

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 August 2006

## Asia

### Thousands of South Korean hospital workers strike for pay

On August 24, workers from 62 hospitals across South Korea went on strike for a 4 percent pay rise. Last week, 26,600 members of Korea Health and Medical Worker's Union voted overwhelmingly to strike. Last minute talks to avert the strike failed because hospital management refuse to negotiate on the pay claim.

Workers began sit-in protests at hospitals across the country, including Ewha Women's University Hospital, Korea University Hospital and Hanyang University Hospital. In Seoul, 1,500 workers joined the strike.

The tripartite National Labor Relations Commission declared that if the strike caused major disruptions it would put the dispute into mandatory arbitration and force a return to work. A union spokesman said that even if arbitration was ordered and management failed to resolve the pay issue workers would strike again.

### Indian construction workers demonstrate for conditions

Construction workers marched through Chennai, the main city in the southern Indian state of Tamil Nadu, on August 17 for a series of demands. Construction workers in the adjoining state of Pondicherry demonstrated on the same day, marching to the Labor Department in Rajiv to submit a memorandum to the Labor Commissioner.

The workers demanded the state governments standardise welfare schemes across various labour boards, grant a monthly pension of 1,000 rupees (\$US22), provide medical insurance and legislate to protect casual workers.

They called for a reduction in the annual welfare board subscription fee from 100 rupees to 50 rupees and demanded 500 rupees relief and 50 kilograms of rice for construction workers stood down during the rainy season. They are also seeking the provision of free home sites and subsidies to construct houses, plus financial aid to educate children from the age of six.

Workers expressed concern over the shortage of construction materials and called for the construction of warehouses for sand and other materials. The Construction Workers Federation of India called the demonstrations.

### Indian club workers on strike

Over 300 employees from the Nizam Club in Saifabad, Andhra Pradesh, have been on strike since August 18. They are demanding the regularisation of jobs, better working conditions, bonuses, a staff welfare fund and coverage under the Employee State Insurance. Workers allege the management has failed to implement several earlier promises to resolve issues.

Nizam Club Staff and Workers Union president Amjedullah Khan said the labour court had issued an order for the provision of bonuses but the club had not complied. "We approached the management committee several times but it has been dragging the issue out for a year now," he said.

### Child-care workers demonstrate

Around 200 child-care (Anganwadi) and noon-meal workers demonstrated in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu, on August 2 for a multi-point log

of demands. The protesters marched to the municipal office and held a rally.

They called on the state government to transfer meal centre employees to time-scale pay, which provides for periodical increments, and upgrade centre organisers' pay to the level of secondary grade teachers. They also demanded the disbursement of monthly pensions to retired workers. The Tamil Nadu Noon Meal Employees Association and the Tamil Nadu Anganwadi Employees Welfare Association called the demonstration.

### Indian power workers protest outsourcing

Thousands of workers from the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) staged a sit-down protest (dharna) in front of the PSEB head office in Patiala on August 22. The protest went ahead in defiance of a recent local civil court order prohibiting any protest within 200 metres of the PSEB head office.

The workers and their families later marched and then held a mass rally. They are demanding that PSEB cease outsourcing work under the Punjab state government's contentious Electricity Act 2003.

To create conditions for ongoing outsourcing, the PSEB had frozen staff recruitment and refused to provide jobs for the kin of deceased workers as was customary. The demonstration was called by the Joint Struggle Co-ordination Committee and supported by the Bharati Kisan Union and Punjab Kisan Sabha. Further protests are planned.

In a separate dispute in the Punjab, hundreds of retrenched workers from the Shree Bhawani Cotton Mills and Industries in Abohar held a sit-down protest at the plant's main gate on August 22. They are demanding payment of outstanding wages and other entitlements. The workers, including women and children, prevented the removal of machinery from the closed mill. Wages and other benefits have only been partially distributed despite the Punjab and Haryana High Court directing the liquidator to sell immovable mill property to fund workers' entitlements.

### Punjabi government employees protest anti-worker policies

Hundreds of employees of various government departments, including health, education, public health, and veterinary, held a sit-down protest outside the Deputy Commissioner's office at Sangrur in Punjab on August 21. They were protesting "anti-worker" government policies, including the privatisation of state services and official indifference toward employee concerns.

The protesters visited various offices to talk to staff about the dispute before delivering a memorandum of demands to the Deputy Commissioner. Later they marched through Sangrur, blocking traffic for 15 minutes. The demands include the revival of 80,000 posts abolished by the state government and the recruitment of regular employees rather than contract appointments. They called on the government to regularise the services of all daily workers, part-time and ad-hoc employees.

They are also seeking the granting of promotional scales to employees after four, nine and fourteen years service, a 500-rupee monthly medical allowance and the provision of jobs on compassionate grounds to family members of deceased employees. They want the state government to implement a fifth pay commission and provide interim relief of 1,000

rupees per month.

#### **Indian salt workers demand pay rise**

Around 1,000 salt workers from five companies in Ongole in Andhra Pradesh began an indefinite strike on August 18, demanding the state set a minimum wage. The companies are situated in and around Kanaparthy village in Nagaluppapadu mandal.

According to workers, salt-producing firms have for many years paid only 60 rupees daily to male workers and 40 rupees to females, far below the minimum daily wage of 96 rupees (\$US2) set by the state government. The results of a Labor Department survey submitted to the District Collector's office five months ago confirmed that salt workers are paid far less than the minimum wage.

The workers went on strike after rejecting an offer by salt producers to increase the daily wage by 5 rupees for men and women. They then marched to Prakasam Bhavan and submitted a memorandum to the District Revenue Officer stating they would continue to strike until the pay issue is resolved.

#### **Strike at Delhi Zoo over jobs threat**

Workers at India's Delhi Zoo went on strike for one day on August 24 to protest a government proposal giving management greater autonomy. They fear the move will result in further job losses. Staff levels have already fallen from 350 to 175. Choti Devi, one of the Delhi Zoo's oldest employees with 28 years service, cleans animal enclosures but her workload and hours have increased over the years due to job cuts. "People who have retired or died have not been replaced, so there is a labour shortage," she said. A Zoo Employees Union spokesman said the workers regretted any suffering the strike caused the animals but employees "had no option but to protest".

#### **Sri Lankan estate workers protest over wages**

Around 100 tea estate workers protested in Bandarawela in Sri Lanka's Uva Province on August 20 to demand a salary increase and improvement to health services. The protestors represented estate workers in Welimada, UvaParanagama, Passara, Hapatule, Punagala, Bandarawela and Hali-ela.

In a separate dispute, around 100 teachers picketed the chief minister's office in the southern province on August 16 for a slate of demands. These include the granting of transfers, recruitment to overcome a teachers' shortage and recruitment of diploma holders, management, financial and development assistants. They also called for the establishment of a proper credit board. The protestors are members of the Ceylon Teaching Services Union.

#### **Sri Lankan railway employees on strike**

Stationmasters and railway controllers went on strike on August 22, protesting salary scales set out in the 6/2006-salary circular that removed wage increments and other benefits of 17,000 railway employees.

The strike brought train services to a halt before it ended at 7.30 pm. The workers are members of the Railway Controllers Union and the Station Masters Union.

In a separate dispute, thousands of state bank workers picketed various branches on August 23. The action was part of a national campaign to protest cuts to pension payments and widows' benefits of employees recruited after 1996. Hundreds of bank workers picketed in central Colombo and surrounding suburbs and a rally was held in front of the Peoples Bank head office in Colombo Fort. The workers are members of the Ceylon Bank Employees Union.

#### **Bangladeshi garment workers strike**

Around 1,500 workers at the Phoolchan Garment Factory in Bangladesh's Dattapara area in the Tongi municipality remain on strike after walking out on August 13 to press for an eight-point log of claims, including wage increases. They have been holding continuous rallies outside the factory.

In a separate dispute, thousands of workers from jute mills in Bangladesh's Khulna-Jessore region went on strike for one day on August

22 over an eight-point log of demands. They rallied at the Hotel Royal Square in Khulna City.

Their demands include the payment of wage arrears and implementation of wage commission recommendations for the payment of dearness and medical allowances and gratuity. They also called for more funding for the jute sector and reopening of all closed jute mills.

The rally was called by the Paatkal Sangram Parishad with the support of the Jatiyatabadi Sramik Dal. A large number of security forces were deployed on the day. Workers have threatened to lay siege to highways and railway lines if their demands are not met.

#### **Australia and the Pacific**

##### **Negotiations fail to resolve ACT teachers dispute**

Negotiations in a long-running dispute between the Australian Education Union and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Education Department broke down this week. The Labor government is demanding teachers accept 145 staff cuts and a number of school closures in exchange for a 12 percent pay over three years.

Teachers have held a series of work stoppages and protests. On August 24, teachers at public schools in the ACT's Brindabella electorate went on strike for four hours.

##### **New Zealand hospital workers protest over low pay**

Ancillary staff at New Zealand hospitals began a campaign against low pay rates on August 16. Around 90 orderlies, kitchen workers and cleaners employed by contractor Spotless Services rallied and set up a stall in Palmerston North to win public support.

Many hospital workers earn as little as \$12 per hour. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFwu) is demanding one national agreement for hospital orderlies, kitchen staff and cleaners but is yet to set out a pay claim. Two days of mediation during a bargaining process failed to produce a result last week. Further mediation is set for August 24-25.

##### **NZ clothing workers strike over contract**

Workers at Cambridge Clothing held a picket on August 21. It is the first strike in living memory at New Zealand's 139-year old manufacturer of men's clothing, based in New Lynn, Auckland.

Workers want a one-year agreement with a 5 percent pay rise. The company has offered a two-year contract with 2.2 percent in the first year and reserves the right to determine the pay increase in the second year. It is also wants to abolish service leave and introduce a second five-day shutdown period as a means of offsetting the government introducing an extra week annual leave.

A site delegate said workers had accepted pay rises at or below inflation for the past 12 years and declared "enough is enough". Many workers now earn just above the minimum wage but the company's offer is 1.8 percent below the current rate of inflation.

The National Distribution Union (NDU) is using the dispute to promote the Green Party's nationalist "Buy Kiwi Made" campaign. NDU national secretary and former women's affairs minister Laila Harré said the strike was a means of assuring "well paid jobs in New Zealand".

##### **Thousands rally against NZ probation employment bill**

About 5,000 workers protested in Auckland's Aotea Square on August 23 over a probation employment bill currently under consideration by a parliamentary select committee. Over 3,500 workers arrived in more than 70 buses while more than 200 marched from NZ Post and Sky City. In attendance were teachers, cleaners, engineers, postal and casino workers.

The bill strips new employees of protection against dismissal and other rights during a 90-day probation period. It was introduced by the opposition National Party but has the support of other parties, including two in the Labour-led coalition. Clearly under pressure, Maori Party co-leader Pita Sharples announced at the rally that the party would reverse its previous support for the bill.

##### **French Polynesian flight attendants plan strike**

The Union Nationale des Syndicats Autonomes (UNSA), which

represents flight attendants at Air France in French Polynesia, announced its intention on August 21 to strike on November 3. The strike is against a new flight schedule between Papeete and Paris that will become operational on November 1. The union claims the schedule, which will allow the use of smaller aircraft with reduced seat capacity, will eventually lead to lay-offs of Tahiti-based flight attendants. Seating capacity will be reduced from 1,299 to 1,088 per week.

#### **New Caledonian public broadcaster strike enters sixth month**

A group of USTKE union members at New Caledonia's public broadcaster (RFO) have been on strike since March 23, protesting the sacking of technician Rock Haocas for so-called "misconduct" during a three-month picket outside the radio-TV station in 2004.

The strike is causing extensive disruption to broadcasts. Despite the imposition of \$US100,000 fine on the union, the strikers declared they would not return to work until Haocas is reinstated.

#### **Fiji saw-millers strike for second time**

For the second time in a week, 208 saw millers from at Tropik Woods walked off the job on August 21 to protest the management's refusal to address grievances raised under the employees' 2006 Log of Claims. When they reported for work on August 24 they learnt that 10 casuals had been hired during the strike to operate the chip mill and kilns.

A spokesman for the Tropuk Woods Employees and Allied Workers Union said: "We informed management that the casual labourers would have to be removed before we resume work but management refused."

The union workers remain on strike. They had previously walked out on August 16 but returned after one day when management agreed to discuss long-standing issues such as sick leave for temporary workers, annual leave and wage increments.

#### **Fiji gold miners to vote on strike**

On August 18, unions representing miners and administrative staff at the Australian-owned Emperor Gold Mine (EGM) in Vatukoula, Fiji applied to the Registrar of Trade Unions for a secret ballot of union members for a strike.

The move was in response to the termination of 123 workers on August 15. The sackings contravene an agreement reached in April between the unions, the mine management and the government that workers would not be retrenched until a satisfactory redundancy package was negotiated.

EGM has repeatedly refused to discuss redundancy arrangements with the unions, forcing the dispute into the Arbitration Tribunal. EGM sacked the workers, claiming that money provided by the government to keep them employed until a package was negotiated had run out.



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