

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 September 2010

Bangladesh: More strikes over Eid holiday bonuses

More than 1,500 protesting garment workers from two factories blocked the busy Dhaka-Aricha and Kaliakoir-Nabinagar highways for several hours on September 6 to demand wages in arrears and Eid holiday bonuses. Workers from one of the factories, Monno Attire, were also protesting that management wanted them to work a 24-hour shift before paying Eid bonuses.

Last week, 3,500 garment workers walked off the job to demand full payment of Eid bonuses and wages in arrears. Anxious to avoid mass industrial unrest during Ramadan, Bangladesh's labour and employment minister called on factory owners and managers to pay dues and festival allowances before the Eid holiday. According to one media report, Eid payments still appeared uncertain in more than 100 garment units.

Meanwhile, 350 employees of the LRB Garment Factory at Hemayetpur, Pabna District have been protesting at the factory since its sudden closure on Monday. Workers said they turned up for work and found the factory gate padlocked. Police claimed to be unable to locate the factory owners. Last year, just before Eid, many factory owners closed their factories and disappeared, owing thousands of workers their wages and Eid bonuses.

Pakistani court orders communications workers to end strike

The National Industrial Relations Commission (NIRC) has directed striking employees of Pakistan Telecommunication Company Ltd (PTCL) to return to work and refrain from any further action. The NIRC agreed with PTCL's claim that the strike was illegal and affecting the performance of non-striking workers.

PTCL workers across Pakistan walked off the job on August 15 over pay demands. Some telephone exchanges were turned off and hundreds of thousands of landlines were left out of service. PTCL claims it has already agreed to employee demands for a 50 percent pay rise, but striking workers want the abolition of the Unified Pay Scale (UPS), which they say is aimed at cutting regular employees' jobs. More than half of PTCL's 40,000 workers are affected by the UPS.

Pakistan International Airline pilots ordered to end work-to-rule

The Pakistan government, through the Sindh High Court, has invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act against Pakistan International Airline (PIA) cockpit crews who have been observing work-to-rule since

mid-July. Pilots face heavy fines if industrial action continues. PIA claims that 366 domestic and international flights were cancelled due to the pilots' action.

The Pakistan Airline Pilots Association (PALPA) says there is a shortage of 148 pilots in PIA and that the work-to-rule was imposed to end the over-working of cabin crew "against all international norms and standards," which is compromising safety.

PALPA has directed members to adhere to the High Court ruling and await the result of further court hearings on September 30.

India: Pune public transport workers on strike

Drivers and conductors employed on day contracts by Pune Mahanagar Parivahan Mahamandal Limited (PMPML) walked off the job on September 6, grounding over 400 buses. Strikers said 3,000 of them face an uncertain future as they have been waiting for years for permanent status. They also want wages and benefits on par with permanent employees.

A PMPML spokesman said it will not change the current recruiting arrangements, whereby an employee first works on a contract basis and only obtains permanent status when a vacancy arises. Contract workers earn around 8,000 rupees (\$US177) a month. Workers complain they have no income security because they do not know from day to day when they will be called into work.

Delhi mosquito control workers' stoppage ended

A three-day strike by the 3,200 Domestic Breeding Checkers (DBC) of the Municipal Corporation of Delhi was called off on Thursday. Their spokesman, Ashok Chaudhary, president of the Anti-Malaria Karamchari Sangh, said the government had agreed to "look into" their demand for permanent jobs.

With dengue and malaria cases rising, the strike had threatened the preparations for the October 3-14 Commonwealth Games in the city. The DBCs, who undertake door-to-door surveys to check mosquito breeding, have been demanding the regularisation of their jobs since 2008 when they struck for 47 days over the issue. Some of the sanitary inspectors have been working on contract for the past 15 years.

Punjab power-loom workers on strike

More than 600 power loom factory workers in Geeta Nagar walked off the job on September 8 to demand a pay increase on par with power loom workers in neighbouring factories at Shakti Nagar. The demand was sparked following a two-week strike by 500 Shakti Nagar workers who won pay increases of between 500 and 1,500 rupees (\$11 and \$34) a month.

Cambodian construction workers walk off

More than 700 construction workers at the Vattanac Capital high-rise in Phnom Penh walked off the job for an indefinite period on September 2 to oppose an order that they work an extra night shift in exchange for 3,000 riels (\$US0.75). Workers are currently paid \$3.50 per day. The Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia said the Doo Song Construction Company had stopped work at the site during negotiations.

A workers' representative said the company had agreed to increase wages to \$4 per day, and to restructure regular working hours, but is awaiting a response from its investors.

Xstrata miners in Queensland accept pay deal

The two-year dispute between mining operator Thiess and 200 employees at Xstrata's Collinsville coal mine in Northern Queensland has ended with workers voting to accept a new work agreement. Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members reportedly agreed to a raft of work changes.

The dispute came to a head last month with a three-week strike and blockade of the mine's rail line after miners rejected Thiess' offer for a 14 percent pay rise over three years. The union wanted a 20 percent rise over the same period with superannuation contributions lifted to 12 percent.

No details of the deal have been made public. CFMEU spokesman Steve Smythe told the media: "At the end of the day, where we agreed on this agreement was approximately where we were two-and-a-half years ago."

Corex workers in Victoria accept deal

A seven-day strike by 30 Corex Plastics employees in the Melbourne suburb of Dandenong ended on September 1 after National Union of Workers members accepted the union's deal with the company. Workers will receive a 3 percent wage increase on September 1 and another 3.5 percent in September 2011, and an extra 1 percent superannuation.

Workers walked off the job in August after Corex insisted that any new agreement must include reduced redundancy provisions for new employees and changed entitlements for sick leave.

Melbourne casino staff to vote on strike action

Fair Work Australia, the Gillard Labor government's industrial tribunal,

has authorised Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members at the Crown casino in Melbourne to participate in a ballot for protected industrial action for a new enterprise agreement. LHMU Victorian secretary Jess Walsh said the union was seeking wage increases totalling 13.5 percent over three years while the casino had offered 11 percent over the same period.

According to the union, a sticking point in its negotiations with the company is a plan by Crown to change the pay arrangements for senior dealers, effectively cutting their pay by almost \$5000 a year. The union is proposing limited stoppages during Melbourne's Spring Racing Carnival next month.

South Australian nursing union suspends industrial action

Public sector nurses in South Australia have ended industrial action after the Nursing and Midwifery Federation agreed to allow the state's Industrial Relations Commission to mediate negotiations between the union and the state Labor government.

Nurses began work bans in August over a new work agreement. Union 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 levels, skills mix and professional development remained unresolved.

Newcastle university staff hold stop-work meeting

Academics and general staff at the University of Newcastle, 200 kilometres north of Sydney, held a stop-work meeting on September 9 to discuss the next step in their industrial dispute. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has proposed a 16 percent pay rise over three years, which it says give them pay parity with other New South Wales universities. Management has offered between 10 and 12 percent over three years.

NTEU Newcastle branch president Dr Suzanne Ryan said other issues include superannuation, conditions for casual staff and fixed-term employees and academic workloads. At other Australian universities, the NTEU has pushed through agreements in recent months that provide managements with increased flexibility in using casual and short-term contracts to meet the requirements of the Gillard Labor government's new market-driven funding regime.

New South Wales nurses ordered to suspend industrial action

An industrial campaign over new rosters for more than 800 public hospital nurses in the Newcastle-based Hunter Region of New South Wales has been put on hold after Hunter Health took the dispute with the NSW Nurses Association into the state's Industrial Relations Commission.

The union and Hunter Health have been in negotiations for more than a year over controversial "balanced" nursing rosters due to start next month. The union has helped Hunter Health develop the new rosters, but union organiser Nola Scilinato said the first roster produced by Hunter Health breached agreed guidelines.

New Zealand hospital radiologists and laboratory workers take industrial action

Medical radiation technologists (MRTs) in Auckland hospitals walked off the job for three days on September 3 after last-minute talks between the Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex) and the district health boards (DHBs) failed to break a contract-negotiation deadlock. The strike was followed by a 24-hour nationwide walkout on Tuesday. Elective surgery was cancelled but a backlog of patients is waiting for images and surgery.

Apex, which represents 1,000 MRTs, has reduced its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February. It has now settled on an increase of 2 percent by October. Unresolved claims remain about better terms and conditions, better rest breaks and proper allowances. The DHBs claim they cannot afford the added cost of the unresolved demands.

Meanwhile, medical laboratory workers at 13 DHBs and NZ Blood Services are continuing industrial action after rejecting the employers' latest pay offer of a 1 percent pay rise now and another 1 percent in January. Three DHBs had been standing down up to 30 laboratory workers for six hours each day from August 6 for taking industrial action, which includes not answering phones and a ban on some tests. The New Zealand Medical Laboratory Workers Union has said it is seeking pay increases of up to 5 percent at different DHBs.

Auckland hotel workers picket over jobs

Laid-off workers at Auckland's exclusive Westin Hotel have set up a picket and vowed to fight for every job after the hotel was placed in receivership. Receivers confirmed last week they were shedding 99 staff from the hotel after a dispute between the hotel owners and individual suite holders, many of them overseas investors, went to court, resulting in a reduction in room availability. A Unite union spokesman suggested that redundancy pay should be offered, and warned that workers were prepared to occupy the hotel.



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