employees are angry that management has singled out five workers who had not applied for voluntary severance. Workers at 13 other Amcor sites in Australia have taken industrial action in support of the strikers or are offering financial assistance.

The strikers have defied two return-to-work directives by the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and pressure from the AMWU. Amcor management has sent letters to workers' homes threatening them with legal action and fines of \$22,000 each.

Mackay council workers strike over wages

About 126 Australian Services Union members at Mackay City Council in northern Queensland went on strike and protested outside the council's administration offices on August 16.

The action was part of a series of four-hour stoppages endorsed earlier this month by workers, who want a 5 percent pay increase annually for three years as part of a new work agreement.

The council has only offered a total 13 percent rise and is demanding workers trade off conditions in return.

Australian teachers continue pay campaign

About 400 public school teachers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) walked off the job on August 17 as part of a series of rolling stoppages in protest against the territory Labor government's moves to axe 145 teaching jobs and close 39 schools.

The ACT government wants teachers to accept these cuts as a trade-off for a 12 percent pay increase over three years. The teachers protested outside the ACT Legislative Assembly during the strike.

New Zealand casino workers intensify strikes

SkyCity casino workers in Auckland went on strike on August 11, after a breakdown in pay talks. The walkout by Service and Food Workers Union members follows industrial action by Unite union members who began rolling strikes on July 21. Some 1,200 workers have been involved in strikes, with pickets established outside the casino entrance.

The workers have rejected a 5 percent pay rise offer from the company, claiming that the average \$12 hourly rates at SkyCity are among the lowest in Auckland. Workers put up with arduous shifts, distraught and irate customers and understaffing. They are continuously on their feet for between 8 to 10 hours and are given extra duties such as cleaning toilets.

SkyCity's Auckland operation made a \$56 million profit in the first six months of this year, adding to profit growth of over 200 percent since

1996. Shareholders recently granted CEO Evans Davies a 25 percent pay rise (\$50,000) plus a \$1.5 million bonus. Davies' new salary package is worth \$4.6 million a year. He now earns more in seven days than a worker gets in one year. SkyCity also operates Australian casinos in Adelaide and Darwin.

NZ glass workers strike over pay

Twenty-three Pilkington (NZ) glass workers went on strike for the second time in a week on August 11, after a breakdown in pay negotiations. Employees picketed the company's premises at the Te Rapa industrial park site near Hamilton.

They want a 5 percent pay rise but the company has only offered 4 percent. An Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union spokesman said the union was prepared to accept the company offer if it agreed to open its books to an independent auditor.

Pilkington, one of the world's largest manufacturers of glass and glazing products, was bought by Japanese-based Nippon Sheet Glass Ltd in June.

New Zealand health sector pay disputes widen

Pay talks between hospital junior doctors and the New Zealand district health boards (DHBs) have broken down. Doctors claim the DHBs are deliberately delaying negotiations. About 2,500 junior doctors went on strike for five days in June over pay and working conditions before the union, the Resident Doctors Association (RDA), re-entered talks.

The DHBs have decided to abandon negotiations until the end of September. The RDA says this is a move to force resident doctors off existing employment conditions. The association claims it has a document written by the DHB chief negotiator stating that talks should be continually delayed until work contracts expire in January and Resident Medical Officers are forced onto individual employment agreements.

Meanwhile, several thousand hospital cleaners, orderlies, kitchen, food and other service workers held rallies and protests on August 17 to demand a single national collective employment agreement covering DHBs and four major contract companies. The Service and Food Workers Union initiated bargaining for a Multi-Employer Collective Agreement (MECA), purportedly as a mechanism to lift pay in the public health sector. Even before the negotiations began, a number of key employers indicated opposition to a MECA.

Northern Mariana teachers protest over huge pay cut

About 50 public school teachers in the US territory of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) met on August 13. They were protesting the Board of Education's recent decision to impose an almost 50 percent wage cut on teachers who failed to pass minimum qualification exams. Over 300 teachers face their salaries being cut from \$US47,000 to \$27,000 from the first pay period in September 2006.

Under new standards set by the US government's No Child Left Behind Act (2001) all American public school teachers must pass tests called Praxis 1 and 2. Federal grants to schools are reduced for each teacher who fails to qualify. Richard Waldo, director for finance at the Public School System, has welcomed the proposed wage cuts, saying they will save the department over \$2 million and the amount can be used to pay utility costs.

Fiji loggers return to work

Some 208 employees from Fiji logging company Tropik Woods Limited returned to work on August 15 after a one-day strike. Tropik Woods Employees and Allied Workers Union members walked off the job over management's continued delaying tactics over employees' 2006 log of claims.

The strikers returned to work after management agreed to pay a 3 percent Cost Of Living Adjustment and scheduled a meeting with them for August 17 to negotiate other outstanding issues.

PNG laboratory technicians threaten strike

On August 11, Medical Laboratory Technicians Association president Joseph Kivavia threatened a national strike by 210 union members if Port Moresby General Hospital management continued to disregard grievances over conditions.

Over 40 laboratory technicians at the hospital imposed overtime bans on August 7 over illegal variations to their 2000 memorandum of understanding (MOU) which reduce overtime and shift loading payments.

Kivavia made the threat after hospital management refused to negotiate with the union and when Dr Simon Mete, acting chief executive, warned that withdrawal of after-hours cover was illegal and ordered the technicians to resume normal duties.



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