

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 September 2006

Indian nurses on indefinite strike

Regional Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) nurses at Imphal hospital in Manipur began an indefinite strike on August 28. They are demanding permanency for existing nursing staff instead of further recruitment on a contract basis. Nurses also want a fair system for transfers and appointments, resolution of pay anomalies, repairs to amenities such as hospital septic tanks, and a separate counter for in-patients.

Services at the 800-bed hospital, including casualty and emergency departments and the operating theatre, have been severely affected by the strike. The hospital currently employs 404 nurses, including 153 on a contract basis. Management has threatened to replace contract nurses if they joined the strike.

In a separate dispute, health workers in Andhra Pradesh protested near Prakasam Bhavan in Ongole on August 29 over various demands, including promotions for women health workers on par with their male counterparts, the immediate filling of 3,500 vacant posts and permanency for contract medical staff. The workers are members of the Andhra Pradesh Public Health and Medical Employees Union.

Indian construction workers demonstrate

Construction workers held a sit-down protest in Chennai, in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu on August 28. They were protesting the non-implementation of welfare measures despite the creation of a separate board 11 years ago to oversee their introduction. The measures include the provision of a provident fund.

The mainly women workers, who are members of the Nirman Mazdoor Panchayat Sangam, also want an increase in the monthly pension to 1,000 rupees (\$US22), pension eligibility to be set at 55 years, streamlining of compensation for industrial deaths and accidents, and education assistance for construction workers' children.

Indian telecom workers protest over conditions

Telecommunications company Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) employees held a sit-down protest (dharna) outside the general manager's office in Chikmagalur, Karnataka, this week.

They were opposing various work practices that cause unnecessary inconvenience, such as frequent intra-sectional transfers, lack of amenities and basic office provisions. Police were called to disperse the demonstration.

In another dispute, handloom weavers in Pondichery demonstrated on August 29 to demand a pay increase. The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) called the protest.

Goa lifeguards strike for job security

An indefinite strike by Department of Tourism lifeguards in Panjim, Goa, has entered its second week. The guards, many with several years of service, want permanency. The strikers are members of the All Goa Tourist Lifeguards Association, which is affiliated to the Gomantak Mazdoor Sangh.

Petroleum employees seek pay increase

Oil Sector Officers' Association members at India's state-owned oil companies began a 24-hour national protest at their respective work places

on August 25 over several demands. Up to 500 officers demonstrated in Rajghat, New Delhi.

The officers want a salary increase from 20,000 rupees a month to 50,000 rupees (\$US1,100) for management trainees and a commensurate rise for senior level employees. Other demands include periodic pay revisions every five years, an increase in the Dearness Allowance and additional increments.

The association submitted a memorandum of demands to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh on August 4 and has threatened indefinite strike action if the government fails to resolve the issues.

Kerala doctors on strike demanding higher pay

Government medical doctors at Kerala hospitals struck for 24 hours on August 30 to demand higher wages. While doctors in *taluk* (village councils) and district hospitals joined the strike action emergency services were exempted.

The Kerala Government Medical Officers Association (KGMOA) called the strike. A KGMOA spokesman said that doctors had walked out because the government had refused to heed repeated pleas for pay-scale anomalies to be rectified.

Bangladeshi jute workers fight privatisation

Several hundred workers from Qawami Jute Mills in Sirajganj, Bangladesh, demonstrated on August 29 over an eight-point log of claims, which includes payment of salary arrears. The workers marched through the main roads of the town and held a rally at Bazaar Station.

Rally speakers urged the government to allocate adequate funds to purchase jute supplies and alleged that there were attempts to privatise the mill by stopping production and portraying it as a loosing concern.

Sri Lankan transport employees demand salary hike

Hundreds of Sri Lanka Transport Board workers picketed the transport ministry in central Colombo on August 30 to demand payment of 5,000-rupee (\$US50) salary arrears and for a 2,100-rupee cost of living allowance. The workers chanted slogans denouncing management corruption. The campaign was organised by the All Ceylon Transport Employees Union.

Nepalese part-time university teachers strike

Part-time university teachers from the Tribhuvan University (TU) in Nepal held daily protests at Ratna Park in Kathmandu from August 13 to 24 to demand permanent appointments.

Teachers blocked the offices of all Kathmandu campus heads and staged a sit-down protest outside the education minister's official residence on August 16. Several teachers were arrested during the demonstration. Part-time teachers association chairman Nanda Kishor Singh maintained an 11-day hunger strike during the protests.

While teachers have been calling for permanency for part-timers for the last four years the issue remained unsolved. Teachers ended their campaign after various government officials, including Minister for Finance Ram Sharan Mahat, signed a letter promising to provide permanent appointments for 900 part-time teachers who had one year's service at the university.

Chinese police arrest protesting construction workers

On August 26, police dispersed a march of 33 construction workers in Nanjing, China. Two demonstrators were arrested and charged with organising an illegal protest. The workers were marching towards a government building to demand their unpaid wages.

On August 25, more than 100 workers from another Nanjing construction firm blocked the company's main gate and seized the manager. The police dispersed workers after they moved to the Yangtze River Bridge and held up traffic for several hours.

Philippines plantation workers vote for strike

On August 27, over 3,200 plantation workers from Dole Philippines Inc.(Dolfil) in South Cotabato voted for strike action. The company employs 5,315 workers who are members of the Amado Kadena union, which is affiliated with the National Federation of Labor Unions-Kilusang Mayo Uno (NFLU-KMU). The vote was held a day before negotiations for a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) were about to resume.

While NFLU-KMU secretary general Tony Pascual said he would use the vote as leverage in the new negotiations the union has already cut back its demands from 72 to 15 provisions since April. The union estimates that the 15 provisions would cost only 1 percent of the company's annual profit.

Amado Kadena president Jose Teruel said the ballot results would only be submitted to the regional mediation board if management fails to improve its counter offer in the next round of talks. The company has already taken retaliatory action, filing a notice of lockout that would be implemented if employees strike.

Workers rally to support victimised construction workers

Despite restrictions imposed by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, some 1,000 protestors rallied outside the Federal Court in Perth, Western Australia, on August 29 during the appearance of 60 workers who face crippling fines for striking in February this year. Smaller rallies were held in Sydney and Melbourne.

A total of 107 workers face prosecution for breaching a total strike ban at the \$1.6 billion Perth to Mandurah Rail Project. The 12-day strike by over 400 employees of project contractor Leighton Kumagai was in defence of union delegate Peter Ballard who had been sacked for complaining about health and safety issues.

The Howard government's building industry watchdog, the Australian Building and Construction Commission, is pursuing the prosecutions, which carry individual fines of \$28,600. It is the first time individual workers have been fined under the federal government's Building Industry and Construction Improvement Bill and it is a legal test case.

Even so, the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), which did not endorse the 12-day strike, is working to contain support for the victimised workers to limited protests and calls for financial and moral support.

Prior to the August 29 rally, CMFEU secretary Kevin Reynolds insisted that construction workers should not strike but apply for leave to attend the rally. Of the 1,000 demonstrators in Perth some 200 were union officials. The hearing of charges against the 60 workers has been adjourned until October 18.

Canberra bus drivers oppose job cuts

About 500 drivers at ACTION Buses in Canberra held a stop-work meeting on August 25 demanding the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government drop plans to cut jobs. ACTION is the sole provider of public transport in the territory. The government claims the job cuts are necessary because of a \$A24 million budget deficit.

University workers protest over job cuts

Members of the National Tertiary Education Union at the University of New South Wales held a lunchtime protest on campus on August 30 over management plans to slash jobs. University management announced earlier last month that up to 620 jobs would be shed from administration,

cleaning and security, with the latter services being outsourced to private companies.

New Zealand workers strike for national agreement

On August 25, workers at supermarket operator Progressive Enterprises' distribution centre in the Palmerston North industrial centre went on strike. An around-the-clock picket has been established at the warehouse's main gate preventing all movement of goods. Other Progressive workers in Auckland and Christchurch joined the strike, bringing the total number involved to 600. The distribution centres supply goods to Progressive's Countdown, Foodtown and Woolworths supermarkets.

Police have been following strikers and have broken up demonstrations outside several Woolworths supermarkets. Two days into the strike, the union's negotiator was arrested while on picket. Police gave no reason for detaining him but National Distribution Union national secretary Laila Harre said that there had been no aggravation by employees on the picket.

The workers want a single national collective agreement. They want equal pay rates, all existing allowances combined into a site allowance, an 8 percent pay rise and an extra week's service leave. Currently there are inequalities of pay between the four distributions centres that are as high as \$2.50 (\$US1.67) an hour.

Progressive Enterprises is refusing to negotiate and walked out of a mediation meeting in Auckland on August 28 after only two hours. The company then issued lockout notices saying it would not negotiate a national agreement and workers could only return on its terms.

The union filed for an interim injunction by the Employment Court in Auckland to restrain Progressive Enterprises from employing alternate labour during the lockout. Instead, Employment Court Chief Judge Graeme Colgan ordered the parties back into mediation. Even so, union leader Laila Harre said she was pleased by the court's decision. The union has restricted its appeal for support from other sections of workers to financial assistance.

Fiji sawmill workers forced back to work

On August 25 more than 200 striking workers at Tropik Woods' sawmill in Lautoka ended a four-day strike after being ordered back to work by the government. Tropik Wood Employees and Allied Workers Union general secretary Shiu Lingam said that employees were ready to return to work on the previous day but had been locked out.

Lingham claimed that the company deliberately waited until after the acting minister for labour Ragho Nandonly declared the strike illegal before allowing workers in the gate. While there is a long-running dispute over union's 2006 log of claims, workers struck on August 21 over the recruitment of casual workers.

Solomon Island teachers issue strike notice

The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) on August 29 issued a notice of intention to strike. The 28-day notice will allow teachers to strike after September 28. SINTA general secretary Johnley Hatimoana said the foreshadowed national strike follows the government's refusal to act on outstanding work grievances. Workers' major complaint is the government's 20-month delay in revising the Teaching Service Handbook and introducing teachers' service scheme, which had been previously endorsed by Cabinet.



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