

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 November 2007

Asia

Japanese workers strike at US bases

Thousands of support workers at US military bases across Japan went on strike for half a day this week over a planned cut in pay and benefits. Under a bilateral agreement with the US the Japanese government pays the workers but is now seeking to cut costs.

The cleaning, restaurant and maintenance workers are facing a 10 percent pay cut. The walkout is the first strike since 1991. A union spokesman said the strike showed that workers “would not accept one-sided changes to their working conditions”. About 50,000 US military personnel are stationed in bases across Japan.

Nickel workers strike for pay

Around 500 workers at PT International Nickel Indonesia (PT Inco) in Sorowako on the Indonesian island of Sulawesi remain on strike after walking out on November 15. They are demanding higher bonuses and salary increases. PT Inco is owned by Brazil's Companhia Vale do Rio Doce.

Last year the company produced 71,700 tonnes of matte, which is used in stainless steel production. Its nine-month net profit was up fourfold to \$972.55 million compared to \$247.91 million for the same period last year. The workers are members of the Labor Union FSP-KEP UK PT Inco.

Indian bank workers demand improved conditions

Workers at seven Cooperative Central Banks (CCB) in the Indian state of Orissa went on strike on November 16 to demand an end to disparity in CCB pay scales, 50 percent of the Dearness Allowance to be incorporated into the basic pay, bonuses and other benefits.

The workers also decided to boycott the “cooperative week celebrations”. Cooperative Central Bank employees in Berhampur also went on strike and held a sit-down protest outside the bank. They chanted slogans condemning the government for neglecting the cooperative banking sector.

Midday meal workers demand minimum wage

Andhra Pradesh midday meal workers marched to the Collector's office in Sangareddy on November 19 to demand the minimum wage and for equal status with industrial workers. The 6,250 cooks and helpers working in

2,500 schools across the district are denied the minimum wage.

Workers demanded that the state government stop handing over the provision of school meals to non-governmental organisations. A workers' spokesman said that 50,000 schools across the state did not have cooking sheds and at least half did not have adequate drinking water facilities. He pointed out that 80 percent of the state's schools did not have electrical power and accommodation at 3,500 schools is privately owned.

Sri Lankan hospital workers protest victimisation

Administration workers in public hospitals in Sri Lanka went on strike on November 20. They were protesting against a new Health Ministry transfer scheme that opens the way for the political victimisation of employees.

The scheme was used to transfer a union president from Hambantota to Batticaloa. Workers allege that the transfer was politically motivated and done to undermine union work at the site. A ministry spokesman warned that employees would be placed on unpaid leave for any days they failed to report for work.

Australia and the Pacific

Hunter Valley coal miners strike over wage agreement

Thirty-five coal miners from Bengalla pit, near Muswellbrook in New South Wales' Hunter Valley, walked out on a 48-hour strike on November 22 over a new wage deal. Bengalla mine is owned by Coal and Allied.

While the current Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs) at the mine has expired Coal and Allied is refusing to negotiate a collective agreement, claiming that most workers at the mine have accepted a company agreement.

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union representatives, however, have issued a statement pointing out that the company has refused to negotiate with the union.

Teachers strike for pay and conditions

Over 25,000 teachers in the Australian state of Victoria walked off the job for 24 hours on November 21 to demand improved wages and working conditions.

The teachers, who held a 10,000-strong mass meeting and marched through Melbourne, the Victorian state capital,

want a 30 percent wage increase over three years, reduced class sizes and improved career opportunities. The mass meeting passed an official union resolution endorsing another 24 hour strike on February 14 to be followed by four-hour rolling regional stoppages later in Term One.

The state Labor government is offering a 3.2 percent a year base increase with any greater amount offset by “productivity trade-offs”. Victorian teachers are the lowest paid in the country, earning between \$46,127 and \$65,414 a year compared to NSW teachers who earn \$72,454. Teachers in Western Australia earn \$71,067.

Rest-home workers stop work

Some 600 nurses, caregivers and support staff employed by Eldercare rest homes stopped work for two hours on November 19 over low pay and staffing issues. Stop-work meetings were held in Auckland, Paeroa, Whitianga, Tauranga, Taupo, Hastings, Taranaki, Palmerston North, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch, Dunedin and Invercargill. The workers are members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO).

A SFWU spokesperson said low wages and Eldercare’s reluctance to invest in staff training and support were symptomatic of an industry-wide problem. As many as one in three caregivers were only paid the minimum wage.

The spokesperson said that the unions had been trying to negotiate collective agreements with Eldercare for over a year and described the progress as “pathetic”. The stop-works were timed to coincide with a High Court application by major employers challenging a recent government funding initiative that set a new minimum wage of \$12.55.

Striking NZ laundry workers face lockout

On November 20, 45 members of the Service and Food Workers Union employed in two AlSCO NZ owned laundries in Invercargill and Dunedin went on strike. The company has refused to negotiate a collective agreement covering both laundry sites and threatened to lock workers out unless they agree to accept two separate agreements and separate pay offers.

This is the first time workers at AlSCO have struck in support of a claim. Lawyers for the SFWU are seeking an injunction in the Employment Court in Wellington to stop the company’s lockout plans.

Air NZ engineering workers stop over contract

Air New Zealand engineering workers held a series of stop-work meetings to discuss a campaign for the renewal of the Engineering Collective Agreement. An EPMU spokesman said members wanted “recognition of their contribution in turning the business around”.

In 2006 Air NZ threatened to outsource its Engineering division at a cost of 600 jobs. The job cut was eventually reduced to 300 after the union brokered a deal accepting

substantial cuts to pay and conditions.

A union spokesman said it was looking for “a fair and decent increase” that recognises the workers’ contribution and that “bring terms and conditions up so we can stop the bleeding of staff overseas”. The Air NZ work agreement covers 700 workers in Auckland and Christchurch.

Striking doctors in Tahiti demand funding

On November 20, representatives of the French Polynesian government met a delegation from 140 striking physicians to discuss their grievances. The strike, launched last week, virtually shut hospital services in Tahiti, Raiatea and Nuku Hiva other than for emergency treatment.

The doctors contend that the growing demand for health services in the territory require increased government health funding. They have been joined by private doctors also concerned about the direction of the health care sector. Last week physicians marched through Papeete and rallied at the presidential palace.

Papua New Guinea power strike ends

Power workers in Papua New Guinea went back to work on November 15 after unions and government representatives reached an agreement. The dispute was over management and operational issues at PNG Power Limited. The two-day strike cut power to some urban centres including Port Moresby.

The company agreed to make available to the union a report on the issues in dispute after previously refusing to do so insisting it was not a public document. PNG Power agreed it would not take punitive action against workers for striking and would not make claims for against the union for damages.



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