

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 June 2008

Asia

Indian apparel strike continues

A strike by nearly 2,500 female apparel workers at two garment factories, Leela Scottish Lace and Maryan Apparel, in Thiruvananthapuram, the south Indian state of Kerala, is continuing. The walkout began last week after the company refused to increase workers' pay.

The average monthly salary of a garment worker is 2,175 rupees (\$US62) while a helper receives 2,020 rupees. The owners claim that the strike is illegal because employees did not give the required mandatory notice. Workers, however, have pledged to continue the strike until they get a pay increase.

Indian municipality workers walk out over pay

Around 2,100 council workers or pourakarmikas at the Mysore City Corporation (MCC) in Karnataka walked off the job on June 16 to demand a pay rise and regularisation of employment. They also want special training for underground drainage work, annual provision of safety gear and new uniforms and a 2,000-rupee bonus.

The strike involves those involved in underground drainage work and garbage removal. Garbage has been left uncleared and continues to pile up in the city.

Strikers denounced council officials and held a sit-down protest outside MCC offices. One worker said: "We have been given false assurances in the past and successive governments have taken us for granted though our work ensures a healthy and clean environment for the public."

Nearly 28,000 pourakarmikas are employed on a contract basis in various city corporations and town municipalities across the state.

Indian power workers demonstrate

Kerala State Electricity Board employees demonstrated on June 11 to demand that the state government repeal its 2003 Electricity Act and abandon moves to corporatise the electricity board. Workers protested in Thiruvananthapuram, Kochi and Kozhikode.

In a separate dispute, more than a 1,000 contract workers from the Orissa Primary Education Programme Authority demonstrated in Bhubaneswar, Orissa on June 11 demanding job security.

Sri Lankan medical practitioners strike for allowance

Around 1,550 assistant and registered medical practitioners in Sri Lankan hospitals went on strike on June 16 demanding a 5,000-rupee living expense allowance (\$US46.45). They began a work-to-rule on June 1 but received no response from the government.

Strikers rallied outside the Ministry of Health in central Colombo on June 16 to highlight their dispute. Around 997 hospitals, mostly provincial hospitals and state-owned dispensaries, are affected by the strike.

In a separate dispute, nurses at the country's only cancer hospital in

Maharagama, on the outskirts of Colombo, began boycotting radiotherapy work on June 16. They want proper training, safety equipment and a risk allowance. Nurses allege that they are exposed to various illnesses because they work with radioactive chemicals and equipment.

Sri Lankan public sector engineers demand duty-free car permits

Engineers at the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board launched a work-to-rule campaign on June 13 demanding that the government reinstate permits allowing government professional to import duty-free cars.

The government previously issued duty-free car permits to government professionals, such as administrators, medical doctors, and university lecturers, who could not afford a car. The permits were a concession in order to keep professionals in the government service. Imported cars normally attract a 200 percent tax.

The Sri Lankan government, however, recently stopped issuing duty-free certificates, to employees in most sectors including engineering. Engineers in other government corporations, such as Ceylon Electricity Board, are also threatening to strike over the same issue.

Korean truckers end seven-day strike

Over 13,000 truck drivers, members of the Korea Cargo Workers Union (KCWU), began returning to work on June 18, after reaching a tentative deal with freight owners and container transportation companies on haulage rates.

The truckers—mostly owner-drivers—struck on June 13 demanding a 30 percent increase in haulage rates to cover the skyrocketing price of diesel. The strike had reduced the movement of containers through South Korea's ports to around 10 percent at a cost of \$US4.3 billion.

On the fifth round of negotiations the KCWU struck a compromise with the Container Transportation and Container Yard Operators' Association for a 19 percent rise in transport charges, far short of the trucker's original demand.

The government earlier tried to head-off the strike, offering to allocate 270 billion won (\$US262 million) to truckers to buy excess trucks, help convert diesel engines to liquefied natural gas, and allow commercial vehicles to use the nation's highways cheaply.

The KCWU rejected the government's offer saying there were still three key conditions: increased diesel fuel subsidies, a guaranteed minimum wage and recognition of truckers' full labour rights.

Yamaha workers in Vietnam end pay strike

About 800 workers at the Yamaha Motor Parts Manufacturing Vietnam Company in Hanoi ended a four-day strike on June 14 after management threatened to terminate their contracts if the strike continued. The company refused to address employees' demands until they returned to work.

The workers only receive a monthly salary of 1.05 million dong (\$US63) and want a 20 percent pay rise to cover increases in the cost of living. They also want the company to increase spending on workers' lunches from 13,000 dong to 15,000 dong.

Japanese pilots strike over pay cut

Unionised pilots and crews at Japan Airlines (JAL) and its affiliate, Japan Air Commuter (JAC), struck on June 18 following a breakdown in negotiations over company plan to cut basic salaries and allowances by 5 percent. The walkout by members of the JAL Flight Crew Union and the JAL Pilots Union was expected to force the cancellation of 38 JAL domestic flights with up to 138 JAC flights or 87 percent of its services grounded.

JAL claims it has to slash 10 billion yen (\$US85.8 million) from personnel costs to finance payment of 6 billion yen in dividends to shareholders.

Australia and the Pacific

Qantas engineers to strike again over pay

Licensed engineers at Qantas in Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane and Cairns will strike for up to four hours on June 23 and June 24 after negotiations in the long-running pay dispute broke down this week. The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) warned that there could be further industrial action over the following two days.

The latest stoppages follow similar action at the end of last month. The engineers want an annual 5 percent pay increase over three years but the company has only offered 3 percent.

The pay dispute erupted again after the engineers in April voted down an in-principle agreement brokered by the ALAEA executive for a 3 percent increase and the surrender of working conditions.

Qantas executive general manager Kevin Brown told media this week that the company would take whatever action was necessary to protect its operations. Asked specifically if the company would use strikebreakers, Brown said: "There's a range of contingencies, some of which include consolidating our operations and some of which involve alternative ways of getting the work done." Qantas will also seek an order in the Industrial Relations Commission to test the legality of an ongoing overtime ban.

Australian teachers to continue wage campaign

On June 17, an estimated 11,000 public school teachers in South Australian walked off the job for 24 hours in support of a 21 percent pay rise over three years and improved working conditions. The teachers have rejected the SA state Labor government's offer of just 9.75 percent.

The strike affected up to 600 state schools, preschool staff and technical education (TAFE) colleges. Thousands of teachers and parents carrying banners supporting the teachers' demands, and children holding red balloons, marched through Adelaide to Parliament House. An Australian Education Union spokesperson said that there could be further rolling stoppages in the weeks ahead.

New Zealand pilots could resume pay strikes

Pilots employed by the New Zealand regional airline Air Nelson may strike again after talks for a new collective contract stalled. The New Zealand Air Line Pilots' Association (NZALPA) is recommending industrial action, following nine months of unsuccessful talks. The pilots held half-day strikes on April 4 and March 25 which saw the cancellation of 34 flights on each day.

Air Nelson, an Air New Zealand wholly-owned subsidiary, has not increased pilots' pay in two years. Co-pilots start on \$42,000 a year and captains are on \$68,000. Pilots are also asking for improvements

to work rosters. A NZALPA spokesman said talks over the new collective contract had come to a "sticking point" over the pilots' request to have one weekend off a month. Air Nelson has refused to cooperate in bargaining conducted by the Employment Relations Authority.

Strikes by Auckland cinema workers continue

Over a dozen workers at SkyCity Cinema in Auckland's St Lukes Shopping Mall walked off the job at 6.30 p.m. on June 13 in a pay dispute and set up a picket line outside the cinema. Workers at SkyCity's WestCity Shopping Town cinema in West Auckland took similar on June 11 over the same issue.

Management of the Westfield-owned St Lukes Mall attempted to serve a trespass order on a Unite union organiser, claiming that workers had no right to protest in the mall and that chanting inside was illegal. The Unite union is calling on movie-goers to boycott food and drink outlets at SkyCity Cinemas around the country.

A Unite spokesman said the company's pay offer "was no more than the legal minimum wage for a majority of workers". In negotiations earlier this month, the company said it would give cinema attendants discounts on ice-creams but refused to improve its pay offer. Supervisors at the cinemas, who want their experience and skill recognised, say the company's offer of 3.5 percent would see them paid \$4 less than supervisors in the fast-food industry.

NZ Department of Labour staff continue strikes

Department of Labour staff walked off the job for two hours on June 16, the second stop-work in five days. The action involved 750 workers, including border security officers at Auckland, Wellington and Christchurch airports, health and safety inspectors, immigration officers, labour inspectors and industrial mediators.

The Public Service Association began negotiations to renew a collective agreement in September last year, including a new pay setting system and a 4 percent pay rise. While agreement was reached on the package, a date for backdating remains in dispute. The union has notices in place for a three further two-hour stoppages.

Solomon Islands telecom workers begin indefinite strike

Around 330 workers at Solomon Telekom Company Limited (Our Telecom) walked off the job on June 17 to demand removal of the company's CEO Martin Robinson. Communications systems around the Solomon Islands began failing within hours of the walk-out, affecting bank transactions and closing the national airline's e-ticketing facility.

The strike follows a deadlock in the Trades Disputes Panel over the composition of Our Telecom's representatives in the case hearing. Workers have vowed to stay out indefinitely, declaring that Robinson's termination is non-negotiable. They have accused the British CEO of discriminatory practices.



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