# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

**30 June 2007**

**Bangladeshi doctors on indefinite strike**

Over 300 doctors, medical officers and consultants employed on contract at the Bangladesh Institute of Research and Rehabilitation in Diabetes, Endocrine and Metabolic Disorders (BIRDEM hospital) at Shahbagh began an indefinite strike on June 25.

They want regularisation of employment and establishment of a uniform service rule covering all hospital employees. The strike erupted after doctors were sent a letter stating that their contracts would not be renewed. Some doctors have been working at the hospital for up to 15 years.

Strikers held a daylong demonstration at the hospital on June 25 that stopped scheduled surgery and in-patient admissions. The outpatient department was partially operational because striking doctors provided emergency services.

About 550 doctors are currently employed at BIRDEM hospital but since 1992, in-patent doctors have been employed on contract. One doctor said that despite the contract hire system no doctor had been displaced until now. “The latest notice issued by the BIRDEM authorities,” he said, “means we are going to lose our jobs.”

**Indian communication workers protest**

Contract communication workers attached to Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) in Palayamkottai and Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu demonstrated on June 26 for a pay increase and uniform salary arrangements.

Thousands of contract workers are employed on a temporary basis in BSNL’s housekeeping, cable repairing, and telegram and delivery departments but do not have job security and their wages vary from district to district. BSNL has imposed a ban on the recruitment of permanent labour. Tamil Nadu Telecom Contract Workers’ Union and the Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited Employees’ Union organised the protests.

**Sri Lankan postal workers picket**

Postal workers in the southern town of Matara picketed the local post office on June 19 against increased postal rates and the withdrawal of a shift system of work. They also demanded the filling of 1,507 vacancies across the Postal Department, adequate transport facilities, welfare benefits and introduction of systematic recruitment campaign.

Workers accused the government of undermining public postal services, including exorbitant increases in postal rates to drive people to private providers.

**Hong Kong doctors sit-in over pay**

More than 1,000 public hospital doctors at Hong Kong’s Queen Elizabeth Hospital will hold a sit-in protest on June 30 in a campaign for improved pay and working conditions. They want the hospital to restore new recruits’ wages to the levels of eight years ago and a pay rise in line with 4.96 percent proposed for civil servants.

Hong Kong Public Doctors’ Association president Paul Shea Tat-ming said previous salary cuts had hit morale and subsequently the quality of medical services. In 1999, the authority slashed starting salaries and the highest pay level of newly recruited doctors by about 20 percent and 34 percent, respectively. Senior medical officers and consultants allowances were cut by about 40 percent.

The Association is also demanding the government address the issue of extended working hours and implement a committee report recommending doctors not work more than 14 hours a day and receive extra payment when on-call. While the Hospital Authority has asked for more government funding to adjust doctors’ salaries, chief executive Shane Solomon said a review of the claims would take at least three weeks.

**Hong Kong social workers demand wage increase**

About 1,000 social workers from non-government organisations (NGOs) held a rally at Government House in Hong Kong on June 24 demanding salaries be brought in line with civil servants.

While they provide services similar to those of the Social Welfare Department they have not been offered the same pay rise that civil servants will receive in August. The average salary gap between NGO and government social workers is around HK$5,767 ($US739) a month. Some workers have not received a pay rise for seven years.

The rally was organised by the Hong Kong Social Worker’ General Union and follows a similar action on June 10 organised by the newly-formed Alliance to Fight for Equal Work [and] Equal Pay in the Social Welfare Sector which represents about 40,000 employees in 18 social welfare organisations. Rally organisers handed a petition in at Government House.

Amy, a 29-year-old social worker assistant said she has not received a pay rise since she started in 2000. While her contract is renewed each year, her salary has remained at HK$13,000 ($US1,667) a month.

The union wants the government to lift subsidies to NGOs and restore the HK$70 million yearly subsidy that was cut in 1999.

**Malaysian unions demonstrate for minimum wage**

The Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC) organised nationwide pickets on June 25 as part of a campaign to demand the government set 900-ringgit ($US257) minimum monthly wage for private sector workers, plus a 300-ringgit monthly cost of living allowance.

The pickets, held between 5 p.m. and 6.30 p.m., involved an estimated 50,000 workers. A spokesman for the Timber Employees Union Peninsular Malaysia (TEUPM) said that workers in some industries are paid as low as 300 ringgits a month.

**Disputes by health workers in South Australia continue**

About 50 psychiatrists in the state public hospital system in South Australia (SA) plan to resign en-mass next week in protest over staff shortages and increased workloads. The state Labor government of Premier Mike Rann has refused to negotiate with the Salaried Medical Officers Association.

In a separate dispute, Ambulance Employees Association spokesman Phil Palmer said this week that the union will recommend paramedics end industrial action and accept the SA government’s most recent offer of a 25 percent pay increase over three years. Palmer admitted that paramedics were “fairly agitated” and “still feel the offer’s inadequate”.

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At the same time, the government has ruled out any improvement in its pay offer to the state's nurses. On June 26, Industrial Relations Minister Michael Wright declared a 3.5 percent increase per annum for three years was its "best pay offer". The nurses want a 14 percent rise over two years. A spokesman for the Australian Nursing Federation SA branch warned that bans on non-urgent elective surgery could resume if the government did not present "a suitable new offer" by July 2.

South Australian public sector dentists have escalated work bans in a dispute over pay and staffing levels. They are seeking a 31 percent pay rise over three years in a bid to establish wage parity with the dentists in the private sector. A spokesperson for the Public Service Association said work bans would cost the government tens of thousands of dollars because they include providing patients with free dental care at clinics.

**Auckland liquor workers strike over low wages**

Workers at Independent Liquor in Papakura, South Auckland walked out for two hours and picketed the company's warehouse on June 26 in support of a wage claim. The company has offered a 2 percent pay increase but inflation is over 3 percent.

Management claims the offer is fair "for this area"—South Auckland—but the mostly Maori and Pacific Island workforce is paid well below other brewery workers. Workers at Lion and DB breweries receive on average of 10 percent more than those at Independent Liquor for performing the same work.

Shift allowances at Lion and DB are more than double the $12.50-$15 rate paid at Independent Liquor. Overtime rates apply after 45 hours per week at Independent Liquor while the other breweries pay overtime after 40 hours per week or 8 hours per day. Overall, Independent Liquor workers earn up to $300 a week less than their Lion or DB counterparts.

Unite union claims the company's wage offer is illegal because non-union workers on the site have received increases of up to 7 percent. Under current employment laws it is illegal to offer lower pay or conditions to workers because they are members of a union. Unite has launched a "Boycott Woodstock" campaign to target the company's most popular ready-to-drink product.

**New Zealand hospital strikes postponed**

Strikes planned by Palmerston North Hospital orderlies, cleaners and kitchen staff have been delayed for a week while the Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU) meets to discuss the latest developments in contract negotiations.

District health boards that employ their own service staff have made a pay offer and three contracting companies have joined Spotless Services in initiating bargaining for separate contracts. The union has been seeking a multi-employer agreement that includes all boards and contractors. Notices for immediate strike action and retaliatory lockout notices by employers have been withdrawn. Notices for strike action starting next week remain in place.

**Mediation talks over exploitation of NZ foreign workers fail**

Eight Thai vineyard workers who paid an employment agent to find them work in New Zealand will continue to fight for their rightful pay after mediation with their former employer broke down last week. The workers recently went public with allegations they had been underpaid and threatened with being sent home to Thailand. They paid up to $NZ14,000 to work in Marlborough on the understanding they would earn good money.

The workers allege they had to work 60- to 70-hour weeks and on public holidays while being paid below the minimum wage. Their work permits were revoked after they fell out with contractor Havenleigh Global Services but the Immigration Department has now allowed them to stay and work until their case is resolved.

The Department of Labour, which has been investigating Havenleigh, arranged mediation in Blenheim but the seven-hour meeting came to nothing. The workers may now take their case to the Employment Court to recoup underpayments. The Labour Department has suspended a previously approved application by Havenleigh to bring 20 more workers from Thailand and India. Havenleigh has 80 workers employed in Marlborough vineyards.

**Fiji public sector unions issue strike notice**

Fiji's public sector unions have now issued a 28-days notice to strike over the military regime's decision to cut public servants' pay by 5 percent and reduce the retirement age from 60 to 55 years. The strike by the Confederation of the Public Sector Unions (CPSU) is set to begin at midnight July 19. The CPSU consists of the Fiji Teachers Union, Fiji Nursing Association, Fiji Public Service Association and the Air Traffic Management Association of Fiji.

A CPSU spokesman said the decision was reached after months of trying to negotiate with the interim administration and follows the breakdown of talks over a union proposal presented to cabinet last week accepting the pay cut provided the current rate of pay is restored in interim stages starting in late December.

Four and half months have elapsed since the Public Service Commission imposed the pay cut but unions have resisted striking despite overwhelming support by their members in secret ballots. Meetings and rallies have been planned in the country's Central, Western and Northern Divisions.

The military earlier warned that if the national strike went ahead it would intervene as a matter of "national security". Meanwhile, unions affiliated to Fiji Islands Congress of Trade Unions, including the Fijian Teachers Association, the Public Employees Union and the Viti Workers Union., remain in talks with the administration and have not tendered strike notices.

**New Caledonia catering workers strike at Goro-Nickel**

About 100 catering staff employed by contractors Sodexho are on strike at the Goro-Nickel plant in New Caledonia. The workers, who are responsible for the preparation and supply of thousands of meals at the mining company each day, are seeking a pay rise, staff increases and better promotion prospects for local employees. A meeting between union officials and Sodexho management took place last week but the dispute was not resolved.

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