

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 August 2010

India: Striking Patna University workers suspended

On August 10, over 800 striking non-teaching employees at the Patna and Lalit Narayan Mithila Universities were suspended after 40 days of strike action. At least 33,000 non-teaching employees of nine universities and 250 colleges in Patna are currently defying a Bihar state government order to end strike action which began on July 1. The walkout has affected teaching and admissions at all the universities.

The strikers are demanding wage rises and other benefits promised by the state government in 2005. These include Union Grants Commission pay scales, assured-career promotion benefits and the representation of non-teaching staff in university senates and syndicates.

Tamil Nadu TASMAC employees strike

Over 30,000 employees of the state-owned alcohol retailer, Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC), struck on August 11 to demand better pay and conditions. TASMAC workers do not have job regularisation, even after years of employment. According to the TASMAC Employees Union, its members work 12-hour days and seven days a week for 2,100-4,000 rupees per month (\$US46-\$US85).

The union claims that these working conditions violate the industrial disputes and service sector acts, which call for employment regularisation after no more than three years. This is not the first time TASMAC employees have walked out over their demands. In November 2009 and March this year they struck to demand job regularisation, time-scale pay, promotions, an eight-hour day, a six-day week, compensation for extra working hours and for all TASMAC supervisors, bar attendants and salesmen to be given permanent payroll positions. TASMAC has a monopoly over all wholesale and retail alcohol sales in Tamil Nadu.

Shillong municipal employees strike for pay arrears

Shillong Municipal Board workers in Meghalaya began a three-day strike on August 11 over low pay. They workers want the government to honour a commitment given last year for a 32-percent pay rise for all employees, retrospective from January 1, 2007. The workers have threatened to extend the strike if their demand is not met.

Striking nurses in Gujarat arrested

Over 190 striking nurses from the UN Mehta Institute of Cardiology and Research Centre at the Civil Hospital in Ahmedabad, Gujarat were detained by police for nine hours on August 10 during a protest outside the institute over the sacking of three union leaders. The nurses began a five-day strike on Monday, claiming that they were being punished for forming a union. When all but 25 of the 250 nursing staff joined the newly-formed union on August 6, management suspended three union leaders. Nurses want the suspensions lifted and their union recognised.

According to media reports, management has used students from a nursing school in Gandhinagar to break the strike.

Sri Lankan bus workers strike

Forty-five workers from the Engineering Section of the Sri Lanka Transport Board Depot in Ambalangoda walked out August 9 to demand that salaries be paid on time and for transfer of the depot manager. The striking workers picketed the depot the following day.

Sri Lanka Freedom Union leaders complained that after calling the strike they were threatened by company hired armed thugs inside the depot. The transport workers claim that they are paid their monthly wage in two or three instalments and have yet to receive the full cost-of-living allowance given to other state sector employees. Their 8,030-rupee (\$US70) monthly salary is almost 4,000 rupees less than other government employees.

Sri Lankan teachers protest

A group of Ceylon Teachers Union (CTU) members protested at the Colombo Education Zonal Office in Slave Island on August 4 to demand salary arrears, increments and distress loans.

The CTU members complained that the Rajapakse government has ignored all previous representations on their demands. The arrears total 50.5 million rupees (\$US443,000). Demonstrators submitted a memorandum to the zone director who claimed the government is short of funds and could not pay the arrears.

Indonesian gold miners end strike

Over 1,500 workers at the Batu Hijau gold and copper mine on Sumbawa Island, Indonesia returned to work on August 6, ending a six-

day strike over overtime payments. The Indonesian Workers Union has agreed to settle the dispute in court.

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 owed to 1,919 employees, some of which has been outstanding since June 2008. The Indonesian unit of NMC is the company's largest gold producer, employing over 7,000 people.

Xstrata mine strike in Queensland enters second week

Workers at Xstrata's Collinsville 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, who are employed by Thiess, want a 9 percent rise to be followed by 6 percent and 5 percent increases. They are also demanding superannuation contributions be lifted to 12 percent.

Thiess has offered a 6 percent pay rise to be followed by 4 percent increases for the next three years. The union was expected to end the strike yesterday after Thiess agreed to enter negotiations on Saturday.

New South Wales rail workers impose work bans

On August 9, Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members at the state-owned RailCorp banned the issuing of passenger tickets across Sydney's metropolitan rail network to push for a 5 percent pay increase. The action was estimated to cost RailCorp up to \$2 million. The strike follows weeks of failed talks between RailCorp and the RTBU.

RailCorp has agreed to some pay rises, but only after cutbacks to train guards and CCTV-monitoring staff. Twelve hours of talks on Monday failed to reach agreement with talks to continue through the week. An RTBU spokesman said strike action is planned for August 20, the day before the federal election, if this week's negotiations fail.

RTBU NSW secretary Alex Claassens said RailCorp was still pushing for job cuts to CCTV staff and for the removal of guards on empty trains as a trade-off for any pay rise.

Victoria University staff strike

Victoria University (VU) employees struck on August 8 and demonstrated at the student open-day after negotiations for a new work place agreement broke down.

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members want better student-to-staff ratios and a work-load reduction. An NTEU spokesman said that VU management had reneged on a 2009 agreement to increase wages and claimed that VU staff would become the lowest paid university workers in the country by the end of the year.

New Zealand medical laboratory workers suspended

The Auckland, Waitemata and Counties Manukau District Health Boards (DHBs), announced on August 6 that they will suspend around 30 medical laboratory workers in hospitals for up to six hours a day until their industrial action ends. Around 1,000 members of the New Zealand Medical Laboratory Workers Union (NZMLWU) have been taking industrial action at 13 DHBs and the New Zealand Blood Service after rejecting a 2 percent pay rise offer over two years. The action includes not answering phones and a ban on some tests. The NZMLWU has said it is seeking different pay increases at different DHBs, up to 5 percent.

Meanwhile, 900 radiographers have begun industrial action at hospitals around the country to protest a government-imposed pay freeze. The radiographers want a 3 percent pay rise.

Power-line engineers protest pay offer

Power-line engineers for Connexis, the main contractor for Orion Group's lines network in Christchurch and Canterbury, held a one-hour stop-work meeting on August 6 and rallied outside the company's Christchurch offices to demand a five percent pay rise.

The 120 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members received a 2 percent pay rise last year and have rejected an offer of just 1.6 percent for this year. The offer constitutes a real wage cut since inflation is expected to rise to 6 percent in 2011, driven by an increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 12.5 to 15 percent from October.

The Orion Group is owned by the Christchurch City Council and the Selwyn District Council. The EPMU says Orion returned a \$46 million (\$US33.06 million) profit this year.

Miners' union ends industrial action

Fifty-five miners employed by contractor HWE Mining at Newmont Waihi Gold's Favona Decline resumed normal duties on July 28 after the EPMU agreed to attend government-mediated talks with the company on August 23. Workers began rolling strike action on July 2 to oppose a new collective agreement.

A key sticking point in negotiations is management plans to give the union-negotiated pay increases to 20 non-union mineworkers. This is opposed by the EPMU, which also wants the contract to include additional annual bonus payments that will only apply to union members.

NZ teachers to vote on industrial action

Secondary school teachers will hold meetings across New Zealand on August 24 and 25 to vote on whether to take industrial action, after talks broke down between the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and the Ministry of Education over a new collective agreement.

PPTA members have overwhelmingly rejected a pay rise offer of just 1.5 percent in the first year, followed by 1 percent in the second year, which is well below inflation.

The PPTA wants a pay increase of 4 percent, an additional 1 percent employer contribution to KiwiSaver retirement funds and a laptop for every secondary teacher. The union says the education ministry wants to remove restrictions around class sizes and has not addressed teachers'

concerns about health and safety. The ministry has asked the PPTA to resume negotiations.

Papua New Guinea bank union calls off strike

The PNG Banks and Financial Institution Workers Union (PNGB&FIW) re-entered negotiations with Bank South Pacific (BSP) on August 10 after union members at 35 branches voted 97 percent in favour of taking industrial action. A total of 1,229 BSP workers took part in ballots last week, which were called after nine months of negotiations between the union and BSP over a new industrial agreement broke down. The union claimed over 200 workers had been threatened with termination if they participated in the vote.

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. It says BSP has agreed in principle to all the demands except the housing allowance increase.

The PNGB&FIW represents around 1,600 BSP workers. BSP is PNG's largest bank, with a 60 percent market share in the country.



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