Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 October 2007

Asia

Sri Lankan power workers on sick-note campaign

More than 14,000 power workers at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) began a sick note campaign on October 10, refusing to report to work despite the government cancelling all leave. Several thousand gathered outside the company's Colombo headquarters. The workers want a 7,500 rupee ($US65) pay rise, or 20 percent, and an allowance to compensate for increases in the cost of living.

They are also demanding annual salary increments, instead of once ever three years, a total of five salary increments and a daily supply of five units of electricity free of charge for employees.

In a separate dispute, workers from the Colombo Municipal Council (CMC) picketed the Colombo Town Hall on October 10 protesting a cut in overtime pay and the outsourcing of work to private contractors. They accused the CMC administration of engaging in waste and corruption.

Sri Lankan television workers defend rights

Workers at the National Television Corporation picketed the company's office complex on October 2. They are demanding the reinstatement of four journalists who were promised increased salaries and then sent on compulsory leave. Journalists belonging to five other associations joined the campaign.

Workers at the protest told media that they were fighting against the suppression of their rights and the oppression of trade unions inside the corporation and would continue their struggle.

Sri Lankan agricultural workers protest

Department of Agriculture workers picketed the Ministry of Agriculture on October 3, demanding the filling of vacant posts. While the department had conducted interviews to recruit suitable people, no one has been appointed. When a representative of the workers attempted to enter the building to present a memorandum to the minister, police blocked his way.

In a separate dispute concerning staffing, around 19,000 postal workers imposed a boycott of overtime from October 8. The workers claim there are around 22,000 vacancies inside the department.

Indian bank workers demonstrate for overdue wages

Around 400 employees from 120 Krishnagiri district Primary Agricultural Cooperative Banks in the southern state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated on October 8. They are demanding the state government pay salaries outstanding for the last four months.

They also called on the government to allocate adequate funds to cooperative banks needed to stabilise their financial position because the non-recovery of various loans has placed the banks under severe strain. These include a waver of crop loans that have impacted on the payment of bank employees' wages, particularly in Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri districts.

Indian power workers demand employment regularisation

Temporary workers at Chamundeswari Electricity Supply Corporation (CESC), a subsidiary of Karnataka Power Transmission Corporation Ltd, held a sit-down protest in front of the Deputy Commissioner's office in Hassan in Karnataka on October 5. They want the regularisation of employment for temporary gang-men. The workers submitted a memorandum stating they had been employed as temporaries since May 2005.

Indian transport workers protest for wages and conditions

Workers at the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) began a protest campaign in various parts of the state on October 4 for a slate of demands. These include changing the length of wage agreements to three years, a 30 percent pay increase, an increment based on 3 percent of basic wages and a uniform salary system for all employees. They also called for the streamlining of the current pension scheme and promotion based on seniority.

Workers in Vellore and Tiruvannamalai held a 36-hour fasting protest outside the TNSTC depot in Krishna Nagar. In Salem, protesting TNSTC workers also demanded an immediate 25 percent bonus for all employees, including those on contract and daily-wage basis. The workers are members of the Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation Employees Union.

Indian municipal workers demand permanency

Municipal sanitary workers in Kurnool, Andhra Pradesh, protested on October 4 against non-payment of wages for four months. Some symbolically held begging bowls to highlight their situation.

In a separate dispute, class IV workers employed by the government on a daily wage and part-time basis held a sit-down protest in Hyderabad on October 3 to demand permanency. They warned that they would step up the campaign if the government failed to act.

Pakistani power workers demand bonuses

Workers from the Water and Power Development Authority's Hydro Electric Corporation demonstrated in Swabi on October 3. They were protesting the non-payment of a special Eid (festival) grant to employee and essential commodity price increases.

Workers pointed out that prices had increased dramatically during the month of Ramazan (Ramadan) without any attempt by the authorities to control them. They also allege they did not received extra payment for work performed on off-days.

On the same day, Peshawar Electric Supply Company (PESCO) employees demonstrated in Mardan demanding a special Eid package and in opposition to the privatisation of the Bahader Feeder in Peshawar. They are also concerned about price increases.

The workers plan to hold a pen-down strike and demonstrate across the province if their demands are not met. PESCO provides power distribution to over two million consumers in Pakistan's North

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Western Frontier Province.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers demand factories re-open

Workers laid-off from the Alim Jute Mills and Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills in the Khulna industrial belt conducted a sit-in protest from September 22 to demand the payment of wages arrears and other entitlements.

Alim Jute Mills and Carpet Backing Cloth (CBC), a section of Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills, laid-off workers last September after management alleged the factories faced a severe financial crisis. While workers are fighting for outstanding entitlements they are also demanding the factories reopen.

South Korean hospital staff strike against restructure

On October 10, unionised workers at the Seoul National University Hospital in Jongno in central Seoul and Boramae Hospital in Dongjak went on strike after negotiations with administrators over a planned restructure broke down. While emergency services at the hospitals were maintained, long queues formed as patients waited for hours for non-emergency treatment.

The workers are opposing the restructure and want an increase in the number of nursing staff and permanency for temporary workers.

Hong Kong fast-food workers protest over wages

Members of the Catering and Hotels Industries Employees General Union on October 5 protested at various Tsim sha Tsui fast-food restaurants calling on the government to establish a minimum hourly wage of $HK30 ($US3.87).

Cleaners are currently the highest paid workers in the fast-food industry receiving $HK25.10 an hour. Most other workers are paid between $18 and $20. KFC pays the lowest hourly wage of just $16.18. The union is also accusing KFC of limiting workers' hours to 17 a week or making them take a week off after every three weeks of work to avoid breaching labour laws.

Australia and the Pacific

Fire-fighters strike over pay deal

More than 1,000 fire-fighters marched through the streets of Melbourne on October 10 demanding the Victorian Labor state government sign off on a new workplace enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA).

The workers claim that more than 600 professional fire-fighters from the Country Fire Authority are still without a new EBA despite negotiations with the state government going back to 2005.

A United Firefighters Union spokesperson claimed that with the state's summer forest fire season approaching the outstanding pay deal needed to be resolved because fire-fighters would be asked to risk their lives while working under poor conditions.

Brewery workers continue strike action

About 295 workers at Fosters' Yatala brewery in Queensland walked off the job for four hours on October 10. The stoppage is the second in a week and part of a series of four rolling stoppages planned in a campaign for a new wages and conditions agreement. The strike affected two shifts at the brewery, which is just south of Brisbane.

A spokesperson for the Electrical Trades Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union and the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union said industrial action would continue if agreement is not reached soon. According to recent media reports, Fosters has now made a new offer.

Statistics New Zealand staff take industrial action

Workers at Statistics NZ are taking industrial action because the department continues to reject key claims after 12-days of negotiations that began in June. The more than 540 Statistics NZ staff have banned overtime.

The ban will continue until the department agrees to negotiate what the Public Service Association (PSA) termed "a fair and just settlement". While government departments are required to negotiate minimum pay rates and include these in collective employment agreements, Statistics NZ insists that it will determine pay rates.

The PSA is also demanding the retention of extra leave currently provided to staff with five or more years service and is opposing the department paying field interviewers who gather statistical information in people's homes up to $4.40 an hour less than those who do interviews by phone. The union claims Statistics NZ treats its field interviewers as second class employees. It calls for all staff to be employed under the State Sector Act and be covered by a single collective agreement with common core provisions.

Ports of Auckland workers continue strikes

Maritime workers at the Ports of Auckland stopped work on October 3 for 3.25 hours in support of a pay claim of between 4.5 and 4.9 percent. About 250 port workers struck for two days the previous week, stranding two container ships in port and forcing several others to bypass Auckland. The Maritime Union has given notice of further rolling stoppages on October 17 and 22.

The Ports of Auckland filed an application with the Employment Relations Authority for facilitated collective bargaining after efforts to reach a settlement with the assistance of an independent Department of Labour mediator and a Council of Trade Unions-appointed facilitator failed. A union spokesman said negotiations with the company were "ongoing" but management had yet to make the "head shift" required for a resolution.

The Port Company has continued to make unauthorised payments into workers' bank accounts of a 3.25 percent pay increase decided by management. Workers' demands include full back pay from November 30, 2006 and a "no cost" claim for a collective agreement for a small group of planner/supervisors and cargo officers.

American Samoa teachers strike

The first ever strike by American Samoa public school teachers took place on October 9 when a group of teachers from the Utulei Beach area walked out for half a day. They were protesting the failure of the administration to approve a bill to increase teachers' salaries.

The American Samoan governor said a new funding source must be identified to pay for the salary hikes, something which the pending bill does not address. The strike was organised by the watchdog group Common Cause. The public school system employs more than 1,000 teachers, none of whom are unionised.

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