

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 August 2010

India: retrenched garment workers protest for jobs

More than 500 workers from Players Garments in Nanjangud, Karnataka held a one-day sit down protest outside the deputy labour commissioner's office on August 2 to demand their jobs back.

The company shut down its production unit in March this year, laying off 508 employees who were owed several months of wages. The sacked workers also discovered that when they tried to claim compensation from the provident fund the company had resumed operations and their claim was denied.

Players had previously been ordered by the labour court to pay each worker 70,000 rupees (\$US1,570) under the Voluntary Retirement Scheme, which they have not received.

Volvo bus workers launch indefinite strike

On August 3, over 600 Volvo Buses India employees in Bangalore, Karnataka began indefinite strike action to demand a pay rise, resolution of their two-year demand for permanency for temporary employees and reinstatement of workers suspended in April. The company claims that it has already lost production of 60 buses from three months of go-slow industrial action.

India: Assam state power workers begin industrial action

Assam State Power Workers' Union (ASPWU) members began industrial action for a pay rise. Their action includes hour-long workplace demonstrations commencing August 5, a six-hour hunger strike on August 10 and a pen-down strike on August 25.

Workers claim they are owed an increase from a 2007 pay revision, which covers 8,000 power workers. According to the union, the Assam State Electricity Board has ignored repeated submissions over the outstanding increase.

Nepal transport workers end strike

Striking transport workers in the Mechi zone, Nepal returned to work on August 3, ending a three-day strike to demand local authorities honour a previous agreement to pay compensation for the death of two colleagues

while on duty. Bus driver Sher Bahadur Magar was killed by a group of passengers on March 10 and taxi driver Dipak Pandey was killed two years ago by unidentified assailants.

Authorities finally agreed to pay 70,000 rupees (\$US7,000) to each victim's family. The settlement falls far short of the original pledge by the authority of 1 million rupees in compensation. The strike was called by a joint front of the All Nepal Transport Laborers Union, Nepal Transport Free Laborers Organisation and Nepal Transport Laborers Union.

Sri Lankan university teachers threaten more industrial action

At least 4,000 teachers and 310 professors at 18 public universities in Sri Lanka have given the government until August 16 to address their pay demand. They want a 25 percent pay increase or they will withdraw their voluntary administrative duties. Lecturers warned that the ban would affect most university functions, including exams.

The lecturers said that they have not had a pay increase since 1993 and that the government has repeatedly ignored their pay claim discussions since 2008. The threat came after the government failed to respond to their 24-hour strike on August 3.

Indonesian mine workers strike

Over 1,500 workers at the Batu Hijau gold and copper mine on Sumbawa Island, Indonesia walked off the job on August 1 to demand unpaid overtime payments and an improved work schedule. They plan to remain on strike until August 10.

The strike was sparked when the mine owner, Newmont Mining Corporation (NMC), threatened legal action against a Manpower Office directive that the company pay 126 billion rupees (\$US14.1 million) in overtime, covering the period from June 2008 to June 2010. The Chemical Energy and Mining division of the Indonesian Workers Union is continuing talks with the company.

The Indonesian unit of NMC is the company's largest gold producer, employing over 7,000 people.

Jakarta dock workers protest

At least 800 dock workers rallied outside ministerial offices in Jakarta on July 28 to demand their employer, Hutchison Port Holdings (HPH),

and state-owned Pelindo 2 implement a four-point settlement negotiated in April last year. Workers claimed that their pay and conditions are well below those of colleagues at a neighbouring container terminal co-owned by HPH and Pelindo 2.

The rally was led by the ITF-affiliated Serikat Pekerja Terminal Petikemas Koja (SPTPK Koja) and the seafarers' union Kesatuan Pelaut Indonesia.

Xstrata mine workers demand wage rise

Workers at Xstrata's Collinsville, six-million tonne-per-year, coal mine in north Queensland have been on strike since July 27 over a pay dispute. The 200 Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members, employees of Thiess, a unit of Leighton Holdings, want a 9 percent rise to be followed by 6 percent and 5 percent rises. They also want superannuation contributions lifted to 12 percent.

Thiess has offered a 6 percent pay rise to be followed by 4 percent increases for the next three years. Thiess has refused to enter talks while the strike continues.

Meanwhile the CFMEU, covering 230 striking miners at Xstrata's Tahmoor colliery in New South Wales, agreed to company demands for a suspension of strike action. Four-hour stoppages on each shift will cease on August 10 and the union and Xstrata will enter conciliatory talks with an ex-arbitration commissioner.

Negotiations have been ongoing for 19 months with over 50 meetings between the union and Xstrata. At least three times this year, in what appears to be a stalling tactic to wear down the resolve of the workers, the CFMEU has ordered the miners back to work claiming that a deal can be struck with the company. Each time the company has refused to shift its position. Xstrata has consistently rejected CFMEU demands for improved annual leave and an agreement to protect jobs and existing safety standards. A major sticking point is Xstrata's refusal to include a guarantee in the agreement that it will not replace permanent workers with contract labour.

The union also wants the rollover of the old agreement and pay parity with other mines in the southern coal fields. Xstrata is offering a pay rise of 25 percent on base salary over four years but workers claim that this figure includes existing allowances, which when excluded, take the offer to just 5.5 percent over four years. In other words, a substantial real wage cut.

New South Wales rail workers call for strike

At least 400 maintenance and administrative employees of the state-owned RailCorp stopped work for four hours on August 5 and rallied at Burwood Park, Sydney for a new enterprise agreement. The strike affected maintenance depots and workshops at Hornsby, Flemington, Mortdale and Sydenham. Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members voted to impose a ban on selling tickets for 24 hours on August 9.

The strike follows weeks of talks between RailCorp and the RTBU, which failed to reach agreement. Workers want a 5 percent pay rise and assurances that the increase will not have an impact on staffing levels. RailCorp has agreed to some pay rises, but only after cutbacks to train guards and CCTV-monitoring staff.

An RTBU spokesman said a 24-hour strike is planned for August 18, three days before the federal election. The union and RailCorp are due to

return to the Fair Work Australia tribunal on Monday.

Western Australian public hospital clerical workers stop work

Hundreds of clerical workers at public hospitals in the Perth metropolitan area attended lunchtime stop-work meetings this week as part of a campaign for a wage increase and settlement of a re-classification dispute with the Western Australian Health Department. Workers at the Royal Perth Hospital displayed placards reading "No Clerks... No paperwork, No admissions, No Money!".

Health Services Union members want up to \$5,000 per year extra, which they claim will compensate them for increased workloads and responsibilities following new work procedures to speed up emergency patient processing and private insurance claims. Workers said they would impose bans and work-to-rule from August 13.

The Health Department and the state Liberal government are trying to force the dispute into the WA Industrial Relations Commission.

Western Australian rail ticket inspectors on strike

Revenue protection officers, who check tickets and issue fines on Perth's trains, walked off the job for two consecutive 24-hour periods starting yesterday morning. The stoppages will mean the officers will not return to work until Sunday, August 8.

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, and a 1.4 percent rise for the first year and a 3 percent annual increase for the next two years.

New Zealand radiographers resume industrial action

Radiographers at public hospitals across New Zealand have resumed industrial action over a government-imposed pay freeze. On August 2, Association of Professional and Executive Employees (Apex) members at the Bay of Plenty District Hospital Board (DHB) began two weeks of work-to-rule action and banned weekend work. Two weeks earlier, radiographers at DHBs in Auckland, Northland, Wellington, Canterbury and at the New Zealand Blood Service began work to rule action over the issue.

Apex had called off limited strike action by 900 members in February and again in March to facilitate negotiations, which subsequently failed. Radiographers want a 3 percent pay increase.

Public housing workers strike

Public Service Association (PSA) members at the state-owned Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) struck for two hours on July 29 at

more than 40 centres across the country. Workers held protests in many areas, including Auckland, and outside the HNZC national office in Wellington.

The action escalates a work-to-rule campaign begun on June 30 after ten months of pay bargaining broke down. The PSA wants a 2 percent annual pay increase over two years and more clearly defined pay scales. The union claimed that members are forced to work unpaid overtime in an attempt to manage over 600 properties each. This compares with 250 in the private sector. PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said HNZC plans to cut its maintenance budget by 21 percent, which will increase the workload on overworked staff.

Papua New Guinea: Fish processing workers suspended

Around 400 workers at the RD Tuna Cannery in Madang have been suspended after they went on strike on July 22. Workers claimed that the company was paying less than the national minimum wage of 2.29 kina (\$US0.85) an hour. RD has applied to the National Tripartite Consultative Council requesting that the meals, housing and transportation it gives workers be considered part of their wages. The PNG Department of Labour has sided with the company and declared the strike action illegal.

The RD Tuna Cannery, which employs about 1,000 workers in Madang, is owned by the Phillipines-based RD Group.

PNG bank workers vote on strike action

Around 1,600 members of the PNG Banks and Financial Institution Workers Union (PNGB&FIW) employed at 35 Bank South Pacific (BSP) branches voted this week on whether to hold national industrial action. The ballot was called after nine months of negotiations between the union and BSP over a new industrial agreement broke down. The PNGB&FIW wants increased housing allowances, a higher duty allowance, leave entitlements based on merit and inclusion of the union in the redundancy monitoring committee.



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