

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 September 2010

Bangladeshi aviation employees protest

Biman Bangladesh Airlines workers rallied at the national carrier's headquarters in Dhaka on August 31 to oppose new pay scales which exclude pension entitlements. The protesting employees also complained that while Biman workers were offered a 25-30 percent pay rise, government employees' pay has been doubled.

After occupying the offices for six hours, a spokesman for the airline's society of engineers said that the new Biman pay scale would be cancelled and the issue discussed at the company's board meeting on September 2.

Biman Bangladesh Airlines was government-owned until 2007 when it was transformed into the country's largest public limited company. Management immediately retrenched over 2,000 employees. The airline has a poor safety record and is banned from flying into several countries.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest for Eid bonus

At least 2,500 garment workers in Ashulia, Dhaka walked off the job on Wednesday for four hours to demand full payment of the Eid religious festival allowance. In Savar last Sunday over 1,000 garment workers demonstrated for payment of the festival allowance and dues. Anxious to avoid mass industrial unrest during Ramadan, Bangladesh's labour and employment minister has called on garment factory owners and managers to pay dues and festival allowances before the holiday.

Last year thousands of garment workers across Bangladesh walked off the job and protested when employers failed to pay the Eid bonuses. Demonstrations blocked streets in Dhaka and other cities as thousands of homebound people tried to leave for the Eid holiday.

India: Power-loom weavers on strike

At least 32,000 power-loom weavers in Sircilla, Andhra Pradesh are maintaining a strike begun on August 27 to demand a wage increase and an eight-hour working day. The strike closed related industries in the town, such as warping, dyeing and sizing. Several hundred weavers from the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the Powerloom Workers' Union protested at the Collectorate in Karimnagar.

The power-loom weavers' pay is minimal and less than the government-stipulated minimum wage. Paid according to the amount of cloth they produce, the weavers usually work 12-hour days for an average daily wage of 80 rupees (\$US1.80). Their income is often supplemented by other family members who roll beedies (local cigarettes).

Karnataka nurses protest sackings

Over 300 nurses from the Mysore Medical College and Research Institute marched to the District Commissioner's office in Mysore on Tuesday to protest an order cancelling the appointment of 380 nurses following allegations of irregularities in the recruitment process. Many of the nurses have been on a hunger strike since August 26 and five have been admitted to hospital as a consequence.

The district commissioner told the Karnataka State Government Nurses Association that he would forward their concerns to the state government.

Thousands of Tamil Nadu noon-meal workers arrested

On August 30, Tamil Nadu's Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam government ordered the arrest of almost 10,000 protesting noon-meal workers, most of them women, as they travelled to the state capital Chennai to demonstrate for a series of long-standing demands. This includes regularisation of service, wage increases, and a pension and general provident fund.

Public transport vehicles on major roads to Chennai were intercepted by police and the protesters detained. Almost 2,000 demonstrators at 18 separate locations in Chennai were also arrested and held in community halls.

In March, daily-rated and part-time noon-meal workers walked off the job at nine central kitchens supplying noon meals to government schools in Puducherry. In April 2007, Tamil Nadu Nutritious Noon Meal Employees Association members held sit-down protests in several cities over the current demands.

Punjab computer teachers protest

Nearly 2,000 government contractual computer teachers from across the state blocked the busy National Highway-21 on Sunday in a mass rally to demand regularisation of employment. The Government Contractual Teachers' Union state president Jaswinder Singh Bhullar said the state government had failed to honour a promise in their 2007 election manifesto to regularise their services. Bhullar said they were hired on contract in 2005.

Indonesian workers strike for holiday bonus

On August 30, 13,000 PT Panarub Industry workers in Tangerang walked off the job and rallied outside the factory in protest against an 18 percent cut to their Idul Fitri holiday bonus. The company manufactures shoes for Adidas.

By law workers who have been employed for one year are entitled to a holiday bonus, the equivalent of their respective monthly wage. Panarub workers claim that their bonus of 1.1 million rupiah has been cut by 200,000 rupiah (\$US22).

Over 1,400 workers from PT Woneel Midas Leathers in Tangerang are still on strike after walking off the job on August 27 because they have not been paid their Idul Fitri bonus for two years. The strikers also demanded that the company, which produces golf and baseball gloves, reemploy four workers who had been dismissed recently for allegedly encouraging others to demand the bonus payment.

Victorian steel workers continue strike

Silcar employees at the Bluescope Western Port in Melbourne voted on August 26 to continue strike action after management failed to address key concerns in a new work agreement. The 86 fitters and boilermakers walked off the job on August 5, after extended negotiations between Silcar and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) reached deadlock. Thirty meetings have been held with the company over the work agreement since February.

AMWU Victorian organiser Greg Warren said outstanding issues included better job security, maintenance of health and safety rights, protection from unfair dismissal, attacks on penalty rates and the right of day workers to be consulted on shift work schedules.

Silcar is attempting to break the strike using contract labour from body hire firm Adecco. The steel manufacturing plant employs around 1,400 people full-time and produces over a million tonnes of steel products annually. The strikers are maintaining a 24-hour picket at the plant.

Victorian plastics manufacturing workers on strike

About 30 Corex Plastics workers in Dandenong walked off the job on August 25 and began picketing the factory in protest over a new work agreement. The National Union of Workers members are fighting to maintain their current conditions. Corex has offered a 3 percent pay rise with existing employees keeping their redundancy entitlements but wants to reduce redundancy provisions for new employees and change entitlements for sick leave.

A picketing worker explained, "Our current EBA [Enterprise Bargaining Agreement] is our protection against unfair treatment and we want it to cover all employees working at Corex." The company has called for negotiations to resume.

South Australian nurses escalate industrial action

Nurses and midwives at South Australia's public hospitals have escalated industrial action begun on August 17 over a new work agreement. As well as maintaining an existing ban on the computer system used to calculate staffing levels, the nurses and midwives have

begun hand-writing patients' notes rather than using computers, banned all non-essential and non-clinical work, and plan to hold stop-work meetings.

Nursing and Midwifery Federation state secretary Elizabeth Dabars told the media that a pay rise offer of up to 15 percent over three years had been accepted but a dispute over staffing was unresolved. Dabars said that the state government's proposed enterprise agreement failed to address staffing levels, skills mix and professional development.

New Zealand: Auckland radiographers to resume strike action

The Association of Professional and Executive Employees (Apex) entered urgent negotiations on Thursday with District Health Boards (DHBs) in Auckland ahead of a three-day strike by medical radiation technologists (MRTs) due to begin yesterday. All elective surgery at hospitals in Auckland has been cancelled.

About 1,000 MRTs from DHBs across the country have been involved in rolling industrial action since February over a lack of progress in pay talks. Last week 65 MRTs at Auckland's Middlemore Hospital walked off the job after radiographers employed at Counties Manukau DHB and Auckland DHB were suspended for taking industrial action.

Radiographers have agreed on two pay increases of 1 percent by October, but other issues were still on the table. Apex has called a nationwide strike for September 7.

Mana Coach drivers strike

On August 31, 20 Wellington Tramways Union (WTU) members at Mana Coach Services walked off the job and picketed their depot at Paraparaumu Station, north of Wellington, over a new collective agreement. The company has refused to budge on wage rates, despite the union reaching a settlement of 11.5 percent over two years with two other Wellington companies. Drivers are also complaining that the company refuses to pay overtime and is trying to force them to work 14-hour shifts for 13 days in a row.

Union members at the Paraparaumu depot are in the minority so the company was able to maintain services during the strike.

Public post-primary school teachers vote to strike

Up to 18,000 teachers at secondary schools throughout New Zealand voted overwhelmingly at Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) meetings last week for a national stoppage on September 15 to push for a better pay offer. Plans are also in place for a series of rolling strikes later in the year, while teachers could boycott after-school meetings if they run too late.

The action follows teachers' rejection of the ministry of education's latest collective agreement offer that includes a pay rise of 1.5 percent this year, and 1 percent next year in return for removing restrictions on class sizes. PPTA wants a 4 percent pay increase, an additional 1 percent employer contribution to KiwiSaver retirement funds, a laptop for every secondary teacher and health and safety issues resolved. Teachers also voted at last week's meetings to support an addition to the collective

agreement preventing employers utilising the 90-day law where workers can be fired within a 90-day trial period.

Papua New Guinea bank workers end strike

Bank South Pacific (BSP) employees returned to work on August 31 ending a six-day strike over a new work agreement. BSP had earlier agreed in principle to demands by the PNG Banks and Financial Institution Workers Union (PNGB&FIW) that included a higher-duty allowance, improved leave entitlements and union involvement in the redundancy-monitoring committee, but rejected union demands for a housing allowance increase.

Workers decided to end the strike after BSP agreed to lift the housing allowance by 10 percent while the issue was considered by the industrial arbitration tribunal. The PNGB&FIW represents around 1,600 BSP workers. BSP is PNG's largest bank, with a 60 percent market share in the country.

PNG construction workers remain on strike

A strike at the Hides Gas Conditioning Plant and nearby construction sites for Papua New Guinea's massive liquefied natural gas project is entering its third week. Up to 100 construction workers walked off the job over poor working conditions and to support local land owners who want increased shareholdings and benefits from the project. Workers said they will remain on strike until ExxonMobil addresses their concerns.



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