

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 September 2009

Indian explosives workers on strike

Around 400 employees at Tamil Nadu Industrial Explosives Limited (TEL) in Christianpet, near Katpadi, struck indefinitely on August 28 to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission pay scales. According to a spokesman of the Federation of All TEL Workers' Unions, the last wage agreement was signed between management and the unions in 2003. Two settlements were due—one in 2006 and another in 2009.

Police attack striking transport workers in Kashmir

Police fired teargas and used water cannons against a rally of striking State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) employees in Srinagar on September 1. Workers and family members were marching from the SRTC headquarters to the State Assembly when police intervened, injuring five persons, including a boy. Over a dozen people were arrested.

Workers began indefinite strike action last week to demand payment of five months' outstanding salaries. An SRTC employees' union spokesman said the march had been peaceful. "We are unable to meet our daily needs, leave aside the school fees of our children," he said.

Tamil Nadu power-loom workers end strike

Up to 25,000 striking power-loom workers in Coimbatore and Tirupur in Tamil Nadu returned to work on September 1, ending a 27-day walkout over wages. The textile producers' association has agreed to restore wage rates in line with an agreement signed in August 2008.

The power-loom operators began their strike on August 5 over a "breach of agreement" by factory owners who had slashed wages by 10 percent,

citing a decline in market demand.

Jet Airways India pilots to strike after failed talks

The National Aviators Guild (NAG), covering 680 Jet Airways pilots, has reaffirmed its planned strike for September 7, after mediation talks over the sacking of two union officials failed this week. Jet Airways is refusing to reinstate the pilots who were dismissed after registering the newly formed NAG in July. The Regional Labour Commissioner claims that the pilots' strike would be illegal during "conciliatory proceedings" now underway.

Jet Airways has 84 aircraft, 750 pilots and operates 365 daily domestic and international flights. The airline was established as a cheap fare "air taxi" operator in 1992. In December last year the company cut expatriate staff jobs, including pilots, and reduced the salaries of employees earning over 75,000 rupees (\$US1,500) a month.

Sacked Punjab health workers protest

On September 1, over 170 sacked multi-purpose health workers rallied outside the Civil Surgeon's office in Ludhiana, Punjab over their sudden sacking after only ten months' employment. The protestors demanded their jobs back or redeployment within the Health Department.

Civil Surgeon Dr Maninderjit Singh told the health workers that they were hired in excess under the National Rural Health Mission and the department was "now making corrections". Workers said they will move their protest to the state office of the National Rural Health Mission in Chandigarh.

Sri Lankan transport workers take national action

Transport workers began a national campaign last week for a cost-of-

living allowance and an increase in the retirement age to 60 years. Workers picketed the Nittambuwa Bus Depot (50 kilometres from Colombo) on August 25 and on September 1 protested outside depots in Badulla (230 kilometres from Colombo) and Moneragala (166 kilometres from Colombo). Transport workers' basic monthly salary is 8,530 rupees (\$US74).

Cambodian garment workers strike

Over 3,000 employees at the Sky High garment factory in the Dangkor district struck on August 24 over poor working conditions and wage cuts. Their grievances included a 1,000-riel (\$US0.20) reduction of monthly wages, lack of compensation or assistance for those who lose vehicles stolen on Sky High property, and unpredictable, indefinite production stoppages at the garment factory.

Employees returned to work after 48 hours, having not received any response from the company. The minimum monthly wage for factory workers is \$US45 in Cambodia, but workers in some foreign-owned plants earn between \$50 and \$70 a month.

Thai police issue arrest warrants for Triumph union protest leaders

On August 28, the Dusit Police Bureau in Bangkok issued warrants for the arrest of three leaders of the Triumph International Thailand Labor Union (TITLU), following a protest by 400 garment workers who surrounded parliament the previous day—the second time this month. Police claim the protest inconvenienced officials inside the building.

Laid-off employees from the Bang Phli factory of clothing manufacturer Body Fashion (Thailand), which produces lingerie and swimwear for Triumph, were attempting to deliver a petition to Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva over the dismissal of over 1,950 workers. The parent company plans to axe over 3,700 jobs from its plants in Thailand and the Philippines.

On July 13, around 500 Bang Phli workers demonstrated outside the Board of Investment (BoI) office in Bangkok over the job cuts, claiming that the company accepted BoI incentives to relocate its factory to Nakhon Sawan where labour is only 180 baht (\$US5.30) per day per worker compared to the 333 baht paid at Bang Phli.

Locked-out Queensland sugar workers return

Some 250 locked-out employees from Bundaberg Sugar processing mills in Queensland returned to work on August 30, after the Australian

Workers Union (AWU) brokered an interim deal with management for a new agreement.

Negotiations with the AWU, Electrical Trades Union and Australian Metal Workers Union were deadlocked for six months, the main sticking point being Bundaberg's insistence that workers give up one week's annual leave for a wage rise. The dispute came to a head last week when the company locked out the workers after they began implementing four-hour strikes at the beginning of each shift.

The company has agreed not to take away one week's annual leave but wants the non-crush season working week increased to 38 hours. The AWU said it would continue negotiating with the company.

New South Wales TAFE teachers strike

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers staged a 24-hour state-wide strike on September 2 against government plans to boost teaching hours. The NSW government wants teaching time increased by 71 hours per year for temporary and permanent teachers, current limits on weekly teaching hours removed and a reduction of professional development time.

An estimated 4,000 teachers rallied outside state parliament and voted unanimously to continue their industrial campaign. It was the second stoppage in a month by NSW Teachers Federation members over the issue.

University lecturers vote to strike

University lecturers in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria have voted for strike action for a new workplace agreement covering 30 universities. National Tertiary Education Union members are expected to endorse a 24-hour strike for September 16 at campus meetings this week.

The NTEU wants annual pay rises of between 4 and 6 percent, stricter workload regulation, restoration of union rights and limits on the use of fixed contracts.

Some 10,000 university staff in Victoria struck for 24 hours in May as part of a national campaign to restore conditions lost under the Howard government. In 2005, individual agreements were imposed on all university employees, limits removed on the number of casuals and union access to members restricted. Restoration of conditions lost has become the main sticking point in negotiations.

New Zealand telecommunications engineers continue strike

Around 700 lines engineers employed by Telecom NZ subsidiaries Transfield Services and Downer EDI are maintaining strike action begun on August 24 over Telecom's plan to contract their work out to Visionstream.

In a move designed to break the strike, Telecom NZ has begun transferring work to Visionstream one month before the contract is due to start. Visionstream claims it has already recruited enough engineers as owner-operators for installing and repairing Chorus' phone and broadband connections in Auckland, Northland and Waitakere. Transfield and Downer EDI announced they will begin shedding jobs earlier than anticipated.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union members are opposed to Visionstream's sub-contracting model, which the union claims will lower their income by 50 and 66 percent. Under the plan, 900 engineers in the Auckland and Northland regions will have to become owner-operators or lose their jobs. As owner-operators, engineers will pay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools, plus cover vehicle operating costs.

New Zealand postal workers step up industrial campaign

On September 1, Christchurch and Wellington-based workers at state-owned Express Couriers Limited (ECL)—NZ Post's largest courier and logistics subsidiary—voted for strike action for a new collective agreement covering processing, admin and finance employees. Around 800 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union members implemented a work-to-rule last month after negotiations with ECL broke down.

Workers have rejected the company's offer, which ECL chief executive Mark Gibson claimed to be "fair" in the "current economic conditions". Neither party has reported details of the rejected offer.

Zeal 320 cabin crew accept inferior settlement

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at Air NZ's subsidiary Zeal 320 have accepted a new work agreement after a drawn-out campaign that began in April. The EPMU claims that the deal is a victory but it falls well short of original demands by the 240 workers for pay parity with their colleagues at Air NZ.

Zeal flight attendants work on Air NZ's short-haul international routes, and, according to the union, are paid up to \$30,000 dollars a year less than attendants directly employed by Air NZ doing the same work.

The settlement includes a 3.95 percent pay rise (below the 4 percent which flight attendants rejected in July), a 6.7 percent increase in a tour-of-duty allowance after 12 months (below the 8 percent allowance increase also rejected in July), a new guaranteed allowance between \$149 and \$186 a fortnight based on last year's value of an at-risk bonus scheme, a \$1,000 up-front payment, and various non-financial clauses.



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