

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 July 2011

Korean bank workers remain on strike

Standard Chartered (SC) First Bank workers in Korea are continuing strike action they began on June 22 in protest against company attempts to impose performance pay. The walkout by over 2,800 workers is the longest bank stoppage in South Korean history. The union has rejected a management offer to join a combined union-management task force to examine a modified proposal that would raise the average base pay of union members by 5 percent.

According to the SC union, the new pay scheme and planned restructure 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 performance pay. Standard Chartered First Bank management declared on Monday that would not back down on the regressive pay system.

Bangladeshi apparel workers demand holiday rights

On July 22, Jahin Tex Garments workers at Rajedrapur in Gazipur, Dhaka walked off the job and demonstrated to demand a six-day break for the Eid holiday on August 2. Five workers were injured when police intervened to break up the protest. Management granted the six-day holiday on the condition that workers work three holidays before Eid.

India: West Bengal tea plantation workers protest

Progressive Tea Workers' Union (PTWU) members at 208 gardens in the Dooars and Terai plains in the foothills of the Himalayas walked off the job on Monday and held "gate" meetings to demand their wages be increased from 67 rupees to 250 rupees (\$US5.67). Protesting workers at Kerala Valley in Jalpaiguri briefly stopped a tea truck leaving the garden and threatened to permanently block shipments from all the tea gardens if their demand was not granted. Workers have rejected a miniscule annual 8-rupee increase in the daily wage over the next three years.

West Bengal tea plantation lifts lockout

Over 800 workers at the Kalaincherra Tea Estate in Cachar, West Bengal returned to work on Tuesday after being locked out for nine days.

The estate owner, Kolkata-based Lova Tea, agreed to enter talks with the INTUC-affiliated Barak Valley Cha Shramik Union over grievances. Workers were locked out on July 17 and food rations stopped after they demonstrated at the manager's office to oppose increased workloads for female workers.

Pakistan power union calls for end to strike

In a sell-out deal, the People's Workers Union (PWU) on Tuesday signed a "compromise" agreement with the Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) and the Sindh government that ends a three-month strike by thousands of KESC employees. The agreement, reached behind closed doors in the Governor's House, has not been put to striking workers for ratification.

Thousands of KESC workers walked off the job on April 30 against plans to transfer regular "non-core", non-technical workers onto contracts. The 4,000 non-core workers were sacked in January and "reinstated" into the "surplus pool" several weeks later, after the government intervened. Workers rejected a voluntary separation scheme offer and demanded to be placed back in their old jobs.

Under the sell-out agreement, non-core positions will be dissolved and workers in the surplus pool offered redundancy under the voluntary separation scheme with an additional three months' pay if they accept the offer before Ramadan. Workers who refuse redundancy will remain in the surplus pool and absorbed back into the workforce "according to their proficiency." Non-core workers, however, are mostly unqualified and uneducated and therefore unable to accept any vacant technical or administrative positions.

Beer workers demonstrate in Cambodia

At least 60 employees of the Cambrew beer company struck on Tuesday and rallied at the company's head office in Phnom Penh to demand overtime rates for Sunday work. The female workers, who promote the company's Angkor beer products, want the company to implement an Arbitration Council directive doubling their Sunday wages to \$US4. One worker said she had worked as a Cambrew promoter for 10 years but was only received \$50 a month. Workers said they will begin protesting at beer gardens until their demand is met.

Cambodian garment workers get payout

After months of protests, the June Textile Factory has finally agreed to pay remuneration to about 4,000 former employees in accordance with an Arbitration Council ruling. When the June Textile factory burnt down in March the company offered each worker \$US36 redundancy with an additional \$20 for every year of service. The textile workers rejected the offer. The company is due to pay employees three months' salary for a "pre-notice" period ahead of their dismissal and other entitlements previously offered.

Victorian port workers resume strike action

Up to 100 workers at Patrick Stevedores bulk and general terminal at Geelong Port walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday as part of a nationwide campaign by members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) for a new work agreement. Two ships were stranded in port, and another on Friday in a second 24-hour strike. The Geelong workers have rejected Patrick's latest offer of 4 percent annual pay increases over three years along with transfers of some workers into permanent positions.

Negotiations at the national level for a new work agreement covering Patrick workers in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane and Fremantle have been ongoing for eleven months. Workers have been taking protected rolling strike action since December and although the MUA has accused the company of using stalling tactics it has regularly called off planned industrial action each time Patrick management agreed to resume talks.

The MUA has presented 40 claims, including annual pay increases of 6 percent over three years, a sign-on bonus of \$5,000 and reduced casual employment. The company has refused to budge from its original offer of annual pay rises of between 4 and 4.5 percent over three years with productivity offsets.

At least 60 percent of Patrick workers are casual and the union has called for long-term casual employees to be offered permanent positions. Another issue is improved safety—three port workers were killed in accidents during 2010.

Salvation Army workers in Victoria stop work

For the fourth time in four months workers at the Salvation Army's Westcare facility in Sunshine, Melbourne walked off the job on Monday and picketed to demand improved pay and entitlements in a new work agreement. Westcare employs more than 100 staff and is a major provider of placement and support services for children and young people.

Australian Services Union (ASU) members first walked off the job for two hours in March. Westcare refused to negotiate on the work agreement for more than two-and-a-half years, defying industrial court directives. Management has since offered a 3 percent annual pay increase but only if employees agree to keep working unpaid overtime.

The Westcare workers want 5 percent annual pay increases and improved maternity and long-service leave entitlements. They claim that employees in comparative positions with other organisations receive up to \$20,000 more per annum. Westcare now claims that a pay agreement cannot be reached until the Equal Remuneration case currently being dealt with by Fair Work Australia is finalised.

Sydney private hospital nurses strike

Over 130 New South Wales Nurses Association (NSWNA) members employed by Macquarie Hospital Services (MHS) at five private hospitals in Sydney walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday and rallied in Sydney's CBD for a new work agreement.

The NSWNA has been attempting to negotiate a new enterprise agreement with MHS since September 2009. According to the union, MHS has offered a 6.5 percent pay rise over three years on the condition that nurses "roll in" their allowances, agree to cut leave entitlements from five weeks to four weeks, and be subjected to a "very strange and unfair" process of assessment.

Nurses want a 15 percent pay rise over three years and the maintenance of all entitlements and conditions. The NSWNA claimed MHS wage rates are 12 percent below public hospital pay rates and 8.5 percent below other private hospital rates. MHS registered nurses earn \$7,500 less than their counterparts in other private hospitals.

New South Wales public sector workers protest

Over 800 public sector workers, including nurses, allied health workers, firefighters, teachers, police and police support workers along with other public servants rallied outside state Liberal politicians electoral offices this week to protest the NSW government's wages and industrial relations policies. Protests were held in Lismore, Coffs Harbour, Forster, Albury and Parramatta.

Under the new legislation, wage rises for 400,000 public servants will be capped at 2.5 percent and an additional 1.5 percent "productivity" increase only paid after 12 months if it is financed from "employee-related savings" such as job losses and increased workloads. The legislation will also allow the state government to impose wage cuts, along with reductions in core conditions, such as penalty rates, sick and long-service leave entitlements and holidays.

Qantas warehouse workers walk out

At least 300 Qantas warehouse employees in New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia walked off the job for 24 hours on Friday to demand a new work agreement.

Workers claimed the dispute was not primarily about pay but job security, particularly for casuals. The National Union of Workers members handle freight, passenger catering and replacement equipment and parts for the Qantas fleet.

Papua New Guinea provincial workers protest

Around 3,000 temporary census workers in Papua New Guinea's Chimbu province rallied at the provincial government's office in Kundiawa on July 22 to demand payment of outstanding allowances. Police intervened when protesters entered the building to demand a meeting with the Provincial Census Coordinator. On Monday Finance and Treasury officers announced the allowances were available for distribution. Workers said they will not submit the completed census forms until they are paid.

Meanwhile, census workers in the neighbouring Eastern Highlands

Province said they would also withhold census forms until they are paid their allowance. Earlier in Lae, Morobe province census workers refused to start work until promised allowances were paid.

Christmas Island nurses threaten industrial action

Immigration detention centre nurses on Christmas Island, an Australian Territory in the Indian Ocean, have threatened to impose work bans in a dispute over pay and increased workloads. The nurses want pay parity with colleagues on the Australian mainland who are paid \$8,000 a year more, and are angry over higher workloads. The nurses, who have to perform health checks on refugees due to be transferred to Australia, are also being asked to take x-rays, which should be done by qualified radiologists.



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