

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 June 2007

Sri Lankan building material workers continue protests

Building Material Corporation (BMC) employees protested in central Colombo, Sri Lanka, on June 6 to demand replacement of company directors. Workers allege that salaries are not paid on time and that BMC is being mismanaged.

The latest protest follows similar action on May 30 over the non-payment of salaries for May. Workers also accuse management of failing to deposit contributions to the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) and Employees Trust Fund (ETF) for the last two months.

While BMC is a state-owned distributor, successive governments have drastically scaled down its operations and it now faces increasing competition from private companies. Management claims that the salary delays are the result of financial difficulties. Minister of Consumer Affairs Bandula Gunawardane said that there was no other way of resolving the financial crisis other than restructuring BMC, raising the spectre of job losses and privatisation.

In a separate dispute, on June 6 around 200 workers from the Embilipitiya Paper Factory demonstrated in the town of Embilipitiya, around 200 kilometres from Colombo. They demanded payment of outstanding salaries for May. The factory employs around 350 people. The Inter-Company Workers Union branch at the plant called the protest.

Indian airport taxi drivers oppose relocation

Mumbai International Airport taxi drivers went on strike on June 4 over the Airport Authority of India's (AAI) decision to exclude the pre-paid taxi stand from the airport parking area and to relocate it almost one kilometre away. The AAI is planning to float tenders to set-up a private car park in the area. Taxis have operated out of the present site for more than 20 years.

One striker said that drivers were shocked by AAI's decision. "We will suffer losses in this arrangement," he said. "There are over 800 taxis operating from the airport." Another said: "We have asked the authorities for an amicable solution. But no one is ready to understand our problems."

Malaysian unions call for private sector minimum wage

On June 1, the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) demanded a 900-ringgit (\$US257) national minimum monthly wage in the private sector. An MTUC spokesman said the minimum wage was needed to lift workers above the official monthly wage level of 691 ringgits. Millions of private sector workers still earn just 400 to 500 ringgits monthly pushing them below the poverty line.

Protests are being planned at a number of strategic locations but if there is no positive government response a mass protest of workers from around the country will be held in Putrajaya on June 20 to present a memorandum to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Babawi. The union has threatened a one-day general strike if

the demand is ignored.

Hong Kong university staff fight for higher pay

Several university unions and the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union announced on June 4 they are forming an alliance to fight for pay increases. City University Staff Association vice-chairman Fung Wai-wah said that university employees have suffered from several pay cuts and that their salaries have not been kept pace with civil servants since 2003.

Chinese University non-teaching contract staff salaries have been cut by 16 and 23.6 percent since 2004. Emily Ng Hiu-chun, chairwoman of the CUHK Employees General Union, said a pay rise of up to 30 percent was needed to bring wages in line with civil servants.

Fung said most universities have accumulated surpluses of between \$HK310 million (\$US40 million) and \$HK650 million since the pay cuts were implemented. She called for university heads to "use the additional funds to adjust salaries". The alliance will conduct a survey to gauge the views of university staff and will meet government officials and heads of university committees when it is completed.

Hong Kong public hospital doctors threaten to strike

Frontline doctors in Hong Kong's public hospitals held a press conference on June 5 to announce a strike on July 1 unless the Hospital Authority addressed a series of issues. They want improved working conditions and salaries to stem the flow of doctors from public to private hospitals.

Attending the conference were representatives of the Hong Kong Medical Association, the Hong Kong Doctors Union and legislator Kwok Ka-ki, who represents the medical sector in the Legislative Council.

The doctors complained that the monthly entry salary of new graduates has fallen since 1999 from \$HK52,012 (\$US6,753) to \$HK39,409 in 2007 forcing many graduates into the private sector. They are also calling for a reduction in working hours claiming that at least 25 percent of frontline doctors work between 65 and 80 hours a week.

A Hong Kong Doctors Union spokesman said: "Public hospital frontline doctors are not in perfect shape to provide satisfactory treatment for patients." The doctors have given the Authority two weeks to respond.

Childcare workers protest

Childcare workers, members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, at ABC Learning Centres protested on May 6 outside the company's Perth headquarters over wage anomalies affecting numbers of under-21-year-old employees.

They claim that many childcare workers entitled to an adult wage are still being paid junior rates despite stipulations in a new award.

The Children's Services Private Award, which came into effect in March 2007, states that only childcare workers on a level-two stage and who are under-21 can be paid a junior rate. The company, however, continues to pay young employees on level-two a junior hourly rate, which is \$4 less than the adult hourly rate of \$15.94.

The company has disputed the claims and taken the dispute to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission. ABC Learning Centres is owned by Eddy Groves who last year topped Australia's Young Rich List with personal wealth estimated at \$260 million.

Nurses to impose work bans

South Australian public hospital nurses have rejected the state Labor government's latest pay offer of a 10.5 percent pay increase over three years. The nurses want a 14 percent pay rise over three years and improved working conditions.

A Nurses Federation spokesperson said that union members would implement rolling work bans, including bans on doing paper work, over the next four weeks starting June 4 with regional and country nurses playing a central role in industrial action.

Mine workers protest over sackings

Austar Colliery workers near Cessnock in New South Wales' Hunter Valley protested outside the Chinese Consulate in Sydney on June 1 over the sacking of 79 coal miners. Southland Colliery was renamed Austar after it was sold to the Chinese government-owned Yanzhou Coal Mining for \$US23 million in December 2004.

The workers carried placards in English and Chinese condemning the sackings and a delegation delivered a letter of protest to the Consul. A union spokesman said that forced redundancies at the mine had also been raised with the NSW government. Austar is the only coal mine owned by the Chinese government outside of China.

Building workers locked out in contract dispute

Workers are continuing protests outside three construction sites in NSW and Queensland after being locked out in a dispute between construction company Bettaplex and residential developer Meriton. Bettaplex suspended work on the sites on June 5 claiming it was owed more than \$1 million by the developer. One of the sites is located in the Sydney suburb of Rosebery and other two on the Queensland Gold Coast.

A spokesman for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) said the contractual dispute could lead to the 200 workers losing their jobs and entitlements including superannuation and redundancy contributions, annual leave and accumulated rostered days off worth a total of nearly one million dollars. The union has called on the federal government to secure the workers' entitlements if Bettaplex goes into liquidation.

Council workers protest sackings

A mass meeting of around 500 Melbourne City Council staff passed a no-confidence resolution in the council's chief executive David Pitchford over restructuring plans and the sacking of 26 workers last week.

Pitchford, Victoria's highest-paid council officer at around \$396,000 a year, has announced that a review of the Council's financial situation may result in the shedding of another 100 jobs later this year. The cost-cutting review also recommends that private companies, such as Tenix, be brought in to take over parking enforcement, a move rejected by council parking officers.

New Zealand hospital strikes called off

Last-ditch talks have stalled nationwide industrial action by 2,000 New Zealand hospital workers and averted one of the biggest lockouts in 50 years. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) issued

strike notices under which cleaners, cooks and orderlies would have walked off the job for 55 minutes in every hour beginning midnight June 5. Four contracting companies, which employ the 2,000 workers, responded by issuing retaliatory lockout notices. Another 1,800 workers employed directly by district health boards (DHBs) would not have been affected by the lockout.

A SFWU spokesman said a last-minute pay offer by DHBs had "opened sufficient space for the union to return to mediation". The latest offer of a 50-cent increase would lift the entry-level hourly rate to \$13.60 and the top rate to \$15.60. The union said while the offer is not a settlement, "it does change the options". The SFWU claims that it also now has the possibility of auditing the DHBs' financial figures.

The SFWU agreed to lift the strike notices for a week and resume negotiations on May 7. Outstanding issues include if the new pay rates will recognise current service and whether DHB's will persist with a demand for separate regional rates.

Meanwhile, industrial action by hospital radiographers has entered its eighth week with no sign of a breakthrough. The radiographers are refusing to work outside the hours of 8 a.m. to 4.30 p.m. and will perform fewer examinations. The action involves radiology staff in the Southland, Otago, Canterbury, Hutt, Lakes, Bay of Plenty and Tairāwhiti DHBs who are not receiving the same pay and conditions as colleagues in other areas.

In a separate dispute, a scheduled two-day strike by 500 administration staff in public hospitals in Wellington, Wanganui and Taranaki was called off by the Public Service Association (PSA) after its received improved pay offers. After nearly 12-months of negotiations the workers had rejected previous pay offers that were below the level of inflation.

Following mediation, Capital and Coast DHBs' offer increased from a 4.4 percent increase over two years to 4.9 percent, Taranaki DHB's increased from 4.64 percent to 5.4 percent and Wanganui DHB's from 4.74 percent to 5.4 percent. PSA meetings are currently being held to consider the deals.

Fiji unions delay decision on nationwide strike

The Fiji Confederation of Public Sector Unions has again delayed national strike action, claiming this time that it was because Teachers Union general secretary Agni Deo Singh was unable to attend a crucial meeting last week.

Public sector workers have overwhelmingly voted for a national walkout against the military regime's interim administration decision in February to impose an across-the-board 5 percent pay cut and to reduce the retirement age from 60 to 55.

Since then the unions have engaged in drawn out strike balloting of members and repeatedly sought talks with the government. Despite ballots delivering an overwhelming mandate to strike, the unions have failed to do so even though Public Emergency Regulations outlawing strikes and public gatherings were lifted last week.



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