Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 September 2006

Asia

Indian doctors demand payments

Junior doctors at India's Karnataka Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS) in Hubli began an indefinite strike on August 31 over management withholding doctors' stipends (fixed allowances) over an earlier strike. Strikers demonstrated outside the KIMS director's office.

KIMS has refused to comply with a Supreme Court directive to pay the stipends, claiming that the money would not be released without a government order. The doctors have also complained that many emergency drugs are not kept on site at the hospital.

Protest against Indian bank merger

Lord Krishna Bank (LKB) employees protested outside the bank's main branch in Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, on September 4 as part of a statewide campaign against a merger of LKB with Centurion Bank. Protests were also held in Ernakulam, Kottayam, Palakkad and Kondungallur.

LKB workers fear that rural branches will be closed, permanent staff retrenched and replaced with contract labour, and that LKB's social and development banking schemes will be disrupted.

A statement by the United Forum of LKB Unions declared that all employee and bank officers' organisations at LKB oppose the merger and prefer to merge with a public sector bank. The bank workers are proposing an all-India LKB strike and have called for other workers to support their campaign.

Workers fight to save midday meal scheme

Midday meal workers in Karnataka demonstrated on September outside the Deputy Director of Public Instructions office in Mysore against plans to subcontract the midday meals program to private individuals and organisations.

Cooks under the current government scheme are paid just 300 rupees ($US7) to 650 rupees per month but have no job security. The workers, who are members of the Akshara Dasoha Bisi-Oota Tayarakara Federation, claim that instead of improving the scheme, the government was encouraging religious institutions to take over.

Patna workers strike over unpaid wages

Strike action by 3,000 employees of the Patna Municipal Corporation (PMC) and Patna Water Board (PWB) in Bihar continued for a second day on September 5. The workers have not been paid since March.

The PMC depends on government grants to pay salaries but runs into deficit every month. While it needs 275 million rupees for salaries it is only able to generate 150-200 million rupees in revenue.

One striker said: "How does the administration expect us to work and support our families without a regular salary? We do not think civic employees of any other state capital are treated so badly."

Sri Lankan rail workers fight for salaries and incentives

Around 10,000 railway workers, including engine drivers, guards, shunters and technical officers, went on strike from midnight on September 4. They were demanding rectification of wage irregularities. Rail services, including the movement of mail, were crippled by the strike.

On August 31, 3,000 Ratmalana rail workshop employees struck over the withdrawal of incentive production bonuses. While they returned to work the next day, workshop employees have placed a ban on meeting production targets.

Australia and the Pacific

Electrical workers strike after company withholds pay

Workers at switchboard manufacturers Heinemann Electrics at Mulgrave in Melbourne's southeast went on strike this week and are currently picketing the factory. The 46 Electrical Trades Union (ETU) members walked out after management withheld a week's pay because employees imposed overtime bans in a dispute over a new work agreement and working hours.

While industrial action is supposed to be legal and "protected" during negotiations on a work agreements the company claims that under WorkChoices, Australia's new industrial relations laws, workers cannot be paid during industrial action. Heinemann Electrics is refusing to pay employees even if they return to work but maintain the bans. The company was advised by Freehills, the law firm that helped draft WorkChoices.

Radio Rental lockout

On September 7, 24 Radio Rental service technicians in Adelaide walked off the job for four hours. The workers, who are members of Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), are demanding a new collective wages and conditions agreement but management is insisting that they accept individual work contracts (AWAs) with substandard conditions.

The company told strikers on September 7 that would be locked out for a month if they took industrial action. The lockout is legal under the Howard government's industrial relations laws.

Teachers at Catholic schools impose bans

Schoolteachers employed at Western Australian Catholic schools have banned all before- and after-school activities in pursuit of a wage rise and for reductions in class sizes and workloads.

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Delegates from around 30 schools voted for the bans this week.

If teachers' demands are not met within two weeks they have vowed to increase their industrial action to include rolling stoppages. They want a 9.5 percent pay rise to bring them in line with teachers in New South Wales.

Canberra teachers protest over new pay offer

Over 200 Canberra public school teachers protested outside the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) legislative assembly for over three hours on September 5. They were opposing the ACT Labor government's latest offer of a 10.8 percent pay increase over three years in exchange for accepting the axing of 85 teaching jobs.

While the government originally offered a 12 percent pay rise over three years in line with the teachers' pay claim, the offer was rejected because it was tied to the destruction of 145 jobs.

New Zealand supermarket distribution workers remain locked out

A strike by New Zealand supermarket distribution employees entered its second week on September 2, following a breakdown of mediated talks between Progressive Enterprises and the National Distribution Union (NDU). The Employment Court had earlier ordered the mediation before a judge, but the talks have reached an impasse with no date set for their resumption.

Progressive Enterprises' 600 distribution workers began a two-day strike on August 25 for a national collective agreement and wage rises but were locked out in Auckland, Christchurch and Palmerston North three days later. The company insists it will only lift the lockout if workers withdraw their demands for a national agreement.

Police have harassed pickets and arrested an NDU official during the lockout and a picketing worker was injured last week in Christchurch when a truck driver hit him. The Labour government's industrial laws allow the company to use scab labour. The NDU failed in a legal bid this week to stop Progressive from using delivery firms during the lockout.

Despite the lockout, the NDU resumed talks this week in another dispute involving 4,500 workers at Progressive's Woolworth, Countdown and Foodtown supermarkets. Earlier talks had ended in deadlock. The workers want a 13.5 percent pay rise.

In another pay dispute, the Meat Workers' Union gave notice of a four-day strike by 23 staff at Progressive's Southmore meatworks. The company is not prepared to move on a 3.5 percent offer, despite pay at Southmore, which supplies the company's South Island stores, being below industry standards.

Union officials are keeping the various disputes with Progressive separate and refuse to organise industrial action to support the locked out workers. Progressive's 193 supermarkets have continued trading.

Auckland glass workers strike over pay

Workers at Pilkington's glass factory in Auckland remain on strike after walking off the job over a pay dispute. Ten nightshift workers struck August 30 and were later joined by 50 dayshift workers. They are currently picketing the site.

They want a 5 percent pay rise and an increase in shift allowances from $3.25 to $10 a shift. A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said the claims were "quite modest" but the company claims it can't afford them. Pilkington's NZ operation made a $14 million net profit last year, with a global profit of more than $600 million.

New Zealand radiographers to strike

New Zealand hospital radiographers seeking a pay increase and better working conditions will strike for up to three days from September 12. APEX, their union, says 260 staff employed by the Southland, Otago, Canterbury, Hutt Valley, Gisborne, Lakes and Bay of Plenty District Health Boards (DHBs) want parity in wages and conditions with the majority of their counterparts who settled a collective agreement last year. An APEX spokesperson said she hoped the DHBs would come back and negotiate a settlement.

Fiji sawmillers defy government order to end strike

On September 1, over 200 striking saw millers from Tropik Wood Industries near Lautoka City, Fiji, have defied a government order and union directive to return to work. The saw millers say they will continue industrial action indefinitely unless casuals employed as strike-breakers are dismissed and the company enters meaningful negotiations.

Tropik Wood Employees and Allied Workers Union members struck on August 21 over the company's continued refusal to negotiate on a log of claims. Workers initially complied with the government's directive but resumed strike action after management refused to enter into negotiations and insisted on retaining the casual employees. All operations at the mill have come to a halt.

Fiji Nestlé workers to vote to strike over pay increase

About 200 Nestlé (Fiji) workers will vote on September 8 for industrial action over a pay claim. The Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union called for the ballot after Nestlé refused to negotiate on workers' demands.

Most Nestlé workers are only paid $2.75 an hour ($US1.59). The union wants to raise the minimum wage at the factory to $3.50, just 32 cents above the poverty line. The company offered a 72-cent per day increase in March and has refused to budge from this.

PNG university staff end strike

Over 120 academic staff at Papua New Guinea's University of Technology (Unitech) in Lae ended a four-day indefinite strike on September 5 after university administrators negotiated a compromise deal with the National Academic Staff Association (NASA).

NASA members walked out on September 1 over the non-payment of a domestic market allowances (DMA) since 2001 and the non-payment of a portion of their superannuation contributions into the National Superannuation Fund Limited.

NASA directed the academics to return to work after Unitech made a verbal agreement to fully implement the award, including the DMA payment. The shortfall in superannuation savings payments remains unresolved.

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