

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 October 2010

Cambodian garment factories maintain lockouts

Garment factory owners in Phnom Penh and Kandal province are maintaining a lockout of over 800 employees implemented immediately after the ending of a national four-day strike on September 16. The Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC), called the strike, which involved over 200,000 garment workers, to demand that the \$61 per month minimum wage agreed in July with the government, employers and the Free Trade Union of Workers be renegotiated and lifted to \$93.

Factory owners have ignored a government request to allow the suspended workers to return to work. At least 10 factories have filed damages lawsuits against CLC officials and for suspension of workers identified as strike leaders. The government, factory owners and union representatives were due to begin talks on the minimum wage issue on September 27.

Cambodian rubber plantation workers protest

Over 2,000 rubber plantation workers in Mondulakiri province protested outside the Bousraa offices of Socfin KCD, a Franco-Cambodian rubber firm, on September 27 accusing it of failing to pay them agreed day wages.

Workers complained that they were paid 5,000 riels below the agreed daily wage of 20,000 riels (\$US4.76) and were forced to begin work at 4 a.m. but were only paid from 7 a.m.

Company representatives refused to speak to the demonstrators.

India: Striking NLC miners arrested

Over 2,000 striking contract workers of state-owned Neveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu were arrested on October 1 while picketing a power station as part of a strike by 13,000 contract workers. The NLC workers walked off the job on September 19 to demand regular employment, bonuses and equal pay for equal work. The Central Industrial Security Force and the local police have been deployed at mine-heads and the thermal power stations using NLC coal.

The strike was called by the Labor Progressive Front (LPF), the Pattali Thozhilalar Sangam and the NLC Jeeva Contract Workers' Union. Talks this week failed to reach a resolution.

Punjab power-loom workers on strike

Up to 50 textile factories in Ludhiana, Punjab have been shut down for over a month due to a strike by power-loom operators. The strikers want replacement of the piece-rate pay system with the minimum wage and establishment of accident insurance and identity cards. There are over 20,000 small and medium-sized textile factories located in Ludhiana producing a range of apparels, shawls and knitwear.

Orissa communications workers strike

Members of the BSNL Casual Karamchari Sangh (BCKS) demonstrated outside of the offices of the Provident Fund Commissioner and divisional headquarters of the telecommunications giant BSNL in Berhampur on October 6 with a charter of six demands.

BSNL officials met with workers representatives later in the day and agreed to several demands, including a 100 percent pay increase to 150 rupees (\$US3.4) per day and inclusion in the provident fund and pension scheme.

Bangladesh: Garment workers locked out

On October 5, the Dynasty Group, which owns three garment factories in Ashulia, Dhaka locked out its entire workforce of 5,000 in reprisal for a strike held the day before. Dynasty did not say how long its factories would remain shut. The workers had made several demands, including a wage increase.

Bangladeshi transport workers strike

Transport workers in 16 northern districts of the Rajshahi division struck for a raft of demands on October 4. These included withdrawal of false charges filed against transport workers and their unconditional release, and end to extortion on the highways and harassment of transport workers by law enforcers.

The Bangladesh Road Transport Workers' Federation, representing drivers and owners of all vehicles, including buses, mini-buses, trucks, tank-lorries, taxi-cabs, minibuses and auto-rickshaws, called off the strike later in the day claiming that the Rajshahi divisional authorities had

“assured us that they would meet our demands”.

Sri Lankan teachers protest

Assistant teachers protested outside the Sri Lankan Ministry of Education on the outskirts of Colombo on October 6 to demand integration into the Sri Lanka Teachers Service and an increase in their allowance.

The protesters have been demanding their monthly allowance be doubled to 6,000 rupees (\$US52.70) for more than 12 months. There are around 3,500 assistant teachers in Sri Lanka.

Philippines government bans airline flight attendants' strike

The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has “assumed jurisdiction” over a dispute between Philippine Airline (PAL) and the Flight Attendants and Stewards Association of the Philippines (Fasap) and directed the union to call off a strike planned at the end of October. Both sides have been forced into compulsory arbitration.

The 1,600 member Fasap and PAL have been in dispute over wages and conditions since last November. A key sticking point is forced retirement. PAL insists that female workers hired after 1996 retire at 45 years of age and those employed after 2000 at 40. Fasap wants the retirement age lifted to 60.

In March, PAL management announced planned cost cutting measures after the European Union banned Philippine airlines from flying to the 27-country bloc after the US Federal Aviation Authority downgraded the airline's safety ratings.

Last month the PAL Employees Association, comprising the carrier's ground employees, filed a notice of strike with the Labor Department over the company's plan to spin off its non-core units and retire 2,600 employees. In August, 25 pilots and first officers on the airline's short-haul aircraft suddenly quit for higher paying jobs abroad, forcing the abrupt cancellation of some flights.

Queensland health workers strike

Over 800 Queensland Health (QH) workers, including radiographers, psychologists and social workers at hospitals in Cairns, Townsville, Toowoomba, Brisbane, Gold Coast and Sunshine Coast, walked out on October 7 over a new enterprise agreement. Four hundred health workers rallied outside Parliament House in Brisbane.

Queensland Public Sector Union (QPSU) and Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) want a 4.5 percent annual pay increase over three years. The government is offering just 2.5 percent annual increases over the same period which workers claim is below inflation. QPSU members are also complaining about excessive workloads and have imposed bans on recording data for QH.

Queensland sugar mill workers accept wage deal

Around 1,500 workers at seven Sucrogen sugar mills on Queensland's North Coast, have voted to accept an 8 percent pay increase over two years, 2 percent below their original demand. After years of below-inflation pay rises—agreed to by the unions—the workers demanded a 10 percent pay increase over two years. The company had refused to budge from its original offer of 7 percent over two years and productivity trade-offs, which included management having the power to dictate the timing of rostered days off.

The agreement brings an end to a 12-month dispute between Sucrogen and the Australian Workers Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Communications Electrical and Plumbers Union and saw a series of work stoppages that ended in July when the unions accepted the federal Labor government's Fair Work Australia workplace relations tribunal order to suspend all industrial action.

Western Australian hospital workers' union calls off industrial action

On September 30, the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) ordered its 8,000 members in the state's public hospitals to lift work bans, without a resolution on key issues in their pay dispute. The directive came after officials met with government representatives in the WA Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). The government offered a paltry pay rise offer of 9 percent over three years and agreed to remove some trade-offs affecting casual employees and rosters. It has not backed down on its demand that anti-privatisation clauses in their enterprise agreement be removed.

Western Australian hospital support staff want a 15-18 percent pay rise over three years. Many of the workers earn less than \$40,000 per year and are struggling financially following steep increases in household electricity, gas and water charges imposed in the state budget handed down in May this year.

The new offer will be put to members in the next week and a half and a follow-up meeting held in the IRC on October 11.

Melbourne casino staff vote to strike

LHMU members at Crown, Australia's largest gambling casino, have voted by 97 percent to strike during Melbourne's Spring Racing Carnival, a major annual tourist attraction. The walkout is expected to severely disrupt gaming operations during the casino's busiest period for the year.

The union wants a wage increase of 13.5 percent over three years but the casino has only offered 11 percent over the same period. Crown also plans to change the pay arrangements for senior dealers, effectively cutting their pay by almost \$5,000 a year.

Crown is the largest and richest casino in the Southern Hemisphere and has just announced a \$292 million profit. It is spending \$450 million upgrading and expanding the casino. Last week Crown awarded its CEO a 6.9 percent pay increase bringing his annual income up to \$2.9 million.

Victorian port workers on strike

Fifteen employees of Midway Geelong who load woodchip on ships at the company's Corio Quay facility in Geelong walked off the job on

October 1 over a new work agreement. Construction, Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members want a 5 percent pay rise over two years. Midway has offered just 3.8 percent. Both increases are below Melbourne's consumer price index rate of 2.8 percent.

A CFMEU official said the action was indefinite and had been approved by the Industrial Relations Commission. Strikers have accused the company of bringing in workers from interstate to break the strike.

New Zealand medical laboratory workers strike

Medical laboratory workers at the NZ Blood Service in Palmerston North plan to strike on October 8 and 11 after the company announced it was suspending five of its six staff members for implementing work bans. Lab workers in Northland, Auckland and Counties Manukau health boards will walk off the job for 24 hours on October 18, as will Blood Service workers in Waikato.

The New Zealand Medical Laboratory Workers Union, with 400 members in the public health system, has been in dispute with 13 District Health Boards (DHBs) and NZ Blood Services for over three months over a new collective agreement. Several DHBs had been standing down up to 30 laboratory workers for six hours each day from August 6 for taking minor industrial action, which includes not answering phones and a ban on some tests. Up to now the union had failed to take any industrial action in support of the stood down workers.

Employers have offered an immediate pay rise of 1 percent and another 1 percent in January, but the union wants pay increases of up to 5 percent at different DHBs.

New Zealand radiographers on strike

As part of a national wage dispute by 1,000 Medical radiation technologists (MRTs) 47 radiographers at the Nelson/Marlborough DHB will strike from 4.30 p.m. October 8 to 8 a.m. on Monday morning. MRTs in Auckland hospitals walked off the job for three days on September 3, followed by a 24-hour nationwide strike on September 7 after negotiations for a new contract reached deadlock.

The Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex) has reduced its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February. It had settled on an increase of 2 percent by October, but unresolved claims remained about better terms and conditions, better rest breaks and proper allowances. The DHBs claim they cannot afford the added cost of the unresolved demands.

JB Hi Fi workers picket New Zealand stores

Striking JB Hi Fi workers and Unite union delegates picketed stores in New Lynn, Albany and Wellington to demand a wage increase on October 1, the day the government increased its Goods and Services Tax (GST) from 12.5 percent to 15 percent. Picketers' slogans said "\$15 per hour, not 15 percent GST". Unite claims JB Hi-Fi workers have not had a pay increase for two years and are paid just \$13.50 an hour.

There has been on-going limited industrial action at JB Hi-Fi stores since early April. Half-day stoppages were held on April 9, April 16, and

May 1. The electrical retailer has nine outlets in New Zealand.

French Polynesian government workers strike

A raft of strike notices has been issued by government employees in the French Polynesia town of Teva i Uta after the local government announced plans to cut public service provisions.

Fuel transport workers and university workers planned to strike this week while an eight-week strike by other public employees calling for the resignation of the mayor ended this week without resolution. Other planned strikes are expected to affect gas, electricity and the airport.



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