

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 September 2007

## Asia

### Hong Kong construction strike enters fifth week

About a dozen striking metalworkers clashed violently with 100 police on September 5 when they tried to enter a construction site to persuade non-striking workers to join them. Over 1,000 bar-benders from 100 sites around Hong Kong have joined the strike, which began on August 8 for improved wages and conditions.

On September 2, 700 strikers, members of the Hong Kong Construction Industry Bar-Bending Workers' Union, and their supporters converged on the SAR Government Headquarters chanting slogans accusing construction contractors of "lacking sincerity" in negotiations.

The workers have lowered their pay demand from \$HK950 (\$US122) per day to \$900, but employers are refusing to budge from their original offer of \$850, backdated from August 1, and an increase to \$950 in August next year. The bar-benders, who have not had a pay rise for 10 years, also want an eight-hour working day.

The Confederation of Trade Unions has established an emergency fund of \$600,000 to aid the workers and distributed \$300,000 to more than 990 strikers.

### Hong Kong social workers strike for equal pay

Around 4,000 social workers and NGO (non-government organisation) employees struck for four hours on September 5 demanding the government increase subsidies and review its lump-sum grant system so that wages can be brought in line with government workers in the Social Welfare Department.

In 1999, the government cut \$70 million in subsidies to NGOs and in 2001 introduced a lump-sum system that was meant to reduce pay differences. The grant, however, has not kept step with increasing costs and the average salary gap between NGO and government social workers is around HK\$5,767 (US\$739) a month. Some workers have not received a pay rise since the grant system was introduced.

Hong Kong Labour and Welfare Secretary Matthew Cheung Kin-chung has rejected workers' demands but claims that he will establish a Lump Sum Grant Steering Committee to "explore more efficiencies."

### Hyundai autoworkers union agrees to compromise

South Korea's Hyundai Motor Corporation and its autoworkers union in Ulsan reached agreement over wages and working conditions on September 4. The company made the decision a few days after its 38,000-strong workforce voted for strike action.

The union's original demand was for an 8.9 percent wage rise

with a bonus increase of 800 percent of monthly wages, up from the current 700 percent, and an extension of the retirement age to 60 from 58. The tentative deal offers a 6 percent wage rise, a 750 percent bonus, retirement age extended to 59, and 30 shares to all union members plus an additional 100 percent incentive if employees accept the agreement without further negotiations. The workers are yet to vote on the deal.

### Police attack Indian teachers' protest

On September 4, police forcibly removed a group of protesting teachers outside the residence of Education Minister Dr. Upinderjit Kaur at Kapathala. The teachers, who are from Sarv Shiksha Abhiyaan, began their sit-down protest two days earlier to demand employment regularisation.

Subdivision magistrate Gurpreet Singh Khaira declared the protest illegal and ordered the police to remove the teachers after they refused to disperse.

Teachers' union president Ishwar Das said union members would march to a planned state-level function to commemorate Teachers' Day.

### Nepal postal workers apply bans

Postal Service Department employees in Nepal held a national "pen down" strike on August 30 over various of demands. Nepal Civil Servants' Union members want existing management changed and the provision of professional welfare measures for workers.

In a separate dispute, sacked employees of Nepal Drinking Water Corporation launched a 24-hour hunger strike protest on August 30 at the corporation's central office at Tripureshwor in Katmandu, to demand reinstatement.

### Sri Lankan teachers' work bans in third week

Hundreds of Sri Lankan teachers are boycotting the marking of recently concluded General Certificate of Advanced Level (university entrance) exam papers to demand the government rectify outstanding salary anomalies and to increase teachers' pay by around 3,000 to 4,000 rupees (US\$25-35) per month.

The teachers began the boycott on August 20 in more than 33 exam marking centres around the country. Despite government threats and intimidation the teachers have vowed to maintain their industrial action until their demands are satisfied.

### Australia and the Pacific

#### Hospital workers ordered to lift work bans

Public hospital support workers in Western Australia have defied an Industrial Relations Court (IRC) order and voted this week to maintain work bans for a 6 percent wage rise over three years. The

bans are causing disruptions and cancellations of elective surgery at hospitals across the state.

Around 5,000 workers, who are members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) and include cleaners, caterers, patient-care assistants, security staff and orderlies, are refusing to remove rubbish and change dirty linen.

Workers want an immediate \$60 per week pay rise followed by increases of \$30 per week in the second and third years of a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Many earn less than \$35,000 (US\$30,100) per year and have been severely affected by the rising cost of living in Western Australia caused by the resources boom.

The government's latest offer attempts to split employees by offering an initial increase of \$52 per week for level 3 and 4 workers (mainly orderlies, patient care assistants and sterilisation technicians) and \$42 per week increase for level 1 and 2 workers (cleaners and catering staff).

#### **Ambulance officers suspend work bans**

A meeting of 500 ambulance officers in Sydney on August 31 rejected a new pay offer from the New South Wales government but agreed to lift work bans during the APEC summit. Health Services Union assistant secretary Peter Mylan said the pay offer was an insult and would leave the officers \$88 per week worse off.

The meeting accepted a state government offer to include the state's 3,000 ambulance workers in a new death and disability scheme. Ambulance workers were previously denied access to the scheme, which covers all emergency services personnel.

The officers voted to replace their "no paperwork" bans with a four-week community campaign culminating in a march from Martin Place in Sydney to the state parliament. Their grievances will be heard by a full bench of the Industrial Relations Commission on September 21.

#### **Canberra cleaners hold protest march**

Office cleaners in Canberra marched on September 3 to demand better pay and conditions. It was part of the Liquor Hospitality Miscellaneous Union's "Clean Start: Fair Deal For Cleaners" national campaign, which was launched 18 months ago.

The cleaners want at least 20 hours work and a minimum of \$400 per week, more full-time jobs with a living wage and a fair workload for all cleaners. LHMU National Secretary Louise Tarrant said cleaners' wages were so low that many were forced to work two or three part-time jobs.

Central business district cleaners in all Australian capital cities met on September 4 to launch the next stage in their campaign.

#### **NZ teachers union in last-minute pay talks**

The union covering over 15,000 New Zealand secondary school teachers met with the Education Ministry last week in a last-ditch attempt to stave off a strike that will close schools across the country. The agreement by the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) to resume negotiations came after teachers voted to strike on September 12 if the government did not improve its pay offer.

Two weeks ago the PPTA rejected a three-year offer that would see a 4 percent increase in the first year, followed by 3.25 percent and 3 percent in successive years. The PPTA then lodged a new one-year claim centring on a 7.5 percent pay increase over one year. This would bring the actual salary of entry-level teachers

with bachelor degrees and one-year of teacher training from \$40,586 to \$43,629. Under the new claim a head of department would move from \$68,323 to a salary of \$74,922.

Other demands include smaller class sizes, increased staffing, more non-teaching time during the school day, and extra funding for middle management in schools and professional development. The last time teachers took industrial action, in 2001 and 2002, the dispute persisted for nearly 16 months.

#### **Workers strike at PNG gold mine**

Gold mining operations on Lihir Island in Papua New Guinea (PNG) remained shut this week as 3,500 workers continued strike action which began on August 31. The PNG government flew heavily armed police to the island to guard Lihir Gold Ltd (LGL) assets.

Passenger aircraft were grounded after landowners closed down the island's Londolovit airport in support of the strike and a PNG industrial registrar team was forced to fly into Lihir by a helicopter to initiate negotiations between the company and workers' representatives.

Workers have vowed to remain on strike until a range of issues, including jobs, wages and the employment of local workers, are settled.

#### **New Caledonia mine workers strike**

Nickel workers at New Caledonia's SLN (Societe Le Nickel) mining company and the Doniambo smelter in Noumea walked off the job on August 31 over various grievances, including employment rights and working conditions, which remain unresolved following extended strike in 2006.

A spokesperson for the Federation of New Caledonian Workers Union (CSTNC) said that the company cared more about its public relations appearance than for the security of its personnel. The union has been seeking an acceleration of recent contract negotiations.



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