

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 June 2007

Indian airline workers strike over conditions

Around 12,000 workers, including baggage handlers, check-in staff and cabin crews at the country's state-run domestic Indian airline, began an indefinite strike on June 12 demanding better wages and protection of career prospects.

The strike was triggered by the government's decision to approve a plan to merge the airline with the country's international carrier Air India. Workers fear that the merger may lead to job cuts and a reduction in benefits.

Indian Airlines was set up in 1953 and renamed Indian in 2005. Indian recently began flights to destinations in Asia and the Middle East in addition to domestic services. Air India was founded in 1932 and flies to more than 40 destinations worldwide. Both airlines have faced increased competition from new private airlines such as Jet Airways and Kingfisher Airlines. While Indian's market share has dropped to 20 percent it still operates more than 300 flights a day carrying some 30,000 passengers.

The current strike has disrupted air travel including to the capital New Delhi, the financial capital Mumbai (Bombay), IT hub Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai, Tiruchi and Hyderabad. The strikers have demonstrated and set up picket lines near most airports.

In a dramatic intervention, Delhi High Court issued a six-page order on June 13 declaring the strike "prima facie illegal" and directing workers to resume duties. The court also banned demonstrations, protests and pickets within a 200-metre radius of Delhi airport. Indian management were instructed to communicate the court order to employees within six hours.

While Civil Aviation Minister Praful Patel threatened disciplinary action against any worker refusing to return to duty the strikers continue to defy the court directive.

Indian communication workers protest

Communication workers at Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) began a weeklong nationwide "relay sit-down" protest on June 12 for a slate of demands. Hundreds of BSNL employees from cities such as Tuticorin in Tamilnadu, Visakhapatnam, Hyderabad and Vijayawada in Andhra Pradesh have participated in the protest.

The demands include institution of a five-yearly compulsory wage revision and the lowering of the salary differentials between executive and non-executive employees. Workers also

want an annual increment system as a percentage of basic pay, a merger of 50 percent of the dearness allowance with the basic pay, a pay increase for contract employees and the immediate filling of all job vacancies.

In a separate dispute, railway workers in the Waltair division of Indian Railways in Andhra Pradesh stopped work and marched from Visakhapatnam railway station to the Waltair Divisional Railway manager's office on June 8.

They want immediate finalisation of the Sixth Central Pay Commission report and have called for the release of interim relief of 1,000 rupees effective from January 1, 2006. Waltair is a major freight carrier for public sector organisations.

Bangladeshi apparel workers demand salary arrears

Protesting Aimon Garments employees barricaded the Dhaka-Tangail highway, near the company's Chandra Palli Biddyt office, on June 8 disrupting traffic for about 30 minutes. They were demanding payment of wage arrears.

The protest ended after police intervened. Following negotiations between workers' representatives and management the company agreed to pay all arrears.

Vietnam seafood workers strike

Nearly 1,000 workers employed at the Singapore-owned Amanda Foods factory in Hoa City, Dong Nai province, struck on June 7 over the cutting of the monthly wage to 600,000 dong (\$US37). Manual labourers in Vietnam typically earn around \$US49.

The chairman of the local and government-approved labour federation told the media that he was working with management to find an "appropriate" solution to the conflict. "Appropriate solutions" imposed by the government and unions in other industrial disputes, however, generally include forcing employees back to work on conditions suitable to the employer.

Hong Kong social workers rally over wages

On June 10, social workers rallied in Hong Kong in support of higher pay. Wages in the non-government social welfare sector are currently about 23 percent below that of civil servants in equivalent positions. The rally was organised by the newly formed Alliance to Fight for Equal Work [and] Equal Pay in the Social Welfare Sector, a group of 18 social welfare organisations.

The Alliance represents about 40,000 employees, including

about 7,000 professionals such as social workers and nurses, in 170 organisations. According to the Hong Kong Council of Social Services, over 1,000 social welfare graduates transfer to other sectors each year due to low wages.

The Alliance is calling for the reinstatement of welfare subsidies cut several years ago in order to allow wages to be increased. A further rally is planned for June 24 at Charter Garden followed by a mass protest on July 1 unless the government responds “promptly” to the Alliance’s demands.

Cambodian newspaper staff strike over sacking

The entire staff at *Cambodge Soir*, a French and Khmer language daily newspaper in Cambodia, went on strike on June 11 over the sacking of a colleague. The workers claim the reasons given by the government for the sacking were vague.

They suspect that the dismissal followed the publication of a report by the journalist slamming the government over its “wholesale and illegal destruction of Cambodian forests”. Editorial employees have issued a statement declaring that they are unwilling to return to work until the government clarifies the reason for the sacking.

Indonesian garment workers strike

Some 300 garment workers at PT Miju in Tangerang, 20 kilometres west of Jakarta, went on strike on June 9 over the company’s failure to pay outstanding salaries for May. The company had promised to pay up by June 5 but reneged. One striker said workers had only received 10 percent of their April salaries and are still owed the entire amount for May.

A management spokesman claimed that the company is on the verge of bankruptcy due to declining export orders and “has no money” to pay wages.

South Australian paramedics demand pay rise

About 300 ambulance paramedics voted at a mass meeting in Adelaide this week to reject the latest pay offer by the South Australian state Labor government of a 20 percent increase over three years. The paramedics want a 37 percent over three years, plus wage parity in line with public service professional officers.

The Ambulance Employees Association is also calling on the government to recognise professional status for paramedics. The paramedics are threatening to ban charging patients ambulance transport fees for two weeks unless the government increases its pay offer.

New Zealand doctors to stop work over pay

The Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS), representing 90 percent of New Zealand’s senior hospital doctors, has issued its first-ever countrywide stop-work notice. A series of two-hour meetings will begin in Waitemata on July 17, followed by Tairāwhiti, Northland and Tauranga over the next two days. Meetings by ASMS members at other district health boards will be held over the next three weeks.

The ASMA claims that government’s under-funding of the public health system is endangering patients and that lower rates of pay and conditions in NZ as compared to overseas is

responsible for the growing shortage of senior doctors. Two years after completing training a doctor in Australia earns as much as a doctor at the top of the New Zealand pay scale, a position reached after 13 years.

National collective agreement negotiations started over a year ago. To date, there have been 21 days of negotiation including seven days with a mediator. An ASMS spokesman said the association remains “committed to mediation”, but can’t allow “Nero-like health bosses to continue to fiddle while Rome burns”.

The doctors want a 6 to 7 percent pay rise in the first year and around half of that in the second year, taking the average salary from \$143,000 to \$160,000. They also want overtime rates increased from time-and-a-half to double time and the reimbursement allowance for attending conferences and courses increased from \$8,000 to \$16,000 a year.

The work stoppages are the latest in a series of health service industrial actions, including strikes by junior doctors, radiologists and laboratory workers in the past year. The Resident Doctors Association, representing 2,500 junior doctors, has not ruled out strikes over its negotiations. The association called a five-day stoppage last year after negotiations on its current agreement broke down. About 20,000 nurses, nurse aides and midwives are also currently involved in pay negotiations.

Auckland hotel workers strike over low pay

Workers at Centra Airport Hotel in South Auckland went on strike on June 11 for a 5 percent pay rise. It was the third strike in as many weeks after pay negotiations stalled. A spokesperson said wages were so low that hotel workers are finding it difficult to make ends meet.

Lopa Muliaga works in the kitchen at the Centra and like many hotel employees earns just \$12 an hour. His wife recently died after she could not use an oxygen machine because electricity to the family’s home was cut off after they fell behind in payment to the power company. Muliaga joined a picket outside the hotel on May 29, the day his wife died. While holding down wages, the hotel is spending \$10 million on refurbishments.

Fiji polytechnic strike called off

A last minute meeting between the Fiji Institute of Technology (FIT) and union representatives led to the cancellation of a strike by 300 staff members on June 12. The workers are opposed to the introduction of contractual appointments mandated by the FIT council. The meeting agreed on a Memorandum of Agreement to refer the matter to voluntary arbitration.



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