

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 July 2008

Indian diamond worker shot dead

Mukesh Zapalia, a protesting diamond worker, was killed and at least six others injured in Bhavnagar, Gujarat, when a private security guard opened fire on a demonstration on July 6. The police apprehended the security guard and arrested around 50 protestors.

Around 40,000 diamond cutters were involved in a series of protests outside factories and employers' homes in a campaign for a pay rise. The workers, who cut and polish diamonds in thousands of small factories in Gujarat, have not received a pay increase for 12 years and want a 20 percent rise.

The campaign was triggered by skyrocketing inflation and a downturn in the diamond industry. The workers are paid for each diamond cut and polished but sales have dropped by 19 percent resulting in a sharp decrease in wages.

Indian plantation workers protest over wages

Hundreds of plantation workers at the Dunsandle Estate near Sholur, Tamil Nadu, stopped work and demonstrated on July 8 in a dispute over wages. The workers claim they are not paid the official minimum wage.

The company said it was unable to fully implement the minimum wage notification because the issue was before the Special Industrial Tribunal in Chennai. The estate management has only offered to adjust wage levels for June but this was rejected by workers.

Community teachers in Bangladesh threaten hunger strike

Around 14,000 teachers in 3,788 Bangladesh community primary schools have threatened an indefinite hunger strike on August 1 if their demand for a 20 percent increase in the cost of living allowance is not met.

The teachers claim it is impossible to live on a monthly salary of 1,200 taka (\$US17.53). A spokesman for the Bangladesh Community Primary Teachers' Association warned: "The caretaker government should pay attention to our demands otherwise community schools will be shut down."

Pakistani municipal workers on strike

Over 2,000 municipal workers in Peshawar went on strike on July 7 over salary payment delays. Striking employees parked municipal services vehicles, including waste disposal vehicles, outside the Town-I office and established a protest camp.

According to strikers, late payment of salaries had persisted since the local government system was introduced in 2002 and was creating ongoing hardship.

Mustafa Shah, a Class IV employee, told the media that his

domestic electricity meter had been confiscated by the Peshawar Electric Supply Company for non-payment of bills. Nazeer Ahmed, another protesting employee, said that he had to begin borrowing for household expenses from the 20th of each month but that shopkeepers had stopped giving municipal workers credit for daily-use items.

Striking workers said that they would continue strike action and even threatened to stop city water supplies if their salaries were not paid on time. The United Municipal Workers Association organised the strike.

Vietnamese garment workers walkout

On July 3, some 6,000 employees at textile manufacturer Chutex Group in the Song than II Industrial Zone in Vietnam's southern province of Binh Duong went on strike over pay and conditions.

The workers want a 15 percent pay rise and an allowance for accommodation and transportation. Workers' current salaries are too low to cope with the country's high inflation. The company's offer 10 percent pay rise offer was rejected and the strike continued.

The company produces for many of the world's top apparel brands and it was hit by two strikes last year forcing it to lift pay.

Korean tyre workers strike over pay and job cuts

On July 8, more than 4,000 unionised workers at Kumho Tires, South Korea's second largest tyre maker, began an indefinite strike against company's plan to axe 431 jobs. On the same day the firm announced it had gained a major order from the US to supply 200,000 tyres to the Ford Motor Company.

The company claims that the job cuts and a wage freeze are necessary to combat rising raw material prices and operating costs. Management threatened that unless the jobs are cut it would shut down its main plant in Gwangji, 300 kilometres south of Seoul. A union spokesman said employees have no choice but to stay on strike until the company withdraws its plan.

The latest action follows a partial strike on July 2 over wages. The union wants Kumho to raise the basic monthly salary by 130,000 won (\$US126) and increase bonuses by 50 percent. A company official said it would hold further talks with the union but added: "Given a tough environment, we cannot accept 100 percent of the union's proposal."

Western Australian paramedics vote for industrial action

On July 7, St John ambulance paramedics in Western Australia voted unanimously for industrial action in support of a pay rise. The campaign will include stop-work meetings and various work-to-rule tactics, including bans on cleaning vehicles and paper

work. Paramedics will also make comments to the media about their working conditions which is currently forbidden under St John's policy.

The paramedics, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, want a five-tier wage system, so that after five years the base salary for a paramedic will reach \$62,000 on par with the pay of a top-level registered nurse. Currently a tertiary-qualified paramedic receives a base salary of \$48,000, which does not alter regardless of years of service.

The workers have rejected St John's offer of 15 percent over three years. The union will now apply to the Industrial Relations Commission for "protected" industrial action during the bargaining period for a new enterprise work agreement.

NSW power workers stop work over privatisation

A visit by NSW Primary Industries Minister Ian Macdonald to the Munmorah and Vales Point power stations on the state's Central Coast last week sparked a walk out by 250 power workers. The protest was against the state Labor government's ongoing attempts to sell off the power industry.

A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) said that McDonald had played a prominent role in pushing the privatisation. The state government is proceeding with the sell-off in the face of overwhelmingly opposition and in defiance of Labor's state conference in May which decisively rejected power the privatisation plan.

From the beginning, the unions' limited campaign of protests and work stoppages has been aimed at containing workers' opposition while a deal can be arranged with the government. At a mass meeting of power workers in June the unions' pushed through a resolution to lift all industrial action, claiming that they had managed to secure the support of opposition MPs and numbers of Labor MPs to defeat the power privatisation enabling bills in parliament. Within days, Iemma announced that the government had finalised a deal with Liberal-National Coalition MPs that would allow passage of the bills.

New Zealand call centre workers strike

Call centre and IT workers at Veda Advantage in Auckland went on strike on July 7 and protested outside the company office in the city centre. The strike was the first in the history of the personal credit rating company.

The workers want a 6 percent pay increase but Veda Advantage is offering only 2 percent in line with similar minimal pay rises in recent years. A Unite Union spokesman said the pay issue had come to a head because petrol and food prices were rising rapidly. The rate of inflation is expected to rise above 4 percent for the year to June 2008.

Veda Advantage is owned by an Australian-based consortium of Pacific Equity Partners and Merrill Lynch Private Equity Partners. It has been very profitable this year with a revenue growth target of 11 percent for next year.

NZ doctors in pay dispute

Junior doctors at New Zealand's public hospitals are considering resuming strike action after rejecting what the union described as a "provocative" pay offer by District Health Boards (DHBs) for new employees and non-unionised doctors.

This week marked one year since the expiry of the national

collective agreement which covers more than 2,000 junior doctors. The doctors are now on individual agreements under terms and conditions stimulated by the Employment Relations Act.

The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) members want an annual 10 percent pay increase for three years. DHBs are offering 4.5 percent for last year and 4.5 percent for this year. However, non-union and new employees will get only 8.5 percent for one year. Junior doctors are considered new employees when they shift between hospitals as part of their training.

A spokesperson for the RDA claimed that the health boards were "inviting" junior doctors to resign to get the pay rise and abandon the MECA (multi-employer collective agreement). "It's a very provocative action on their part," the spokesman said, adding that it increased the likelihood of strikes resuming.

Overtime ban lifted at NZ port

An overtime ban at the Port of Otago was suspended last week following last-minute negotiations between unions and management. The two unions at Port of Otago, the Maritime Union of New Zealand and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, have agreed to meet with management in mediation over pay and shift work issues.

A Maritime Union spokesman said the ban has been suspended for up to a week but if mediation failed the ban would be resumed immediately.

Port Otago authorities are demanding 10-hour shifts which starts whenever a ship arrived as opposed to the present rostered 11 p.m. start. The union said that "10-hour night shifts were not good for health, safety or morale".

Fiji bus operators strike

A nationwide stop-work by Fiji's bus operators on July 3 shut down schools and resulted in many workers either showing up late or calling in absent from work. The strike lasted until 9 a.m. in the northern, central and eastern divisions but the Western Division remained without buses for half the day.

The strike was called by the Fiji Bus Operators Association to demand removal of VAT from bus fares and for the government to pay a 20-cent per litre fuel grant in exchange for free fares for the elderly and the disabled. The association said if the demands were met, it would not ask for a fare increase and that a direct subsidy of 10 percent VAT exclusive price on fuel would be unnecessary.



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