Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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South Korean media union head detained after strike

National Union of Media Workers (NUMW) leader Choi Sang-jae was detained by police last week for leading an allegedly illegal four-day strike from July 20 involving about 5,000 media workers protesting against legislation aimed at deregulating radio and TV broadcasting ownership and competition laws. Choi was also accused of organising illegal rallies and illegally entering the National Assembly building where the bills were being considered.

The bills will allow some of South Korea's largest newspapers and corporate conglomerates to hold a 20 percent stake in terrestrial broadcasters, 30 percent in comprehensive channels and 49 percent in news-only channels. In December, around 2,000 NUMW members from 120 South Korean television and radio stations walked off the job and rallied in Seoul protesting against the bills. More walk-outs have been planned.

India: Hyundai workers end factory occupation

On July 28, the Hyundai India Employees Union called an end to a six-day factory occupation by 290 members at the Hyundai plant in Irungattukottai, Tamil Nadu over a new work agreement. Union members were demanding recognition of the union and reinstatement of 80 retrenched workers as well as a wage settlement. Management had refused to negotiate with the union and instead reached an agreement with a company-appointed Workers Committee.

The union accepted the Workers Committee settlement after 900 permanent employees signed the settlement and management agreed to reemploy 20 of the 80 retrenched workers. Hyundai, however, is still refusing to recognise the union. Details of the wage settlement have not been released to the media.

Maharashtra teachers' strike in third week

A strike by 30,000 senior teachers of the Maharashtra Federation of College Teachers Organisation over pay and eligibility tests continues for a third week. The teachers walked out on July 14 to demand pay rises under India's Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and an end to discrimination against 10,000 union members who have not cleared a national and state eligibility test.

The teachers allege that the eligibility examination, which was not mandatory until 1999, is denying placement benefits to senior teachers with up to 18 years' experience and keeping them on a lower pay scale.

The Higher and Technical Education Minister issued a letter on July 24 that the union claims "nullifies the momentum achieved in the first round of talks". Talks between the union and minister are in progress.

Retrenched Bangladeshi port workers conduct sit-in

Around 2,000 retrenched dock workers staged a three-hour sit-in at the offices of the Chittagong Port Authority (CPA) on July 28, demanding reinstatement and revival of the Dock Labour Management Board. Over 6,000 dock workers were retrenched after the board was dissolved as part of measures, begun in 2007, aimed at the eventual full privatisation of the port.

Abdul Ahad, the joint secretary of the Dock Bandar Sramik Karmachari Federation, claimed the retrenched workers were not given their due benefits when they were forced to quit. Union leaders have said that if the CPA does not meet their demands by August 3 they will call a four-hour strike.

Laid-off aviation workers protest

Hundreds of former employees of Biman Bangladesh Airlines staged their second sit-down protest in a week on July 26 in front of Balaka Bhaban, the Biman headquarters in Dhaka, demanding to be reinstated. Biman was transformed into a public limited company in July 2007, and since then some 1,863 employees have been laid-off.

To date, the High Court has ordered the reinstatement of some 200 sacked workers and is still considering another 300 petitions; however, protesting workers claim Biman has ignored the court order and has not reinstated a single person. "Our program will go on until our demands are met," said KS Shah Alam, convener of an action group for reinstatement of the former employees.

Bangladeshi auto-rickshaw drivers demonstrate

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More than 400 drivers under the banner of the Dhaka Zila Four Stroke Auto-rickshaw Drivers Union held an hour-long protest in Dhaka on July 26, demanding the government take steps against their owners for increasing the deposit they take from drivers. They claimed that owners were collecting nearly double the government fixed rate. Other demands included improved parking facilities for CNG-run three wheelers and for the government to take action against ongoing police harassment.

Pakistan: Peshawar doctors strike

Provincial Doctors Association (PDA) members at four tertiary care hospitals in Peshawar struck for two hours on July 28 to press the government for a better service structure and increased allowances. Outpatient and operating theatre services were affected in the Lady Reading Hospital, Khyber Teaching Hospital, Hayatabad Medical Complex and the Ayub Medical Complex.

Striking doctors rallied at the Peshawar Press Club, holding banners and placards inscribed with slogans in favour of their demands. A PDA official said they had previously submitted demands to the health department with no response, and will extend industrial action throughout the province if the government continues to ignore them.

Doctors in Islamabad implement industrial action

Around 80 postgraduate trainee doctors (PGs) and house officers (HOs) working at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in Islamabad began boycotting the hospital's outpatient departments on July 29, demanding wage parity with their counterparts in Punjab. The doctors rallied outside the hospital's main gate and then moved onto the road in a bid to draw public attention to their grievances.

The starting monthly salary of PGs serving in Punjab is 22,500 rupees ($US271) as against

PGs and HOs at PIMS, who are paid 15,000 rupees and 17,000 rupees respectively.

Sri Lankan port workers demonstrate

On July 28 members of the All Ceylon Port Workers Union held a lunchtime demonstration at the Colombo Port demanding a salary increase that was due in January 2009 when their three-year collective agreement expired. They also demanded that management halt the outsourcing of work to private contractors and end cuts to salaries and overtime.

Queensland public school teachers call off strike

The Queensland Industrial Relations Commission (IRC) has backed the state Labor

government's demand for the state's 37,000 public school teachers to cancel a state-wide strike planned for August 5. The IRC this week ruled the strike could not go ahead and that the Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) must give seven days' notice of any future industrial action.

The QTU and the government are in deadlock over a pay increase in a new workplace agreement. Teachers want pay parity with colleagues in other states. The government is holding firm on its offer of a 12.5 percent increase over three years, which has been rejected by the teachers, who say they would still be earning between $4,000 and $7,000 a year less than interstate teachers.

The IRC has recommended the government pay an interim pay increase of 4 percent, effective from July 1, and that both parties agree to arbitration of the dispute. Teachers have agreed to conform to the IRC ruling, but plan to march on Parliament House in Brisbane on August 5 to push their case.

New South Wales hospital staff protest redundancies

Health Services Union (HSU) members employed at the John Hunter and Maitland hospitals in the Hunter region walked off the job on July 30 for one hour to attend on-site rallies as part of a statewide industrial campaign to protest against redundancies, staff shortages and the privatisation of services in public hospitals. Rallies are also planned for Calvary Mater, Belmont and Morisset hospitals.

The workers are protesting over state Labor government proposals to contract out medical supplies and food services and introduce forced redundancies and redeployment at lower salaries. Just two weeks ago, the NSW Nurses Association called on the government to provide urgent funding to employ additional staff at the Calvary Mater hospital. Six new emergency department beds cannot be used and the new 12-bed emergency medical unit remains closed for lack of staff.

Meanwhile, nurses at the Nepean Hospital, one of Sydney's busiest, fear losing their jobs after being told last week more than 150 positions would be axed, while health workers in the state's north have been offered redundancy deals for the third time in six months, in a bid to clear debt of more than $130 million. Early this month, the Sydney West Area Health Service announced plans to offer voluntary redundancies to all staff, including doctors, nurses, physiotherapists and social workers to "create efficiencies".

Last week, the Greater Southern Area Health Service announced plans to eliminate more than 30 front-line positions at Cooma, Bega and Pambula hospitals in physiotherapy, aged and palliative care and early childhood services. Community health workers are refusing to undertake extra duties but may decide to escalate the dispute.

Western Australian power workers take industrial action

Around 700 members of the Australian Services Union employed by Western Power launched a series of four-hour rolling strikes, work to rule and overtime bans on July 25 to push for an improved pay offer from the energy utility.

About 70 percent of the company's 1,900 employees earlier this month rejected the company's non-union collective agreement, which offered a pay increase of 5 percent a year for the next five years but slashed overtime and penalty rates for salaried workers.

Victorian council workers walk out over sackings

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Around 200 employees of the Geelong City Council walked off the job on July 28 to protest the sacking of two colleagues for alleged theft and fraud. Later that evening, hundreds of workers and supporters rallied at the City Hall demanding reinstatement of the workers.

The two workers who were employed on a patching truck were sacked after an incident in November last year when on their lunch break they agreed to fill in two dangerous pot holes at the Leopold sports club for which the club management gave them each a free steak sandwich.

The workers claimed there was no fraud or theft because the asphalt used was being taken to the rubbish tip and they did the job in their lunch break. The council has refused to comment on the issue except to say “it was considering its position”. The Australian Services Union has called a delegates’ meeting.

New Zealand telecommunications engineers strike

Around 440 lines engineers employed by Transfield Services, a contracting company of Telecom NZ, struck for 24 hours on July 24 in Auckland, Hamilton, Rotorua, Whakatane, Wellington, Blenheim, Nelson and Christchurch.

The workers are protesting Telecom's planned restructure that would see Transfield replaced by Visionstream, which would force around 900 technicians in the Auckland and Northland regions to become owner-operators, or lose their jobs. Telecom NZ is not offering redundancy for engineers that are not willing to transfer to Visionstream.

The technicians, who are covered by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), could be forced to spend up to $60,000 ($US38,700) to buy their own vehicles and tools. They would also lose job security and be forced to pay their own insurance and vehicle repair costs.

University cleaners picket for pay parity

Cleaners at the Southern Institute of Technology (SIT) in Invercargill, New Zealand picketed the institute on July 16 during a visit by Prime Minister John Key and Education Minister Anne Tolley, and handed them a letter of demands.

Service and Food Workers Union members want their pay increased to $14.62 ($US9.43) an hour, the same rate paid to public school and hospital cleaners. SIT cleaners are currently paid $13.10 an hour, slightly above the minimum wage of $12.50. The institute is offering an increase of just 35 cents an hour.

Danaflex workers implement overtime bans

Workers at the packaging company Danaflex in New Zealand started an overtime ban this week after rejecting a pay increase offer of just 2 percent. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said Danaflex initially offered a 1 percent pay rise claiming it could not afford more, but then backtracked after an investigation of its financial records revealed it made $1.8 million in net profit in 2008.

Danaflex employs between 50 and 100 people and is part of the global Alcan Packaging Group based in Chicago, USA. It produces chilled and frozen meat packaging materials plus products for the dairy industry.

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