

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 October 2008

Mass protest outside closed Chinese toy factory

Over 6,000 toy workers lost their jobs this week when the Smart Union Group (Holdings) Ltd suddenly shut its plant in Dongguan in China's Guangdong province on Wednesday. More than 1,000 former employees are currently demonstrating outside the factory for unpaid wages.

The toy workers were not informed about the closure until October 15 when they were confronted with a government notice on the factory's main gate declaring that the plant was shut because of "unfavorable business conditions". Share trading in the Hong Kong-owned company, which has three factories in Dongguan, has been suspended on the Hong Kong stock market. Smart Union Group's owners are reported to have gone into hiding before the closure.

China's Xinhua News Agency reported this week that over 3,630 toy exporters-52.7 percent of the industry's enterprises-went out of business in 2008. The shut-downs have been blamed on higher production costs, wage increases and the rising value of the yuan.

Indian bank workers plan mass walkout

Over 80,000 employees from State Bank of India (SBI) and its associate banks will begin national indefinite strike action on October 20. The All-India State Bank Officers' Federation opposes the merger of associate banks with SBI and wants pension scheme improvements and the implementation of various agreements reached with management from 2005 onwards.

SBI Officers' Association general secretary K. Rajeevan said despite seven days of strike action in April 2006, there had been no change in the pension scheme. The union is also demanding extension of the SBI superannuation scheme to associate bank employees.

Staff at SBI and its associate banks walked out in August this year in a failed attempt to prevent the merger of the State Bank of Saurashtra with SBI.

Indian mine workers on hunger strike

Nevyeli Lignite Corporation (NLC) workers in Cuddalore, Tamilnadu held a one-day hunger strike on October 10 to demand a 325 percent increase in the conveyance allowance. Labor Progressive Front members want the allowance raised from 635 rupees per month to 1,950 rupees, on par with Hindustan Aeronautical Ltd workers.

The mine workers have vowed to implement a work-to-rule and strike if NLC does not concede to their demand.

Indian transport workers protest over pay offer

Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) employees rallied in Bangalore, Gulbarga and Hubli on October 14 to protest the corporation's "meagre" 6 percent pay offer.

Karnataka State Road Transport Employees' Federation secretary-general B. Jayadevaraje Urs rejected the pay offer, stating that KSRTC had made a "unilateral" decision and ignored workers' 30 percent pay claim and other demands. He pointed out that administrative staff members were granted a 21 percent pay rise.

The federation is planning a mass rally outside KSRTC's office in Bangalore to demand negotiations with management.

Jet Airways staff protest mass job cuts

Hundreds of uniformed staff at Jet Airways (JA), India's largest private airline, protested in Mumbai on October 14 over company plans to cut 800 jobs. JA said cabin crew hired for a planned, but now cancelled, airline expansion would be dismissed.

The company announcement follows a recent alliance with Kingfisher, India's second largest private airline, to cut costs amid soaring fuel prices and a drop in ticket sales. The deal will include route-sharing and joint crews. JA says it plans 1,900 job cuts in total. Kingfisher is also considering laying-offs.

Part-time teachers in Nepal protest

Around 800 part-time teachers working at 61 colleges at Tribhuvan University in Kathmandu staged a "fast-unto-death" campaign on October 4 to demand "contract" employment status.

The government converted 1,380 teachers to "contract" status, but about 800 part-time teachers recruited since April 2006 are not being considered. Part-time teachers are paid 102 rupees (\$US1.32) per teaching period while contract teachers earn 13,000 rupees per month. The job security of part-time teachers is determined by the campus chief at each college.

Sri Lankan electricity workers protest over legislation

All 28 trade unions at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) decided last week to stage national protests to "save the CEB from possible privatisation". It follows a government announcement that it will introduce the Sri Lanka Electricity Draft Bill to parliament.

The government planned to present the privatisation bill on three previous occasions but withdrew due to strong opposition from CEB workers. The United Trade Union Front of CEB claims that the government wants to sell the CEB to cut the budget deficit and has threatened mass industrial action which would "put the entire country in darkness" if the bill is passed. The government met with CEB union representatives on October 15.

Hospital security staff in Malaysia strike

Some 140 security staff at Hospital Tengku Amqan Rahimah (HTAR) struck for 15 hours on October 10 over a salary dispute.

A security supervisor said the outsourcing company that employs the workers had not paid their basic salary since June. He said their full salary was about 800 ringgits (\$US246) per month but employees were only paid a few times a month, and only between 100 and 200 ringgits. Other employees claim the company was not contributing to the Employees Provident Fund and Socso (Social Security Organisation). Employer contributions to Socso are compulsory.

A government official ordered the strikers back to work claiming that hospital management and the state government would resolve the problem.

Australian science workers strike over pay

About 300 scientists and technical support staff at Geoscience Australia, in the Australian Capital Territory, walked off the job for four hours on October 15 for a 5 percent pay rise. Community Public Sector Union members decided to strike after being told that \$2.5 million (\$US1.93 million) previously ear-marked for cost-of-living pay rises had been reallocated to fund new projects.

The funding move dashed hopes of a breakthrough in the nine-month dispute involving 700 staff in critical national research, such as earthquake and tsunami monitoring, bushfire mapping and mineral exploration. More than 450 staff signed a letter sent to federal resources minister Martin Ferguson protesting inadequate pay and poor management.

Queensland firefighters demonstrate

Around 100 members of the United Firefighters Union (UFU) rallied outside the Fire Service Training Academy at White Island, Brisbane on October 14 as part of their campaign for a pay rise.

UFU state president Henry Lawrence said the rally was for a work-value claim and in protest against the state government's treatment of firefighters. He said the current wage offer was "very poor" considering "the significant increases in the value of the work [firefighters] perform".

Queensland Labor Premier Anna Bligh denounced the protest as "irresponsible" claiming it had occurred during an anti-terrorism exercise. Most Queensland firefighters are only paid about \$21 an hour.

South Australian teachers plan strike action

South Australian public school teachers are planning a half-day strike on October 30 if mediation fails with the state government in the long-running pay dispute.

Australian Education Union members want parity with their interstate colleagues, a 21 percent pay rise over three years and improvements in conditions, including workloads, class sizes and education funding.

The government and union resumed negotiations in the Industrial Relations Commission on October 15 but the government has repeatedly refused to move from its pay offer of 9.75 percent over three years.

New Zealand vegetable produce workers vote to strike

About 40 members of the National Distribution Union (NDU) met at the Mt Wellington plant of New Zealand's major produce wholesaler Turners and Growers, and voted to walk off the job as part of a series of strikes in support of pay demands. The NDU wants a review of overtime payments and a 6 percent pay rise but said it was willing to negotiate after the company lifted its pay offer from 2 to 3 percent.

The union said the company had been forced to raise some workers' pay when the new minimum wage rates were introduced this year. Union members have threatened to take strike action until they get a reasonable pay offer.

Auckland supermarket employees strike

Checkout operators at the Glen Innes branch of the Pak'nSave supermarket chain walked out on October 11 after being offered a pay rise of just 10 cents an hour, with a 4 percent increase next year. The operators want an extra 30 cents an hour, the removal of performance appraisals and their long service included in the new pay system. The new system wipes out previous service, which means that employees with 12 years' service are on the same rates as workers who started in April this year. The store's starting rate is \$12.20 an hour.

Employees' demands would bring their pay closer to parity with other Pak'nSave union members in Auckland.

Air Fiji talks to begin again over pay cut

The Fiji Transport Workers Union (FTWU) says it is ready to resume talks with Air Fiji over a 15 percent pay cut imposed on its members in August this year. The airline claimed it was facing financial constraints caused by the 2006 coup.

While FTWU members voted last month to strike, the union met with company management to find an "amicable" solution. The union now wants another meeting to offer an "alternative proposal".

Mass rally in French Polynesia against pension reform

Several unions struck and an estimated 7,000 people marched in Papeete, the French Polynesian capital, on October 10 in protest at the Sarkozy government's plan to reform the pension system. The demonstration followed a rally of around 1,000 government employees in Noumea, the New Caledonian capital, on October 7 over the plan.

The reforms aim to phase out the top-up of pensions offered to French public servants who retire in its colonies where consumer prices are often 300 percent higher than in France. Under a system introduced in 1952, pensions can be boosted by up to 75 percent.

The French government has vowed to impose its pension "reforms" despite popular opposition in French Polynesia and New Caledonia.



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