

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 September 2006

Police kill jute worker in Bangladesh

Thousands of jute workers from eight mills, seven in Khulna and one in Jessore, walked out on September 7 after police attacked a demonstration killing one employee, Noor Mohammad Jashim, and injuring 30 others, four of them seriously.

The jute workers had been demonstrating in Khalishpur and Daulatpur industrial areas for an eight-point log of demands, including payment of arrears. Police lobbed teargas at demonstrators and fired shots into the air as clashes spread to different parts of the cities. The Bangladesh Rifles and Rapid Action Battalion were mobilised to support police attempts to bring the situation under control.

On September 12, strikers briefly barricaded the railroad in the Khulna-Jessore industrial belt and thousands of jute workers marched in Khalishpur the next day. The Patkal Sangram Pariahd organised the strike action.

Indian health workers on indefinite strike

Jawaharlal Institute of Post-graduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) employees began an indefinite strike on September 8 over the Indian government's decision to convert the institute into an autonomous body. The federal government administers JIPMER, which is located in the south Indian state of Pondicherry.

The strike brought inpatient services at the institute to a standstill and has impacted on outpatient services in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Strikers held a sit-down protest outside the institution's reception area, preventing doctors and directors from entering.

The strike developed after a federal cabinet decision on September 7 to convert JIPMER into an autonomous body. Institute employees fear that this will seriously impact on working conditions and increase the cost of treating patients. Students also believe that it would become more difficult to gain access to various courses once the status changed.

Karnataka irrigation strike for improved conditions

An indefinite strike by Tungabhadra irrigation project workers in Raichur in Karnataka is continuing. The workers struck on September 4 over several demands, including the regularisation of employment and wages, an ex-gratia payment to the families of deceased employees and the provision of identity cards. Sit-down protests were held at Yermaras, Munirabad and Sindhanur.

Employees submitted their demands to management on August 25 but company officials failed to respond. The workers are members of the Irrigation Department Task Force Workers Association.

Punjabi power workers fight victimisations

Hundreds of Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) power workers held a sit-down protest on September 11 in Tarn Taran, India, over the suspension of 26 of their colleagues. They marched through the town and presented a memorandum to the sub-division magistrate.

The 26 workers, most of them union officials, were suspended for what management termed bad behaviour. This supposedly includes using rough language and pressuring company officials to reinstate five employees suspended on August 25. The company alleged the five workers were not

performing their duties properly.

Nepalese health workers on indefinite strike

Paramedics in Nepal began indefinite strike action on September 8 as part of a struggle by health workers for a 10-point log of demands. While emergency services are exempted, the walkout has brought health services throughout the country to a halt.

Paramedics Joint Struggle Committee coordinator Bhagirath Baniya told a Katmandu press conference that the government should "take all the responsibility because it compelled the health workers to take such a drastic step by not paying attention to their demands". The last promotion of non-gazetted staff, such as laboratory assistants, was in 1997. Since then there has been no salary increases or training provided for those attempting to advance to higher posts.

In a separate dispute, more than 280 assistant health workers in Nepal's Panchthar district began an indefinite strike on September 10 over several demands, including permanency of employment. Only emergencies and out-services are operating.

Sri Lankan teachers demonstrate

Hundreds of teachers and principals demonstrated outside the main railway station in Colombo Fort on September 13 demanding rectification of long-standing salary anomalies and for a teacher-principal constitution. Demonstrators marched to the Presidential Secretariat where they presented a petition signed by 100,000 teachers and principals.

In another dispute, ambulance drivers at the Anuradhapura district hospital in Sri Lanka's North Central province began a work-to-rule on September 8 over the curtailment of overtime.

Indonesian Sanyo workers in end strike

Thousands of striking workers at Japanese-owned electronic goods producer PT Sanyo began returning to work on September 7 after management threatened to call police to break-up a sit-down protest at the East Jakarta Industrial Park, Bekasi. Employees walked off the job on September 5 demanding reinstatement of three union organisers sacked following a strike in April for a wage rise.

Management refused to attend a meeting with the Bekasi Council and workers representatives and claims that the strike action violates labour laws. The company threatened suspensions and dismissals if employees did not return to work.

Hotel workers demand reinstatement of colleagues

On September 11, about 80 workers from hotels and restaurants at Indonesia's popular Senggigi Beach in the West Nusa Tenggara islands rallied outside the Senggigi Reef Resort Hotel protesting the dismissal of two colleagues.

The protesters want the two workers reinstated, claiming that the reasons given by the Senggigi Reef Resort Hotel management for the dismissals are frivolous.

Indonesian workers seek minimum wage increase

On September 10, about 500 workers demonstrated outside the presidential palace in Central Jakarta to demand a national minimum wage. The rally was called by the Alliance of Protesting Workers (ABM).

Addressing the rally, ABM chairman Anwar Ma'ruf called for the rejection of an outsourcing system in a proposed amendment to the 2003 Labor Law and demanded the government implement a 1.5-million rupiah (\$US160) national minimum monthly wage. Minimum wages are currently set on a regional basis with the highest in Jakarta at around 900,000 rupiah (\$US97).

Radio Rental technicians protest over lockout

On September 14, 16 Radio Rentals technicians and supporters began an ongoing protest outside the electrical retailer's Prospect store, near Adelaide in South Australia. They are fighting a lock out which was imposed following a four-hour strike for a new collective work agreement. The company wants employees to accept individual work agreements.

The lockout is one of several attacks by Australian employers using the Howard government's new industrial relations laws. While Amalgamated Manufacturing Workers Union national secretary Doug Cameron made an appearance at the Radio Rentals protest, the union, one of the largest in Australia, is not planning any significant industrial action to back the locked out technicians.

Broadcasting staff to strike over pay

On September 11, about 1,600 journalists and general staff at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) voted by a 91 percent majority to take industrial action in support of a new wages and conditions agreement.

Media Entertainment Arts Alliance and the Community and Public Sector Union members, who plan to walkout for 24 hours on September 22, have rejected the state-funded broadcaster's latest offer of a 3.5 percent pay rise. The unions have been in negotiations with the ABC for a new agreement since November last year.

A union spokesman said: "Wage increases at the ABC have been lagging behind the rest of the community for over a decade. ABC staff have simply had enough."

New Zealand supermarket lockout continues

More than 500 New Zealand locked out supermarket distribution workers voted unanimously on September 12 to reject a company pay offer. The workers went on strike on August 25 seeking a national collective agreement. The employer, Progressive Enterprises, owned by Woolworths Australia, enforced lockouts at Auckland, Palmerston North, and Christchurch three days later.

The company has offered a 3.5 percent pay increase, which is below the inflation rate, and insisted on retaining separate agreements, declaring that the issue is non-negotiable. Thousands of people attended rallies to support the locked out employees last weekend.

The National Distribution Union (NDU) and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union filed proceedings in the Employment Court this week challenging the legality of the lock out. However, the NDU simultaneously entered mediation with Progressive for a 7 percent pay claim for 4,200 in-store supermarket workers. They are also seeking retention of long-service leave and a national collective agreement. No effort has been made by the union to organise a joint struggle across Progressive to shut down the company's operations.

On September 8, the Council of Trade Unions convened a so-called "emergency meeting" purportedly to discuss inter-union support for the locked out workers. The meeting, however, agreed to provide financial support and only to "explore" what industrial action could be taken to "exert financial pressure" on Progressive.

A proposal that the Maritime Union, together with its Australian counterpart, block Progressive products being shipped to New Zealand from Australia was scotched by the union's acting general secretary Terry Ryan.

New Zealand radiographers strike after rejecting pay offer

A three-day strike by radiographers in seven of New Zealand's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) went ahead this week after the

radiographers' union rejected a new pay proposal in mediated negotiations. The strike affected hospitals in Southland, Otago, Canterbury, Hutt Valley, Gisborne, Rotorua and the Bay of Plenty. Two more notices have been issued for 24-hour strikes on September 19 and 21.

The 260 radiographers want conditions consistent with counterparts at other DHBs who gained settlements last year. Rates vary widely across the sector and aligning them in the course of one year would mean an across the board rise of 15 percent. DHBs claim this is "unaffordable" and want to spread settlements over two and a half years.

An Association of Executive and Professional Employees spokesperson said the strike would cost the boards at least \$5 million, far outstripping the estimated \$1 million cost of settling their claim. Virtually all elective-surgery at the hospitals involved was postponed during the strike and services at outpatient clinics reduced.

Labour's Health Minister Pete Hodgson has demanded the dispute be resolved quickly but said that the government would not provide extra funding to meet pay rises.

Strike continues at Auckland glass factory

Industrial action is continuing at Pilkington's glass factory in Auckland where 55 employees walked off the job last week. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members struck after the company rejected a claim for a 5 percent pay rise and a shift allowance increase to \$10.

Pilkington's New Zealand operation made a \$14 million net profit last year while its parent company made a global profit of \$600 million. An EPMU spokesman said the union didn't think 5 percent was "too much to ask" and urged the company to "get back to the negotiating table".

PNG water workers set strike date

PNG Waterboard Workers Union members will begin a sit-in strike on September 31, following a breakdown in talks over the full implementation of an award agreed by management in July last year. The union said that all work, including reservoir servicing, will stop and that water supply to 15 districts will be at risk.

Employees want extra working shift days, an increase in housing allowances, payment of 2004 and 2005 bonuses, and a reduction in management positions. The union said that the strike would continue until all demands are met.

Solomon Islands council workers issue strike notice

On September 7, Honiara City Council workers, members of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW), issued a 28-day strike notice. SINUW general secretary Tony Kagovai said that council management had failed to sign an agreed collective agreement.

The agreement includes a 12-percent general wage increase effective from January this year, a \$5,000 (\$US657) ex-gratia payment to individual employees and payment of annual leave. The Honiara City mayor agreed to meet with the workers on September 15.



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