

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 August 2008

Asia

Indian construction workers demonstrate for compensation

Karnataka Construction Workers' Association members demonstrated in Hassan city on August 23 demanding compensation and better facilities. The protesters presented a memorandum containing their grievances to the deputy commissioner.

Their demands include 500,000 rupees compensation (\$US11,345) for on-duty deaths and for workers permanently impaired by workplace injuries and 10,000 rupees to assist workers who have been hospitalised. They also called for the provision of state housing loans.

Indian tea plantation workers demand outstanding wages

Around 400 workers employed on the Jalalnagar and Madanpur tea estates protested on August 22 over the non-payment of wages and the management's refusal to supply compulsory subsidised food rations. The plantations are in the Karimganj district near the India-Bangladesh border in West Bengal.

The company has had to provide the food rations since mid-2005, following the death of three plantation workers—Anjali Nayak, 32, Subhadra Nayak, 60, and Surabala Nayak, 36—allegedly from starvation. The tea plantations, which are spread over 550 hectares, are owned by the All India Tea and Trading Company Ltd.

Indian Pepsico workers strike over suspensions

More than 250 employees at the Pepsico Channo food plant stopped work on August 20 over the suspension of five colleagues. Since walking out the workers have been protesting around the clock outside the plant in Punjab's Sangrur district.

The strikers claim that five employees were suspended on "false and frivolous complaints" and that management is applying pressure, via the police and the local authorities, to end the protest.

Indian university workers demand better conditions

Non-teaching employees at the Mangalore University in the state of Karnataka protested in Mangalagangothri and presented a list of their demands to the university's vice-chancellor on August 20.

These include an end to contract-based employment, permanency, the filling of vacant posts and the creation of new non-teaching positions proportionate to the number of students. They want priority to be given to the construction of staff quarters on campus and the permanent stationing of a vehicle and a driver on site for emergency purposes.

Employees also demanded that the government nominate non-teaching staff to the university's decision-making bodies, such as

the Academic Council and Syndicate. The workers are members of the All-India University Non-teaching Employees' Federation.

Korean auto workers continue strike action

Over 73,000 Korean auto workers at Hyundai Motor Company and Kia Motors Company began a series of four-hour rolling strikes on August 26 over wages and working conditions.

The 45,000 Hyundai workers have held six rounds of rolling strikes in the past two months costing the company over 240 billion won (\$US233 million) in lost production. The union is seeking a 9 percent pay rise and a union position on the board of directors.

The 28,000 Kia workers are also demanding a 9 percent pay rise plus an unspecified lump-sum bonus payment and shorter working hours. Kia has already lost 130 billion won (\$US125 million) in lost production from previous stoppages over the issues.

Thai garment workers protest over sacked union official

About 300 striking garment workers from Body Fashion Thailand (BFT) protested outside the company's office in Bangkok on August 25. The workers want reinstatement of sacked union leader Jitra Kotchadej and for BFT to pay wages for the period of the strike. The protestors dispersed after four hours when told that company management would be available for talks the next day.

Around 2,000 BFT workers walked out of the factory in the Bang Phli district of Samut Prakan province on August 4, following the dismissal of Kotchadej for wearing a T-shirt bearing a slogan supporting the right of people not to stand when the royal anthem is played at public events.

The strikers are receiving financial assistance from the union at Thai Airways International and a group of academics and activists have been collecting donations.

Indonesian footwear employees clash with security guards

Some 7,000 workers at the Tangerang factory of PT Hardaya Aneka Shoe Industry downed tools on August 21 over a management decision to cut the Idul Fitri (religious holiday) allowance from 241 percent of monthly salary to just 100 percent.

The workers clashed with around 25 factory security officers at the plant when they attempted to bar television reporters from covering the strike. The security guards had to be rescued and escorted from the site by the police.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian journalists strike over staff cuts

Journalists employed by Fairfax, one of Australia's largest media and newspaper companies, walked off the job on August 28

in protest over the company's decision to shed 550 jobs in Australia and New Zealand. Journalists are currently picketing Fairfax offices.

The strike action will affect some Fairfax operations, including the Melbourne-based *Age*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Australian Financial Review*. Staff at Fairfax's regional publications, such as the *Newcastle Herald* and the *Illawarra Mercury*, also joined the walkout. While management has yet to announce all the jobs to be axed, Andrew Jaspan, the *Age* editor-in-chief, was dismissed on Wednesday and Mike Carlton, a *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist, sacked on Friday after he refused to submit his weekly column in solidarity with other journalists.

According to media reports, the 5 percent workforce cut will save the company \$A50 million a year. Journalists who are members of the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance will remain on strike until Monday.

Public sector unions call off industrial action

Tasmanian public sector unions called off threatened strike action this week and were instructed by 11,000 members to lift 300 work bans, even though the state Labor government had not improved on its pay offer.

While state premier David Bartlett agreed to resume pay talks if the unions lifted bans, he only promised to "consider some flexibility" in negotiations. Community and Public Sector Union state secretary Tom Lynch told the media that talks between union representatives and public-sector management last week were "encouraging" and there was now "common ground between the parties".

The government is offering a 20.1 percent pay increase over four years, around 4 percent below the amount demanded by workers who also want a three-year agreement.

Auckland casino workers stop work over pay

More than 350 workers at Auckland's SkyCity Casino held rolling work stoppages last weekend and protested outside the premises. The stoppages involved security personnel, cashiers, cleaners and housekeepers. When the slots crew realised management had covered their duties during the stoppage they walked out for the rest of the shift.

Pay negotiations have stalled with members of the Unite union and the Service and Food Workers Union rejecting a company offer of a 4 percent increase followed by a further 3.5 percent next year. The unions are seeking a 5 percent annual increase and recognition for service. Workers have maintained an industrial campaign since the end of July and more rolling stoppages are planned over the busy weekend period.

Before a \$62 million write-down of its cinema assets SkyCity recorded an after tax profit of \$NZ111.9 million in the year to June, up 19 percent on the previous year. Company manager Nigel Morrison is one of New Zealand's highest paid CEOs.

New Zealand bank workers discuss pay offer

ANZ National Bank employees attended two-hour stop-work meetings across the country on August 22 to discuss their campaign for a 5 percent pay rise and a review of debt sale targets. Auckland and Wellington employees voted to stay out for the rest of the shift while those in other centres returned to work.

The bank is offering just 4 percent and refusing to change targets

that put staff under pressure to sell services that increase customer debt. Despite admitting that the bank's offer is below the rate of inflation and represents a pay cut, Finsec union campaigns director Andrew Campbell said that the union would submit the offer for membership ratification next week.

Meanwhile, workers at Westpac bank have voted in favour of a collective agreement that includes a 5 percent pay increase and a new competency-based pay system.

NZ hospital service workers strike

Fifteen service workers at the Oamaru Hospital went on strike for 24 hours on August 22 and August 25. The strikes followed a breakdown in negotiations between the Compass Group and the Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU).

The kitchen, cleaning, orderly and security service workers want the same Meca (multi-employer collective agreement) rates and conditions given to employees in other hospitals earlier this year. An Oamaru Hospital cleaner is paid \$12 an hour while the Meca rate is \$14.62. Union delegate Jeanette Doran said she was "bloody angry" and that while she was generally against strikes at hospitals, "we felt we had no option in this case".

Fiji university staff strike for suspended colleague

More than 100 staff union members from the University of the South Pacific (USP) in Fiji went on strike on August 21 demanding reinstatement of a library worker suspended in May over a misconduct issue. The USP staff union is mainly made up of support employees and hourly-paid workers.

The union claims that management has not provided a legitimate reason for the lengthy suspension and breached an agreement that stipulates that staff facing serious allegations can be suspended on half pay for only up to 28 days. The library worker has been suspended for over 108 days, despite the union requesting on three occasions that he be reinstated. The strike ended after three hours, when the management gave a written assurance that it would end the suspension.

Meanwhile, the union has lodged a 21-day notice of strike with the Ministry of Labour over the university's plan to close down its Media Centre. Centre staff were only given three days' notice of the closure.



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