

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 July 2011

Korean bank workers strike in fourth week

In the longest bank stoppage in South Korea's history, over 2,800 workers at Standard Chartered (SC) First Bank or half its workforce are maintaining strike action begun on June 27 against a new performance-based pay scheme and restructure. The bank has been forced to close 43 of its 400 branches, prompting South Korea's financial regulator to order the bank to boost liquidity management following a run of withdrawals. About 1 trillion won (\$947 million) has been withdrawn since the prolonged walkout began.

According to the SC union, which is affiliated to the *Korean Financial Industry Union*, planned restructure and new pay scheme would cut salaries by up to 46 percent and close 27 branches. SC First Bank is the first lender in South Korea to attempt to replace the traditional seniority-based pay system with a performance-based system.

Standard Chartered took over Korea First Bank for 3.4 trillion won (\$US3.3 billion) in April 2005 and renamed it SC First Bank. It was the largest ever takeover by the British banking giant.

India: Jammu and Kashmir government workers strike

On Monday, thousands of Jammu and Kashmir government employees in Srinagar walked off the job and marched to the civil secretariat's office. Workers demands included payment of salary arrears as per the recommendations of the Sixth Pay Commission, a raise in the retirement age from 58 to 60, regular employment for daily wage workers and ad hoc employees, and increased payments for Anganwadi (child care) workers.

Hundreds of protesters were injured, some hospitalised, and dozens detained after police attacked the protest. Joint Consultative Committee union officials told the rally that the government has had three years to deliver the promised salary increases and "shouldn't take its five hundred thousand employees for granted."

Orissa technology institute employees protest

State Institute of Educational Technology (SIET) employees in Bhubaneswar, Orissa held a three-hour protest outside the School and Mass Education Secretary's residence on July 15 to demand 20

months' unpaid wages. Protesters carried the body of Jitendra Murmu, a work colleague who died because he had no wages to pay his medical expenses. The workers demanded compensation for Murmu's family.

Cigarette-rollers in Andhra Pradesh locked out

Over one million beedi workers (cigarette-rollers) are jobless after managers of cigarette factories in Telangana and Mebak, Andhra Pradesh closed their factories and stopped supplying tobacco leaf to home-based workers.

The employers' lockout is against Government Order No.41 which demanded beedi workers' wages be raised from 80 rupees per 1,000 cigarettes rolled to 158 rupees (\$US3.54). A spokesman for the Beedi Workers Joint Action Committee said that employers had threatened to move production to another state unless the cigarette-rollers accepted lower wages.

West Bengal tea estate workers locked out

Over 800 workers at the Kalaincherra Tea Estate in Cachar, West Bengal have been locked out since Sunday in a dispute over increased workloads. On July 16, estate workers rallied outside the manager's office in protest against increased workloads and working hours for female employees.

Management refused to talk to the protesting workers and on the next day locked the estate and stopped all wages and food rations. Barak Valley Cha Shramik Union official said that the estate manager pinned a lockout notice on the front gate of the estate and left without giving notice.

Pakistani government hospital doctors walk out

The Young Doctors Association (YDA) of the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) in Lahore walked off the job for four hours on Tuesday to protest the government's failure to honour commitments given in March 2010 to improve pay scales and service structure, and regularise doctors working on contract basis. The

doctors ended a ten-day strike in April, after the Health Secretary made a commitment to resolve the doctors' concerns and issue improved pay rates by July 1. The issue remains unresolved.

Vietnamese garment workers strike

On July 13, at least 2,000 employees of the South Korean-owned Ivory Garment factory in Vu Thu town in Thai Binh province walked off the job to demand a bonus increase on par with workers in neighbouring factories. Their current monthly salary is 1.5 million dong (\$US75), with those employed for five or more years paid 2 million dong. The garment workers want bonus increases that include overtime pay lifted from \$10 to \$20 per month and bonuses for senior staff from \$1 to \$2.50 per month. Strikers returned to work after management apparently agreed to some of their demands.

The local media reported that government authorities are fearful that more pay strikes will break out because Vietnam's cost of living has increased by 13.5 percent in the first half of 2011.

Queensland bus drivers on walk-out

At least 120 bus drivers of Veolia Transport, which services commuter routes in Brisbane and Redland Bay, south-east Queensland, struck for 28 hours on Thursday in a long-running pay dispute. The bus company implemented its Saturday timetable for Thursday and Friday, cancelling all school services.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members, who are currently paid \$19 an hour, want 5 percent annual pay increases in a new three-year work agreement. The company has offered 4 percent annual increases. A TWU spokesman said the union and company had been negotiating for six months and that talks would resume after the strike.

Western Australian maritime workers strike

Over 30 maritime employees at the Mermaid Marine Vessel Operations' Dampier supply base in the Pilbara walked off the job on Friday, July 15 after six months of negotiations for a new four-year work agreement reached deadlock. Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members imposed overtime bans on Saturday and Sunday and struck again for 24 hours on Monday.

Major stumbling points in the negotiations are accommodation allowances and increased casualisation. The union wants the accommodation allowance lifted from \$670 per week to \$1,200, to cover high rents in Dampier, and casual numbers reduced. Sixty-five percent of Mermaid Marine's workforce is casual at the Dampier supply base and 85 percent casualisation on the company's vessels.

Canberra nurses apply for ballot to take strike action

Australian Capital Territory nurses and midwives have applied to Fair Work Australia for approval to hold a ballot to take strike action after rejecting the government's latest pay offer in a new workplace agreement. The government's offer will strip away a qualification allowance in return for a 3.5 percent annual pay increase over two years.

The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) wants annual 6 percent pay rises over two years with no trade-off of entitlements. According to an ANF official, the government's offer if accepted would deliver a significant pay cut for part-time nurses.

New Zealand firefighters file strike notice

The New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union (NZPFU) filed notice of strike action on Friday. Negotiations for a new Collective Employment Agreement (CEA) covering 1,800 professional firefighters across New Zealand have been ongoing since November 2010. The union had previously withdrawn notices of strike action because the Employment Court ruled that the bargaining process between the parties had not been complied with.

The NZPFU wants a pay increase of 3.75 percent for the first six months, to bring the basic pay of a firefighter up to the minimum hourly rate for adult workers, and a further 5 percent for the next 12 months. According to the union, the New Zealand Fire Service has only offered a 2.5 percent increase and wants changes to the make-up of the total weekly wage.

Strike action is planned to commence on August 5, with firefighters only responding to emergency calls and no longer carrying out routine paperwork and checks.

Papua New Guinea sugarcane harvesters on strike

At least 1,300 sugar plantation workers from the harvesting and transport section of Ramu-Agri Industries Ltd (RAIL) in Gusap, on Papua New Guinea's north coast, walked off the job on Wednesday to demand that the company restore shift, overtime and weekend payments.

The plantation workers claim that since the inception of Ramu Sugar in 1982 and up to 2008, they were paid overtime and double time on weekends. The entitlements were scrapped in 2009. The district governor has begun talks with the strikers.



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