

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 October 2007

Asia

Steel workers beaten by company thugs in China

On September 26, thugs hired by the Fuxin steel mill attacked over 1,000 workers and their families demonstrating at the factory gate. Workers were protesting the delay of a payment of more than 20 million renminbi (\$US2.6 million) promised by the government to build workers homes.

Employees later marched on Changjiang Road in the city centre following a rumour that two workers who had been beaten in the attack had died. Many residents joined the demonstration swelling the numbers to several thousand. Protestors refused to disperse until city officials promised they would deal with the delayed payments as quickly as possible.

The steel workers were transferred to the Tongling Fuxin mill from another factory after the mills' new owner expanded the Tongling operation. More than a thousand employees paid the Tongling City local government over 20 million RMB to build accommodation at the new location. Construction of the living quarters, however, is yet to begin.

Foreign teachers in Japan hold street rally

On September 26, 50 foreign teachers employed by the Japanese company Nova to teach English rallied in Osaka demanding the payment of outstanding wages and calling for the resignation of the company's CEO. Problems with the payment of teachers' and trainees' wages began after June, when the Japanese Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry ordered Nova to suspend part of its business because of misleading advertising.

Many of the teachers have received eviction notices because money deducted from their salaries to pay rents was not passed on to landlords. Nova employs about 5,000 teachers from Australia. Many are refusing to work until they are paid.

It is anticipated Nova will close about 200 of the 900 schools it operates across Japan due to its financial position, making hundreds of teachers redundant.

Pakistani municipal workers seek pay increases

Sanitation staff at Nawabshah taluka Municipal Council went on strike on September 26 for improved wages and conditions. Within two days of the strike beginning, city garbage dumps began to fill up while rotten garbage lay in streets and market places posing serious health risks.

The workers, who are currently paid 3,000 rupees, want the official minimum wage of 4,600 rupees and are demanding permanency for casuals, many of whom have worked for council for more than a decade. They also oppose the authority's decision

to stop funding scholarships for council workers' children.

Pakistani information officers demand action on promotions

Information officers, including assistant directors and assistant information officers, in Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province began an indefinite strike on September 24. They are demanding the government act on long outstanding staff promotions. On September 24, the Action Committee of the Information Officers Association held a press conference in the Media Centre in Peshawar and condemned the administration's delaying tactics.

Indian telecommunication employees on work-to-rule

Telecommunication employees Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) in India will begin a work-to-rule on October 10 for a seven-point charter of demands. The charter calls for a 5,000 rupee (\$US131) interim relief payment because the government has failed to announce a pay revision, which is due every 10 years.

They are also demanding measures to improve services, including an increase in free landline calls, an extension of cell-phone provision and the launching of a 3G facility for BSNL-controlled cell phone services. A resolution supporting the campaign was unanimously adopted at the fourth district conference of the National Federation of Telecom Employees held in Nagercoil in the southern state of Tamilnadu on September 28.

The workers also want a voluntary retirement scheme to be withdrawn. BSNL currently employs 325,000, including 60,000 officers, but management has offered voluntary retirement to 20,000 workers. The staff cut will drive up the already heavy existing workloads. In the past, there were 116 employees to maintain 1,000 telephones but now there are only 6 to do the same work.

Sri Lankan health workers demand more doctors

All doctors and health staff at the Teaching Hospital in the war-ravaged eastern city of Batticaloa demonstrated outside the hospital on September 25 bringing services to a standstill. They were protesting the shortage of doctors. The hospital has only five doctors although 27 are required.

Medical officers at the Teaching Hospital in Jaffna were due to strike for four hours on September 28 over a 52-doctor shortfall at the hospital. There currently only 19. The hospital is a major medical centre and covers the entire northern region of the country. The Government Medical Officers Association called off the action at the last minute, however, after the Minister of Health Nimal Siripala de Silva promised to provide 20 new doctors.

Sri Lankan cemetery workers strike

Around 80 workers employed at the four urban cemeteries in and

around Colombo went on strike on September 25 against the withdrawal of overtime pay. The strike disrupted funerals, cremations and burials at Borella, Madampitiya, Kirulapona and Jawatte cemeteries.

The Colombo Municipal Council cut the payments, claiming that budget allocations were inadequate. Workers say overtime and night work is necessary to maintain the cemeteries. The main cemetery in Borella has 50 acres of land but there are only 30 maintenance workers. There are currently 30 unfilled staff vacancies, including 10 for watchmen.

In a separate dispute, cooperative inspectors picketed Colombo's main railway station on October 1st over salary anomalies. The inspectors are members of the Trade Union Alliance of the Cooperative Inspectors.

Indonesian workers seal off communications tower

On October 3, building workers in Donggala regency in central Sulawesi took direct action sealing off access to a newly-constructed telecommunications tower owned by PT Telkomsel.

PT Thiess Contractors Indonesia who had been hired to build the tower had failed to pay the workers. One worker told *Jakarta Post*, "We finished the Palolo tower in August but Theiss has not paid us yet so we have decided to seal off the tower by padlocking it until the company pays us."

Australia and the Pacific

Brewery workers strike for collective agreement

Hundreds of workers at Fosters Brewery in Yatala, Queensland walked out on October 5 over management's refusal to negotiate collective work agreements. Yatala is the largest of Foster's three Australian facilities.

The strike includes members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union. Workers rejected a company proposal for a non-union agreement in a company-controlled ballot on September 3.

An ETU spokesman accused the company of using the Howard government's federal IR laws to impose individual work contracts. Another strike is scheduled for October 10.

Nurses face fines if strikes go ahead

The Australian Nursing Federation in Victoria has scheduled a stop-work membership meeting for October 16 to discuss industrial action in support of an 18 percent pay increase over three years. The state Labor government has only offered 3.25 percent annually and wants to tie nurses to a five-year agreement. It is demanding productivity and efficiency gains.

The union's decision to call meetings came after the Industrial Relations Commission this week rejected a union application to conduct a secret ballot for strike action. The ANF wants to negotiate a single agreement for all nurses in public hospitals and another agreement for those in mental health facilities. Such agreements are deemed "multi-employer agreements" and are illegal under Howard's WorkChoices industrial relations laws.

An ANF spokesperson said that federal laws made it "all but impossible to pursue common wages and conditions for nurses, even though they do the same work in each hospital". If nurses decide to take industrial action, they face individual fines of \$6,000.

Postal workers endorse strike action

Postal workers have endorsed national industrial action, including 24- and 48-hour rolling strikes in a campaign for better pay and conditions. The vote was taken last week after prolonged negotiations between the Communications Workers Union (CWU) and Australia Post failed to resolve key sticking points.

The workers are demanding an improved wage offer, job security and the resolution of penalty rate problems affecting postal delivery officers. They also want an independent body to oversee the new work agreement. Australia Post says it has offered an immediate 4 percent pay rise, increasing to 12 percent over two-and-a-half years.

The CWU executive is due to meet on October 5 to discuss the campaign but there are already signs the union is working to contain industrial action. CWU spokesman Cameron Thiele told media this week that industrial action could include consumers being able to send items through the post for free "rather than strike action".

New Zealand port workers begin rolling strikes

About 265 dock workers at Port Auckland, New Zealand's largest port, walked off the job for 48 hours on October 2 in the first of a series of rolling strikes to be held over the next two weeks in support of a wage rise. The strikers picketed the Axis Bledisloe and Axis Fergusson terminals.

The Maritime Union is seeking a 4.9 percent pay increase plus allowances, including an extra week's holiday. Port management has refused to negotiate and has offered a 3.25 percent pay rise but will not backdate the increase. It claimed a 4.9 percent wage rise would add 10 to 15 percent to costs.

Workers will meet early next week to discuss further strike action planned for October 9 and 17. Trucking companies doubt they will be able to clear the container backlog at the port before the next strike.

Solomon Island nurses threaten to strike

Nurses across the Solomon Islands are determined to begin industrial action after a 28-day strike notice issued to the government expires at midday on October 4. While negotiations between the government and the Solomon Islands Nurses Association (SINA) over allowances and other conditions have been ongoing, the issues have not been resolved.

Honiara Town Council Nurses Association president Moses Karuni said his members and nurses throughout the provinces are prepared to strike if the government fails to meet their demands.



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