

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 July 2008

Pakistan telco workers strike after police attack

Thousands of workers employed by state-monopoly phone company Pakistan Telecommunications Company Limited (PTCL) walked out on July 16 after a brutal attack by Pakistan Rangers on a peaceful demonstration in Islamabad one day earlier. Rangers fired teargas at workers involved in a sit-down rally outside the PTCL headquarters causing 16 protestors to be hospitalised.

Pakistan Telecom Workers Ethad (PTWE) members had been holding two-hour protests at the PTCL offices for several weeks in opposition to the new United Pay Scales (UPS) system. They want the company to return to the original pay system.

Workers locked PTCL premises and shut-down call centres across the country during the national strike. PTCL is the only telecommunications provider in Pakistan.

Fearing disruption to government and armed forces communications, Asif Ali Zardar, co-chairman of the Pakistan Peoples Party, pushed PTCL to accept workers' demands, including withdrawal of UPS, reinstatement of workers suspended for protesting, and the payment of wages lost during the strike.

Indian retirees protest over pensions

On July 16, around 300 State Transport Corporation retirees and their families protested in Chennai, Tamil Nadu over pensions. The retirees want the government to assume direct responsibility for the pension payments.

The Transport Corporations Retired Employees Welfare Association claims that some 30,000 retired employees have not been receiving their pensions for protracted periods and that there was a two year delay in accessing or utilising post-retirement benefit schemes. Many retirees had filed cases with the High Court but some had died waiting on the court's decision.

The retirees also want dearness allowance increases to be included in pensions, immediate payment of commutation pension arrears, and free transport passes for the widows of transport corporation employees.

In a separate dispute, Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation Employees' Union members demonstrated in Tuticorin on July 14 for permanency of all corporation employees. Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation

employees also demonstrated on the same day in Udthagamandalam for permanency and for salaries to be fixed on time-scale basis.

Bangladesh water transport workers end pay strike

Water transport workers in Bangladesh returned to work on July 12 after a 38-hour national strike for a pay rise to compensate for cost of living increases.

The strikers agreed to allow launches and other passenger carriers to run but not freight vessels, following a meeting with the Bangladesh Water Transport Workers Federation (BWTWF), the Bangladesh Inland Water Transport Authority (BIWTA) and vessel owners. Most services were restored despite there being no definite pay offer.

The BWTWF accepted a proposal to form a committee with vessel owners, the BIWTA, the labour ministry and directorates of shipping and labour. The committee will formulate pay rise and other conditions until a new wage structure is implemented some time next year. The committee was expected to report within the next 15 days and its recommendations to be backdated to July 1.

Japanese fisherman strike over high fuel prices

On July 15, 200,000 Japanese fishing boats, almost the country's entire fishing industry, remained idle when fisherman struck for one day over soaring fuel prices. Several thousand fishermen demonstrated in Tokyo. Fish markets were forced to sell frozen supplies but could not satisfy the demand and prices rose by 20 percent.

The strike was organised by the National Federation of Fisheries Cooperative Associations and 16 other fishing-industry bodies. A spokesman from the federation said that fuel prices had tripled over the last three years and called on the government for tax breaks and other financial support.

Korean tire factory workers end strike

Some 4,000 unionised workers at Kumho Tires, South Korea's second largest tire maker, returned to work on July 12, ending a four-day strike over wages and jobs. The strike was called off after the company withdrew plans to cut 431 jobs.

Workers wanted a basic monthly salary increase of 130,000 won (\$US126) but the company threatened to cut jobs and close one of its factories if employees persisted with their claim. While the union has now agreed to increase productivity, the exact details of the agreement have not yet been made

public.

Hong Kong food-processing workers strike

Around 200 employees at Hong Kong-based food processor Vitasoy International walked off the job on July 11 demanding a 6 percent wage rise and to protest the sacking of a colleague. Workers protested outside the company's main plant.

The strikers, including drivers, sales personnel and warehouse staff, are employed at the company's headquarters in Tuen Mun. The Labour Department has now intervened into the dispute.

Along with its Hong Kong operation, Vitasoy has plants in mainland China, Australia and the United States.

Queensland power workers strike over pay

Around 3,500 power workers from Queensland government-owned Powerlink and Ergon Energy went on strike for 48 hours on July 16. The strike was joined by 1,000 workers from the state-owned south-east Queensland electricity distributor Energex the next day. Around 100 Energex employees—members of the Australian Services Union (ASU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU)—rallied outside the company headquarters in central Brisbane.

The strikes are part of an ongoing campaign for an additional \$1.50 per hour to bring them in line with electricity workers in the private sector. State government workers receive \$29.05 an hour whilst their private sector counterparts are paid \$31.80. The government is offering a 4.5 percent increase.

Power unions have threatened to step-up the campaign in the coming weeks but a union spokesman declined to specify what action will be taken. The ETU confirmed that unions would begin a \$70,000 advertising campaign to highlight the pay dispute. Power workers have held rallies in major centres across the state and picketed Ergon Energy offices in Cairns, Townsville, Mackay and Brisbane in recent months.

Teachers rally outside minister's office

Over 100 public school teachers and students rallied outside the electoral office of South Australia Education Minister Jane Lomax-Smith's office on July 17 to demand a new pay and conditions agreement.

Teachers want a 21 percent increase over three years, a reduction in class sizes and extra government funding to recruit and retain staff. The SA state Labor government is offering only 9.75 percent over three years which is well below the current inflation rate of 4.2 percent.

An Australian Education Union spokeswoman said that after six months of negotiations teachers were running out of patience. "Our children deserve quality learning and individual attention and that means smaller class sizes and better resources," she said.

Technical teachers to strike in pay dispute

About 14,000 teachers at public sector technical colleges (TAFEs) in Victoria are planning a 24-hour state-wide strike on August 20 for a 20 percent pay rise over four years. In line with restraints imposed by the Victorian state government TAFE

directors are offering only a 3.25 percent annual increase for four years with productivity trade-offs for anything above that amount.

According to an Australian Education Union spokesperson, negotiations on productivity trade-offs have "persistently broken down". TAFE teachers fear that flexibility arrangements will lead to more casual jobs. The dispute has dragged on for 11 months.

Union files harassment complaint against Auckland Airport

The Unite Union has filed a complaint with the New Zealand Employment Relations Authority (ERA) over the harassment of union members by senior management and supervisors at Auckland Airport. The move follows several weeks of industrial action by food court employees at the airport who want better pay and working conditions.

According to Unite, the company management has embarked on a campaign of bullying and intimidation of union members. It claims that while such behaviour is not new it has recently escalated. The actions include threats that workers who have taken strike action will be denied roster changes or preferred shifts. Unite says that workers are also being "actively encouraged" by management and supervisors to resign from the union.

Russian seafarers in NZ demand payment of wages

Aleksandr Ksenofontov, a Russian fishing vessel, is being detained in the New Zealand port of Lyttelton over a wages' dispute. The 19 Russian and Ukrainian crew members are concerned that they will not be paid when their contract expires this month and have approached local maritime unions for assistance.

This is the second time in 18 months that the ship has been detained in New Zealand. In December 2006, the vessel was held in Dunedin port over unpaid bills. Ship's documents revealed that wages paid did not resemble hours worked and had been slashed by using heavy Russian taxation laws and after large employer deductions. The lost wages were eventually recovered after legal action.

A Maritime Union spokesman in New Zealand said that any attempt to send the present crew home without full entitlements and pay would be "resisted both with legal action and direct action". New Zealand immigration authorities are aware of the situation but so far have done nothing to stop the recurring cycle of events that see overseas seafarers sent home only to be replaced by another crew under the same conditions.



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