

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 June 2008

Asia

Indian rubber plantation workers on strike

More than 1,200 workers at the Rehabilitation Plantation Limited (RPL) in Kerala went on strike on June 9. They are demanding a wage revision and a 26-day gratuity payment. The strikers marched to the RPL estate offices at Ayiranallur and Kulathupuzha and held a sit-down protest outside the Kulathupuzha office.

The daily wage of a Kerala rubber plantation worker is only 108 rupees (\$US3), which is less than in neighbouring states, and gratuity is only 15 days, whereas public sector plantation workers receive a 26-day gratuity. Rubber plantation workers' wages have not increased since 2002.

Indian truckers plan to strike over fuel costs and taxes

Over four million cargo haulage vehicles are expected to be pulled off the road on July 2 as drivers and operators begin an indefinite strike over rising diesel costs, hikes in road tolls and higher taxes. The strike has been called by the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC), which represents both small and large truck operators across the country.

The Indian government raised the retail price of petrol by about 10 percent this month but AIMTC chairman Singh Lohara said, "If we raise our charges, we will lose customers to the railways. If we don't, we will make a loss."

Indian telecom workers fight privatisation

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) workers held a lunch-hour demonstration on June 10 in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh, against government moves to allow the private sector to take telecom work.

The workers held a meeting after the demonstration and voted to fight against all private sector intrusion into the industry. The Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited

Employees Union organised the protest.

Sri Lankan building supply workers protest against closure

Workers locked-out by the government-owned Building Material Corporation (BMC) demonstrated outside the company's head office in central Colombo this week.

Workers allege that the government closed BMC on June 5 in response to their demand for a salary increase. They are threatening further protests if the government refuses to re-open the corporation.

Australia and the Pacific

Research staff protest over pay and budget cuts

Staff from the Australia's Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) held national lunchtime protests on June 13 over stalled negotiations for pay and working conditions.

The workers have rejected the federal government's 4 percent pay offer and voiced concern about cuts to merit-based promotions and redundancy arrangements, and the watering-down of provisions covering outsourcing and management accountability.

The protests are also in opposition to CSIRO management decisions to slash research following a \$63 million budget cut over four years by the Rudd Labor government. The cuts will reduce agricultural research and result in the closure of horticultural research laboratories in Merbein and Rockhampton.

A spokesman for the staff association said the "Black Friday" protest was to "send a strong message to the CSIRO executive that they must start valuing staff and the contribution they make to science", especially in vital areas such as "food security, global warming and the water crisis".

Tasmanian government pay offer below inflation

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) announced this week that its members will vote over

the next two weeks on the Tasmanian Labor government's latest pay offer. The CPSU is one of several public sector unions covering 18,000 workers demanding pay parity with their counterparts in other states.

The CPSU is proceeding with the vote even though the government's offer of 14 percent over four years is well below the unions' original claim of 20 percent over three years and less than the current 4.2 percent inflation rate.

Public sector workers began imposing various bans on May 19, including refusing to work unpaid overtime, an amnesty on most library fines and free entry to national parks.

South Australian teachers to strike in pay dispute

South Australian public school teachers will strike for 24 hours on June 17 in support of a 21 percent pay rise over three years. The state Labor government is offering only 9.75 percent over the same period.

The South Australian government has applied to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) to block the strike but the Australian Education Union (AEU) said union members would defy any IRC order preventing the action—the first 24-hour strike by teachers since 1996.

An AEU spokesperson said the government offer was “not a professionally-competitive salary” and teachers “had backing from parents and students”.

In a separate dispute this week, 44 doctors employed in the accident and emergency sections of South Australian public hospitals gave two weeks' notice of resignation over their pay dispute with the state government.

The government has offered to increase annual salaries to \$355,000 but the doctors, members of the Salaried Medical Officers Association, want \$424,000 a year.

Auckland airport workers strike over conditions

Two dozen workers at Auckland Airport's food court staged a lightning strike June 7 to protest working conditions. The strikers marched through the food court shouting their demands and were applauded by travellers. Management and airport security tried unsuccessfully to silence the strikers.

The workers want a pay increase, security of hours for long-serving staff and improved work breaks. Employees are told when to start but not given a set

finishing time and can be required to work for between one and ten hours. They were previously working up to seven hours without a break. Many long-serving employees who work between 38 to 40 hours a week do not have permanent positions.

The food court is a joint venture between HMSC, a global corporation, and Auckland International Airport. Pay negotiations with the Unite union are continuing.

New Zealand public sector union lifts strike action

Threatened strike action by 750 New Zealand Department of Labour employees over various pay claims was lifted last week after the Public Service Association (PSA) began negotiations with the department. The staff had voted to take action during a series of meetings last month. Border security officers, health and safety inspectors, labour inspectors and industrial mediators were due to begin a series of two-hour strikes.

A PSA spokesman said the strike notices were lifted after “some progress” was made during negotiations. Workers want an improved pay offer and an end to the current pay-setting system, which the union claims is “confusing, inconsistent and unfair”. Notices for two-hour strikes remain in place for June 16 with new notices issued for similar action from June 17-19.

Cinema workers in NZ walk out over pay

Workers at SkyCity's WestCity Shopping Town cinema in West Auckland walked off the job on June 11 and established a picket line to demand that their hourly rate be increased to \$13.10 after two years service. While some workers at WestCity are paid \$12.20 the majority receive no more than the legal minimum wage of \$11.25. At the same time there are no guaranteed weekly working hours.

The Unite union has called on cinema patrons not to buy food from the company's confectionery stands until the cinema chain meets employees' demands. SkyCity is the largest cinema operator in New Zealand. Further protests and strikes are planned at its 19 cinemas throughout the country.



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