

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 July 2010

China: Strikes continue in manufacturing sector

Up to 500 factory workers at the Japanese automotive electronics manufacturer Omron in Guangzhou, southern China struck on July 14 in the latest disruption in the manufacturing hub over demands for better wages and working conditions. The factory, which employs over 800 people, mainly produces switches and ignition keys for Honda. Workers want a pay rise of at least 40 percent from their current monthly salary of 1,270 yuan (\$US186).

Meanwhile, a strike at Atsumitec Auto Parts, a Honda parts factory in Guangdong, has ended after more than a week. Workers walked out on July 12 to demand a pay rise of 500 yuan a month. Media reports said that while strikers compromised by withdrawing previous demands that management apologise for its attack on conditions and terminate some Japanese supervisors, they insisted on the pay rise. It is not yet clear whether employees' demands were met.

Indian income tax workers strike

On July 15, nearly 50,000 income tax employees and officials went on a one-day national strike to support a 12-point charter of demands. Workers want an end to outsourcing of departmental functions at the central processing centre in Bangalore. The strike was called by the Joint Council of Action (JCA), comprising the Income Tax Employees' Federation and the Income Tax Gazetted Officers' Association.

Bangladeshi weavers on strike

At least 25,000 looms in Narsingdim division, 50 kilometres north of Dhaka, have been idle since July 13 after weavers walked off the job to support their charter of 13 demands. Workers want permanent contracts for 12,000 weavers, weekly holidays, and a 20 percent pay rise. Narsingdi Textile Workers' Federation members also want the release of two union officials arrested on July 18.

Talks with the power loom owners broke down on July 19. The Power Loom Owners' Association claimed that workers' wages and bonuses were recently increased from 600 taka a month to 1,200 taka (\$US22.85). At less than \$1 a day, Bangladeshi textile and garment workers are among the lowest paid workers in the world.

Bangladesh: Postal strike ends without resolution

At least 24,000 non-permanent Bangladeshi postal department workers ended their 12-day strike for a pay rise and other demands on July 22. Mail services at 8,500 rural post offices were affected while over 600 extra-departmental sub-post offices in metro Khulna were closed during the strike. The Postal Extra-Departmental Workers' Union wants workers allowances increased by 20 percent to between 3,200 taka and 4,500 taka a month. Other demands included festival and outfit allowances and permanent appointment after five years' service.

Workers ended a hunger strike in June after the postal department promised to consider demands and respond by July 11, which it has not done so. A union spokesman said workers have planned indefinite strike action from August 8 if their claims are not met.

Australian paint manufacture workers walk out

On July 19, Liquor, Hospitality, Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members at Australia's largest paint manufacturer Wattyl walked off the job for a week in a national stoppage for a new pay offer. The paint workers struck for 24-hours and held daily stoppages of up to four hours earlier this month at various Wattyl locations across Australia.

The union wants a three-year agreement, effective from February 2010, with wage increases of 12 percent over three years to keep in step with cost of living increases. Wattyl has refused to budge on a national pay offer of 8.5 percent over three years.

Wattyl has plants in Australia and New Zealand and employs over 1,000 people.

Sydney airport refuellers' ordered to end strike

Contracted casual refuellers at Sydney Airport were ordered back to work this week after the workplace relations tribunal, Fair Work Australia, banned strike action for the next month. The 19 casual employees of body-hire firm Adecco walked off the job on July 21 in support of 24 full-time employees at Airport Fuel Services (AFS) who struck on the same day against the company's new pay offer.

AFS, which is owned by Qantas, BP, Caltex and Mobil, has offered a 5 percent pay rise to full-time employees but not for casual employees. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) wants all 43 employees to receive an annual 3.5 percent pay rise over three years. Negotiations have been ongoing for six months.

The TWU claimed that casual workers contracted by Adecco will lose at least \$14,000 in wages under the new deal. AFS wants to introduce a pay structure for future employees, which it says will be “more competitive than the above-market wages” paid to current workers. TWU federal secretary Tony Sheldon said, “This is a cheap and nasty move to replace permanent staff with labour hire.” TWU members are expected to vote for further strike action this week.

Queensland sugar mill workers resume strike action

Workers at seven Sucrogen sugar mills in North Queensland walked off the job for two days on July 19 in a long-running dispute over a new work agreement. It was the third stoppage in two months. Several unions, including the Australian Workers Union (AWU), the Australian Metal Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union, have proposed a “roll-over” enterprise agreement with a 10 percent annual pay increase.

After seven months’ of negotiations, Sucrogen, an arm of the sugar giant CSR, has refused to lift its offer of a 3.75 percent annual pay rise for two years and wants more control over the timing of rostered days off. Negotiations have been ongoing for over six months and are currently being supervised by the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal.

The AWU claims said that workers’ wage demands are a catch-up for marginal pay rises during the past decade when sugar prices were low. The three unions will meet next week to discuss Sucrogen’s request for Fair Work Australia arbitration.

Perth rail ticket inspectors stop work

Up to 100 MSS Revenue Protection Officers who check tickets and issue fines on the trains in Perth, the Western Australian capital, walked off the job on July 22 for four hours over a pay dispute. They planned to vote late this week for a possible 12-hour work ban if their claims are not met. The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union members have not had a pay rise for over two years and want a 12 percent pay rise over two years with 18 months’ back pay. Other demands include additional training and the removal of penalty rate anomalies. MSS has offered the minimum FWA wage increase of \$26 per week, which they are entitled to anyway, a 1.4 percent rise for the first year and a 3 percent annual increase for the next two years.

Maintenance unions accepts job outsourcing at National Foods

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU) have accepted plans by National Foods, Australia’s largest food and beverage processor, to outsource maintenance jobs at its factories. Twenty-seven maintenance workers at the company’s Morwell factory in Victoria were sacked on June 29.

The AMWU and ETU claimed the sackings were not redundancies as stated by the company and were illegal because the jobs remained and the workers were being replaced by contractors. Workers picketed the factory to demand reinstatement and the unions claimed that they would take legal action against the company.

The unions claimed victory this week because they had won an

improved redundancy payout. The deal involves an average \$55,000 payout to each worker and “preferential treatment” if they apply for jobs with the new labour hire company. With no other alternative, the 27 maintenance workers accepted the package.

National Foods has production facilities and sales offices in every Australian state, as well as New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia, and employs approximately 5,000 workers.

New Zealand workers protests over new industrial laws

Some 300 people, including workers, activists and trade unionists, rallied on July 18 outside the ruling National Party’s annual conference in Auckland’s SkyCity Grand Hotel, to protest proposed changes to New Zealand’s employment laws. Around 40 people briefly entered the hotel, but were confronted by police. Although police said there were no injuries one protestor said she had been “belted in the face by the cops”. Smaller protests were also held in Dunedin, Christchurch and Wellington over the weekend.

The law changes will extend a current temporary law that allows all new employees to be fired at any time during a 90-day “trial period” without the employer being required to provide any reason and with no right of appeal for sacked workers. Currently over 22 percent of new recruits have been fired under the act. Prime Minister John Key also announced new restrictions on sick leave and attacks on annual leave entitlements. The new laws will also restrict union access to work sites, requiring unions to seek consent from employers to enter premises.

Papua New Guinea fishing company threatens to sack unionists

Papua New Guinea Maritime and Transport Workers’ Union (PNGM&TWU) members at the Frabelle fishing company have been told by management to resign from the union or lose their jobs. Some 357 out of around 1,000 workers at the company are union members.

More than 500 workers at Frabelle’s cannery in Lae went on strike in March over low wages and safety concerns. On May 19, union membership authority forms were submitted to Frabelle that gave the PNGM&TWU the legal right to represent the workers. Management, however, has refused to meet union representatives. The union claims that Frabelle’s actions breach PNG labour laws and has called for the government’s labour and industrial relations secretary to investigate.



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