

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 August 2007

Indian oil workers strike for pay rise

About 45,000 workers, including junior managers and supervisors, at the Indian Oil Corporation and 12 other state-run oil companies went on strike for four hours on August 21 demanding a 100 percent pay increase. The companies supply 85 percent of India's fuel. The strikers, which comprise one third of the workforce at the state-run companies, disrupted production at 17 of 19 refineries.

The last walkout by supervisors and junior managers was more than seven years ago, again over wages. Low pay at the state-owned industries has led to supervisory staff seeking employment in the private companies that have entered India's oil business under government "economic reform".

The Oil Sector Officers' Association ended the strike after agreeing to a one-off advance payment of 120,000 rupees (\$US3,000) and a salary increase yet to be determined at a meeting with Oil Minister Murli Deora.

Sri Lankan teachers boycott exam marking

Hundreds of Sri Lankan teachers boycotted the marking of recently concluded General Certificate of Advanced Level (University Entrance) exam papers on August 20. They want the government to rectify long outstanding salary anomalies and to increase teachers' pay by around 3,000 to 4,000 rupees (\$US25 to \$35).

More than 33 exam marking centres around the country were almost empty for a third consecutive day on August 22. On August 16 teachers had refused to attend an exam-marking seminar at Royal College in Colombo and demonstrated outside the venue instead.

In an attempt to intimidate teachers, the government has threatened legal action and the government-owned *Daily News* ran a statement quoting Examination Department sources who warned that anyone disrupting examinations could be arrested without a warrant and held for 14 days under the Commissioner General's Examination Act. The threats followed the police detention for questioning of two trade union leaders on August 20 and a public address by Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa condemning the teachers' action.

Ratnapura health workers protest over unpaid entitlements

Minor staff at Ratnapura Base Hospital, 70 kilometres from Colombo, walked out on August 15 to demand unpaid overtime and holiday pay and the resolution of staff transfer problems. The United Health Services Union members claim that hospital management has continually refused to address these issues

despite repeated requests by the union.

In a separate dispute, nursing staff at Mahaoya Hospital in the country's Eastern region boycotted work on the morning of August 20 and demonstrated outside the District Medical Office. They were protesting against the sudden transfer of two fellow workers to Padiyatalawa Hospital.

The nurses have threatened to expand their industrial action to include hospitals in Padiyatalawa and Dehiattakandiya if the transfers were not cancelled.

Sri Lankan archeological workers oppose salary anomalies

Workers at the Central Cultural Fund in the ancient city of Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka's North Central province protested over salary anomalies on August 21. They are involved in archeological restoration work around the country.

In separate dispute, around 400 graduates employed at provincial and national schools as development and financial assistants demonstrated outside the Provincial Secretariat in Kandy on August 16. They want permanent teaching positions as promised by the government in 2005.

Chinese miners clash with police

One miner and a security guard were killed on August 15 at the Tanjiashan Coal Mine in the Hubei Province in a two-hour battle when police attempted to break up a six-day strike by 800 miners. Company officials accompanied police and thugs to the mine site when the attack occurred. Around 100 people later joined the strikers to support them in the event of another police assault.

The miners went on strike after discovering that 360 million yuan (\$US47.4 million) allocated by the central government for redundancy payments as part of the company's privatisation plan had allegedly been appropriated by the mine's board of directors.

Hong Kong building workers' strike enters third week

On August 19, about 1,200 striking Hong Kong construction workers, along with 300 supporters, marched in from Charter Garden to the SAR government headquarters. They attempted to present a petition but were prevented by police from entering the building. The strikers, who have been gathering daily at the Tin Kwong Road, Ho Man Tin construction site since going on strike on August 8, are planning further rallies.

The workers, who are members of the Hong Kong Construction Industry Bar-benders Union (CIBU), are demanding a uniform daily wage of \$HK950 (\$US122)—up from their current level of between \$HK500 and \$800—and a reduction in the working day from nine to eight hours.

The strikers have already rejected a union-negotiated agreement

struck by the Hong Kong Bar-bending Contractor's Association of \$850 a day from August 1, rising to \$950 from August next year. They have now turned to the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) for representation but employer groups have refused to negotiate, declaring that they will only deal with the CIBU. The strike has now spread to around 100 construction sites—up from 60 last week.

Esselte strike continues

Workers at the Minto warehouse of stationary company Esselte are still picketing the site after going on strike on June 18. The National Union of Workers members are opposing company attempt to push them onto individual work agreements (AWAs) which cut pay and conditions, resulting in the loss of around \$50 a week. Management has now agreed to consider a collective agreement but only on the same terms offered in the AWAs.

Despite Esselte using the Howard government's draconian WorkChoices laws to impose the cuts, the union has not organised any broad industrial action to support the strikers, leaving the handful of workers isolated. Nor has the Australian Council of Trade Unions, which claims to be leading a national campaign against WorkChoices, organised any support.

At a demonstration outside Howard's Sydney office one worker described the situation as a "stand-off". "They (the company) made it clear there would be no collective agreements with the union. We're in limbo," he said. There are now reports that some strikers facing considerable hardship have drifted back to work.

Component workers strike over entitlements

Around 500 car component workers at Venture Industries in the outer northern Melbourne suburb of Campbellfield, walked out on August 25 demanding that more than \$25 million in workers' entitlements are paid out when the company implements job cuts.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members claim that 230 workers due to be laid off under company plans to shift production to smaller facilities are in danger of losing their entitlements. They are also concerned that the job cuts will not be voluntary.

Venture supplies around 1,500 separate components to the Ford Motor Company. More than 1,200 Ford workers at the Broadmeadows and Geelong plants were stood down indefinitely on Friday due to a lack of car components.

Auckland hotel workers locked out for over three weeks

Workers locked out on August 3 are maintaining daily pickets outside the Gateway Hotel in Auckland. The lockout was imposed following strike action for a collective work agreement with the new owner who took over the business last November. After the take-over, regular staff had their hours cut and positions downgraded.

On August 1, kitchen and restaurant workers went on strike. The next day other staff, including cleaners, joined the action and voted to stay out for several more days. The employer then locked out the workers declaring they could not return unless they accepted a work agreement on inferior conditions.

Even under normal conditions, the workers were paid only the minimum wage with no recognition for service or skill. Pay for experienced staff is well below industry standards. The Labour Department is currently investigating claims that cleaners at

Gateway are paid less than the minimum wage.

During the first days of the lockout, Gateway management brought in workers from a neighbouring hotel in a clear breach of the employment law. The employer has also threatened to "restructure" and contract out kitchen and restaurant work. Police have been called to the picket on a daily basis and on August 16 a number of workers were issued with trespass notices.

Air Tahiti Nui workers threaten strike over drugs probe

Two unions representing workers at French Polynesian airline Air Tahiti Nui have threatened to go on strike after 20 percent of the airline's employees were suspended amid a police drug probe. The union claims that the airline management has used abusive procedures against the workers targeted by a police investigation into the alleged importation and use of illegal drugs.

About 100 employees had been questioned as part of the investigation and 33 of them are due to appear in the criminal court in Papeete in September. The airline says it has put in place disciplinary measures which staff fear will result in sackings. The unions have accused the airline of acting in haste and ignoring workers' right to the presumption of innocence.

New Caledonia resort workers continue strike

Workers at the Ouvéa Paradise resort hotel in New Caledonia have been on strike since August 17. Cooks, chambermaids and administration personnel stopped work to oppose the dismissal of a member of the kitchen staff who allegedly removed a meal from the premises.

A delegation of employees appealed to management to drop the dismissal, saying it was a disproportionate penalty. The Japanese owners of the hotel, however, insisted on going ahead. Most of remaining staff walked out and began picketing the hotel's front entrance. Subsequent discussions between management and representatives of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) have failed to resolve the issue.



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