

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 September 2006

## Asia

### Indian railway workers demand wage and staff increases

More than 6,000 Central Railway workers demonstrated at Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus, the main railway station in Mumbai, on September 14. They were demanding a pay increase and an end to anti-labour management policies on safety, security and workloads. The demonstrating engineering, commercial, ticketing, carriage and wagon, signal and telecommunications employees were joined by motormen, guards and stationmasters.

Rail employees claim there are acute manpower shortages with numerous vacancies for points-men, guards, drivers, loco-pilots, stationmasters and maintenance workers. While train services have increased management has ignored union calls for extra staff.

Pradnya Naik from the railways commercial department in Sholapur said: "I have a family of six and have been asking for a revision of my salary for two months. But the railway authorities are not heeding my pleas. All the other central government office employees are getting wage revisions."

Ticketing department employee Sanjay Chauhan travelled from Nashik to join the protest. She said: "The demand for an increase in wages was made a few months ago and I have personally written letters to the Railway Board asking for a revision. But there has been no response from them which made me to join the agitation." The demonstration was organised by National Railway Mazdoor Union.

### Indian bank employees begin protest

Workers from nearly 100 branches of the Andhra Bank in the Vijayawada district, Andhra Pradesh, began a sit-down protest at the bank's zonal office on September 15. They are opposing outsourcing of banking services and want regularisation of temporary staff and the payment of provident fund arrears.

Andhra Bank Panel Sub Staff Association and Bank Employees Federation of India members carried slogans denouncing management's "indifferent attitude".

### Indian gas workers demand wage rise

Nearly 100 workers at Bharat Petroleum Corporation's gas refilling plant began a two-day strike on September 19 demanding productivity-related wage increases. The plant is at Ganapathy in Tamil Nadu.

The strike affected LPG refilling in seven western Tamil Nadu districts. Under normal conditions the plant dispatches around 30,000 cylinders each day.

### Indian Honda workers on strike

More than 150 Honda motorcycle and scooter factory employees

in Manesar, north India, went on strike on September 19 to demand the regularisation of employment.

Police have been deployed at the factory in an attempt to intimidate striking employees. Police attacked striking workers in July last year, injuring several of them.

### Tamil Nadu sanitary workers demonstrate

Scores of sanitary workers and panchayat (village council) water tank operators demonstrated in Tiruchy, Tamil Nadu, on September 14 for a charter of demands, including time-scale pay and pensions. The workers want gratuity and pensions on retirement, as is the case with other sections of the workforce, and accommodation allocated under the group houses scheme.

### Bangladeshi fertiliser workers demonstrate

Zia Fertiliser Company Limited workers protested outside the company's Ashuganj plant on September 19, as part of a three-day protest for a nine-point log of claims, including implementation of wage increases in line with national pay commission proposals.

The protest caused a backup of at least 150 trucks near the factory's main entrance and affected distribution to hundreds of dealers in Brahmanbaria, Comilla, Chandpur, Netrakona, Kishoreganj and Sunamganj areas. Bangladesh Chemical Workers Association members are threatening to blockade the main Dhaka-Sylhet highway if the authorities do not meet their demands.

### Sri Lankan sugar workers demand pay rise

On September 20, thousands of Pelwatta Sugar Company workers protested opposite the factory in Buttala in southern Sri Lanka for an immediate salary rise and job permanency.

Only 1,000 of the factory's 4,000-strong workforce are permanent employees even though some have more than 10 years service. The casual workers are denied health insurance and other benefits provided to permanent employees.

While workers have been demanding a pay increase since last April there has been no response from management. One protestor pointed out that the cost living had "increased to unbearable levels".

In a separate dispute, workers picketed the Sugathadasa Sports Complex, the country's main stadium, on September 20 in support of a salary increase and other demands.

### Sri Lankan road workers strike

Road construction workers for Japanese company Kumayai in Sri Lanka began an indefinite strike on September 13 over several demands, including fresh drinking water, toilet facilities and the removal of two managerial staff. The workers, who are building a road from Pinnaduwa to Matara in the south of the country, claim

there is no ambulance or even emergency first-aid supplies.

The only water available on the project is used for construction work and the work regime is gruelling. Employees are expected to report for duty at 5.30 a.m. and work until lunchtime without a break. Their limited four-day annual leave is also being reduced to two and half days. One employee said that the company treated its workers “like beasts, not humans”.

#### **Sri Lanka power workers demand overdue increment**

Some 2,000 Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees demonstrated in Colombo on September 20 for payment of an outstanding increment, improved maternity leave, a medical allowance, increased employee loans for motorcycles, and other demands.

The workers are paid a salary increment once every three years but have not yet been paid the increment due last January. In March, the government promised payment in April but then postponed it until September 7. It was then put off for another two weeks. The workers want a 5,000-rupee (\$US50) interim allowance until the increment is paid and have threatened to strike if their claims are not met.

#### **South Korean construction union ends strike**

An 82-day strike by over 1,000 Pohang Region Construction Union members ended this week. The indefinite walkout began on June 30 bringing work at dozens of construction sites at POSCO steel mills to a standstill.

Workers voted to accept a tentative collective agreement on September 20 after union ballots on September 11 and 13. Union officials efforts to push through a deal eventually wore employees down with some already having returned to work. The deal eliminates a previous arrangement with the company for union employees to be hired ahead of other day labour workers.

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

##### **ABC staff strike over wages**

About 3,000 employees at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) walked off the job for 24 hours on September 21 to demand an improved wages and working conditions agreement. ABC workers have rejected a 3.5 percent pay rise offer from management, which wants the increase linked to cuts in working conditions.

Community and Public Sector Union and Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance members protested outside ABC offices nationwide. The strike affected the airing of radio and television programs nationally in most major and regional cities. Union members plan rolling stoppages in pursuit of their claim.

##### **Bus drivers call snap strike**

Bus drivers in Australia's national capital Canberra walked off the job for one day on September 20 in opposition to ACTION public bus company moves to change rosters and cut services and staff. The proposed changes are part of a restructuring plan by the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Labor government.

According to media reports, ACTION management threatened that individual drivers could be fined \$5,000 each for striking. The drivers are members of the Transport Workers Union. The issue went before ACT Industrial Relations Commission on September 21.

#### **Union deal ends New Zealand supermarket lockdown**

The New Zealand National Distribution Union (NDU), representing 600 locked-out supermarket distribution workers, reached a deal with Australian company Progressive Enterprises on September 22, ending a bitter month-long pay dispute.

The union recommended workers accept the deal, claiming it provides pay parity at distribution centres in Auckland, Palmerston North and Christchurch. The deal came after two days of talks following NDU threats to mount a court challenge over the lockdown's legality.

According to the union, “the workers were able to use their national bargaining power to deliver equal pay for equal work.” However, the NDU had difficulty persuading workers to accept the settlement. One union delegate said that 49 percent of Christchurch workers voted against it while the Auckland meeting took three hours to reach a conclusion.

The settlement, in fact, fell short of the union's demands. It failed to establish one collective agreement covering all three centres and equal pay rates will not become operative for another two years. The agreed pay rise amounts to an average of 4.5 percent annually for three years and barely matches forecast inflation. While locked-out workers lost an estimated \$2 million in wages, they will only receive a token back-pay amount and an interest-free \$1,000 company loan to pay bills.

New Zealand workers donated tens of thousands of dollars to the distribution workers and many joined support protests and rallies. The unions, however, refused to mobilise an industrial campaign to shut down Progressive's operation. On September 15, the NDU announced it had reached a pay settlement for 4,200 in-store workers after two days of mediation with Progressive, ensuring the continued isolation of the locked-out distribution employees.

#### **New Zealand radiographers' strikes continue**

Radiographers in six of New Zealand's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) went on strike on September 19 and 21, following a three-day walkout the previous week. The 250 radiographers want pay parity with colleagues from other boards that settled a claim last year.

DHB management claim the pay differential amounts to a 15 percent increase and therefore “unreasonable”. A spokesperson for Apex, the radiographers' union, expressed frustration at the DHBs' refusal to meet during the stoppage. Negotiations will resume first thing next week with Apex, declaring it was “hoping for a resolution”.



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