

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 September 2006

Asia

Indian health workers' strike continues

An indefinite strike at Pondicherry's Jawaharlal Institute of Post-graduate Medical Education and Research (JIPMER) entered its 18th day on September 25. The strike is in protest against the federal government's decision to convert the institute into an autonomous body.

Health employees fear the move will seriously impact on working conditions and increase treatment costs. Students also believe it be more difficult to gain access to various courses once the status is changed.

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 hospital on September 25. Around 25,000 Pondicherry state employees plan to take casual leave en masse to support the strike and join a proposed protest campaign.

The JIPMER administration is attempting to intimidate strikers and has begun legal action against 100 workers, suspended 50 others and sacked five. Employees claim management has employed thugs to attack the strikers.

On September 20 the Madras High Court issued an order forbidding sit-down protests or any other agitation within JIPMER premises. Around 1,000 strikers and supporters were arrested when they tried to demonstrate outside the JIPMER administrative block.

Sanitation workers demand salary arrears

Contract sanitation workers employed at the Salem Government Medical College Hospital in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu went on a strike on September 25 over the non-payment of salaries for the past three months.

In a separate dispute, health employees from various local hospitals, the National Malaria Eradication Program and the Port and Airport Health Organisation held a sit-down protest in New Delhi on September 20.

They were demanding a 15-point charter of claims, including the filling of all vacant posts, a patient care allowance and an end to the contracting-out of services in the health sector. The workers are members of the Central Health Employees Federation

Municipal employees oppose privatisation

Uncollected garbage and other refuse continues to pile up as strike action by conservancy workers at Pallavaram municipality in Tamil Nadu entered its seventh day on September 26.

The strikers are protesting moves by municipal authorities to privatise conservancy work and claim that officials have stopped recruiting permanent staff to fill job vacancies. Employees struck for two days in August but returned to work after the Municipal

Commissioner agreed to address the issue.

Tamil Nadu plantation and construction workers in joint protest

Plantation and construction workers in Yercaud, Tamil Nadu, walked out on September 25 to demand that the state government lift the minimum wage and increase the pension for construction workers.

The minimum wage for the plantation workers, which is lower than the general minimal wage set by the government, has not been revised for the past 11 years.

The protest, organised by the Neelamalai Thotta Thozhilalar Sangam and the Shevaroy's Pothu Thozhilalar Sangam, also called for a proper system of wage distribution for Horticulture Research Station employees.

Indian power workers strike against privatisation

Uttar Pradesh Power Department engineers and employees struck on September 25 in opposition to the privatisation of the Anpara-C power plant. Wearing black badges, they held a sit-down protest in Lucknow and are threatening to strike next month if the state government refuses to abandon its plans.

While shift-duty engineers and other essential employees did not participate in the walkout in order to maintain power supply, they will join next month's strike. The campaign is organised by the Power Employees Joint Action Committee.

Punjab autoworkers protest for pay increase

More than 200 contract employees at automaker Swaraj Mazda Limited in Ropar, Punjab began a protest campaign on September 22 over pay and working conditions. Management retaliated by dismissing five employees without notice.

The car workers, who are paid 2,500-3,500 rupees (\$US55-77) per month, have not had a salary increase for over seven years nor been made permanent employees despite over four years service. They also complain of ongoing problems with Swaraj Mazda's employee provident fund.

Railway employees demand improved safety

Kerala railway workers went on strike for 24 hours and protested outside Kozhikode railway station on September 22 to demand improved safety and the provision of basic amenities for night-duty trackmen. The workers are members of the Dakshina Railway Employees Union (DREU).

The DREU claims increasing numbers of trackmen throughout India are being killed by trains, especially during the monsoon season. A fortnight ago, two trackmen on night patrol died after being hit by a train at Kallayi near Kozhikode.

While Indian Railways earns large profits it has no proposals to improve safety measures for its employees. The night-duty track workers, who are forced to work 12-hour shifts, are only issued with kerosene lamps to indicate their presence. They want reflector jackets,

walkie-talkies and improved residential amenities. Staff shortages also mean gatekeepers at Kerala level crossings are often forced to work 24-hour shifts.

Sri Lankan teachers demonstrate

More than 1,000 teachers in Sri Lanka's Badulla region marched to the Zone Education Office in Hali-Ela on September 26 over various demands. These include the payment of salary arrears, correction of irregularities in recent salary increases and an end to delays in providing distress loans.

The teachers also want the education department to stop irregular and suppressive transfers and end political interference in education.

Nepal tea estate workers demand salaries

Workers at the Kanyam Tea Estate, Puna Dhakal in Ilam, Nepal, boycotted work and protested on September 23 over the non-payment of wages from August 1 and cuts to the Dashain allowance bonus. Under current agreements, the Dashain allowance should be equivalent to 26 days' wages. Management has announced, however, that it will only pay 15 days' wages.

Workers locked eight officials, including the tea estate manager, in the company office during the protest. There are four tea estates in Ilam employing some 500 workers.

Indonesian hotel workers protest over retirement fund

Dozens of former Hotel Indonesia employees in South Jakarta demonstrated outside the hotel manager's office this week to demand immediate payment of a retirement fund. The workers accuse management of misusing the 3,722 billion rupiah fund.

Protestors said management should have paid out retirement money in March this year but "keep buying time to avoid fulfilling their obligation". When a management representative claimed the funds had been disbursed, protestors demanded to see the bank transfer slips.

Philippines plantation workers protest sackings

Over 190 workers from the Japanese transnational, Sumitomo Fruits Corporation-AJMR, have been demonstrating outside the AMS Group of Companies in the Philippines' Davao City for over a week. The plantation is near Compostela town in Compostela Valley. Sumitomo Fruits Corporation, one of the biggest agriculture and fruit companies in Mindanao, also owns the Fresh Bananas Agricultural Corporation.

The workers are protesting over being "unjustly" sacked on August 12. A spokesman for the protestors denounced the sackings as "an act of grave injustice". Strike action planned last August in support of the sacked employees was called off after the company gained a temporary restraining order from the Regional Trial Court.

Australia and the Pacific

Electrical workers strike enters third week

A strike by 56 employees at switchboard manufacturer Heinemann Electrics in Melbourne has entered its third week.

The workers began indefinite strike action and established pickets outside the factory after management cut a week's wages from them for imposing overtime bans. The bans were put in place after prolonged negotiations for a new collective work agreement broke down.

According to employees, the company withdrew previously agreed conditions soon after the introduction of the Howard government's new industrial relations laws earlier this year. Heinemann then demanded workers accept cuts to working conditions. These included the "averaging out" of working hours. While the standard working week remained at 38 hours, employees could be required to work on weekends without receiving overtime penalties.

Hydro workers to strike over new agreement

About 200 Electrical Trade Union (ETU) members at Hydro Tasmania will strike for 24 hours on October 2 and then impose overtime bans over a new wages and conditions agreement. The industrial action comes after a break down in negotiations between management and the union.

ETU members rejected Hydro Tasmania's offer of a 4.5 percent pay rise over three years because it was tied to surrendering working conditions and shift penalties. Employees want a 5 percent increase without trade offs. The ETU represents half the 400-strong workforce in Hydro Tasmania's electrical division.

Australian childcare workers strike for reduced workloads

About 3,000 childcare workers from the Queensland Department of Child Safety walked off the job on September 26 to demanding improved wages, reductions in workloads and increased funding for childcare and protection. They returned to work on the same day.

In a separate dispute, 20 maintenance workers at Woolworths' grocery distribution centres in Acacia Ridge, Coopers Plains and Larapinta in Queensland struck for four hours on September 25, rejecting a 3.5 percent pay rise from the company.

Management wants workers to trade-off shift allowances worth \$140 per week for the pay increase. The maintenance workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

New Zealand radiographers end strike

On September 22, 250 striking radiographers employed by six of New Zealand's 21 District Health Boards (DHBs) agreed to return to work on the promise of renewed contract talks. Their union Apex will begin negotiations with the six DHBs on September 25. The radiographers are seeking wage parity with their counterparts in other boards who settled a wage claim last year.

Meanwhile, in another dispute, 170 radiation therapists began rolling protests on September 25 as part of a pay dispute. The therapists, employed by DHBs at Auckland and Canterbury, Waikato, ModCentral, Capital, Coast and Otago, are refusing to work overtime and are randomly stopping work for periods of 45 minutes to four hours.



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