

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 August 2011

Bangladeshi garment worker's death sparks walkout

Hundreds Skyline BD workers at the Ashulia Apparel Industrial Hub, in Dhaka walked off the job and demonstrated outside the factory on August 11 over the death of a colleague who they claim was maltreated by the factory doctor. The demonstration ended after management agreed to pay compensation to Bashar's family and to punish the doctor.

Angry workers said Abul Bashar, a knitting operator aged 27, became sick in the morning at the factory but was certified physically fit after being provided first aid by the factory physician. A colleague told the media that factory management "ordered Bashar to keep working, [despite] workers' pleas to send the ill operator to a private clinic for better treatment."

India: Gujarat medical teachers strike

Over 1,500 medical teachers from seven government-run and grant-in-aid medical colleges in the state of Gujarat struck for 24 hours on August 12 to demand a pay increase as per the Sixth Pay Commission (SPC). Gujarat Medical Teachers' Association members have been holding in-house protests since the beginning of August, complaining that their salaries are lower than doctors in the state-run primary and community health centres.

West Bengal tea workers' union reduces pay demand

After several weeks of strikes and demonstrations, the Tea Workers' Coordination Committee (TWCC), representing over 250,000 plantation workers in the Dooars and Terai plains in the Himalayan foothills, has reduced its pay demand from 250 rupees (\$US5.67) per day to just 90 rupees. Tea workers are currently paid 67 rupees (\$US1.47) per day.

The Consultative Committee of Planters' Association has offered a miniscule annual 8-rupee increase in the daily wage over the next three years, claiming that this is adequate because the minimum wage will be 91 rupees in three years and in line with neighbouring tea garden employees. The TWCC called a strike for Wednesday and Thursday this week and has threatened to call further walkouts from August 22 if its demand for an immediate increase to 90 rupees is ignored.

Andhra Pradesh pharmaceutical workers strike

At least 650 contract workers at Dr Reddy's Laboratories' Pydibhimavaram manufacturing facility in Srikakulam, Andhra Pradesh are maintaining strike action begun on August 13. Production of active pharmaceutical ingredients (APIs) at the laboratory continues to be affected by the strike. Workers demands include a wage rise from the present 5,557 rupees (\$US121) per month to 12,000 rupees, improved allowances, and regularisation of employees who have completed five years' service.

Dr Reddy's Laboratories is India's second largest pharmaceutical manufacturer employing 13,500 people, with markets in India, Europe and the US.

Sri Lankan hospital workers walk out

Doctors and staff in Kinniya Base Hospital, near Trincomalee in eastern Sri Lanka walked off the job on Tuesday after Sri Lankan naval officers entered the hospital looking for injured demonstrators.

According to hospital staff, navy personnel assaulted hospital security guards and opened fire inside the hospital premises while looking for patients who had received gunshot wounds while demonstrating outside a nearby navy camp. Demonstrators had alleged that the navy was protecting criminals involved in rape and looting.

Australian quarantine officers strike

Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry (DAFF) employees walked off the job at international airports across the country on Friday in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The four-hour stoppage affected cargo inspections, the release of imported goods and x-ray screening of international mail. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members want annual pay increases of 3.6 percent over three years in line with the inflation rate.

Following the expiration of enterprise agreement on July 1, over 58,000 public servants rejected the government's offer of 3 percent annual pay rises over the term of the new agreements. Staff are also angered by the Gillard Labor government's attempts to streamline employment conditions, which has led some agencies to try to cut access to leave, flexitime and overtime payments. Over 3,000 DAFF employees at 40 sites across the country walked off the job for two hours last week over the issue, causing delays at abattoirs, mail centres, sea ports and international airports.

Queensland: Sunbus withdraws lockout

On Wednesday, Sunbus lifted a lockout of its 160 drivers, after the Transit Australia Group (TAG), which owns the Sunshine Coast commuter service, reached an agreement with the Transport Workers Union (TWU) to provide a limited service during industrial action. Saturday bus schedules were implemented for the rest of the week and all school bus services restored.

For the second time this month, Sunbus imposed a lockout on Monday, after drivers announced a five-day ban on voluntary overtime in their 15-month dispute for a new work agreement. TAG's decision to lift the lockout followed threats by the state transport authority Translink to suspend payments to Sunbus if the issue was not resolved.

According to the TWU, TAG wants to force drivers back onto award rates and conditions which would eliminate allowances won over the past 10 years. The TWU has proposed 4 percent annual pay rises over three years, with current entitlements maintained. In their latest offer, TAG proposed a 4 percent pay increase this year, annual 3.5 percent increases for the following two years, plus an increase in weekend penalty rates and 13 months' back pay. Negotiations are in progress.

Queensland construction workers strike

At least 600 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and the Builders Labourers Federation at Griffith University, Brisbane Airport, Brisbane Convention Centre and the Stocklands Shopping Centre in Townsville walked off the job on August 12 and remained on strike for seven days over a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The unions said they have been negotiating with the employer Laing O'Rourke since February. They want the EBA minimum rate increased and travel allowance and other entitlements paid to all employees on the minimum rate.

Queensland mining unions in further talks with BHP

The Single Bargaining Unit (SBU) representing three unions at seven BHP Billiton-Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines at Bowen Basin mines in central Queensland met BMA negotiators this week following more rolling stoppages last weekend. Shift stoppages were held at Blackwater and Gregory mines as part of ongoing industrial action over a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Industrial action has been ongoing since June.

The SBU represents 3,000 members of the CFMEU, the Australia Manufacturing Workers' Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union. BMA told the media it plans to finalise negotiations this month and present an offer to employees in September. A CFMEU spokesman said it would not support an agreement if BMA does not address its concerns over job security, recruitment and the use of contractors.

The unions claim that negotiations were deadlocked for six months because BHP is demanding radical work changes, including "family unfriendly" rosters, unrestricted use of contract and part-time workers, increased flexibility of operators' jobs and more fly-in-fly-out employees. The unions want enhanced training opportunities and contractors to receive the same pay and conditions as BHP workers.

Brisbane Airport cleaners protest

On Thursday, for the second time in a week, United Voice (UV) members, covering cleaners and security guards, held a "drive through" demonstration at Brisbane's international and domestic airport terminals in a dispute over pay and conditions. At least 50 cars were involved in the protests. Spotless cleaners and ISS security guards are protesting over their \$16.50 per hour wage and poor job security. A union official said that the Brisbane Airport Corporation contractors had refused to discuss workers' claims. A similar protest is planned for Monday.

Meanwhile, 100 Spotless cleaners at Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport have been granted approval from Fair Work Australia to hold a ballot for strike action in their wages dispute. UV wants Spotless to reinstate a \$1,600 a year allowance paid by other contractors at the airport. The allowance is to cover parking fees and car maintenance costs to compensate airport workers for the lack of public transport to the airport.

Victorian milk processing workers strike against wage cuts

About 200 maintenance workers and boiler attendants at six Murray Goulburn milk processing plants in Victoria walked off the job for 24 hours on Friday in a nine-month dispute for a new work agreement. An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) official said further maintenance and call-back bans will be in place for the weekend.

According to the AMWU, the company is attacking long-standing employment conditions and wants to introduce a two-tier agreement with new employees on seven-day shifts paid over \$100 a week less than current employees on same shift rosters. Negotiations are scheduled to resume on Thursday.

Tasmanian teachers protest funding cuts

Up to 100 teachers and school workers protested in Hobart, the Tasmanian state capital, on August 11 against \$190 million cuts to public school funding over the next four years.

An Australian Education Union official told the rally that the measures would lead to school closures, increased class size and the loss of specialist teachers. In June the state Labor-Green coalition government's last budget announced and an overall spending cut of 10 percent in real terms over the next four years, which would destroy of 1,700 full-time jobs—7 percent of the public sector total—and close 20 schools.

New Zealand steel manufacturing workers strike

More than 850 steel workers at NZ Steel in Glenbrook, Waikato North Head and Taharoa walked off the job for 24 hours on Tuesday after a breakdown in collective agreement talks. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said that workers feared that wages will be driven down and jobs lost if contractors are employed on the sites. A

company spokesperson said that the negotiations, which began in May, would continue after the strike.

NZ Steel produces flat-rolled steel products for export and the local building, construction, manufacturing and agricultural industries. The company is owned by Australia's BlueScope Steel. On Monday, BlueScope announced that it planned to scale-back operations in Australia with the possible loss of more than 1,000 jobs.



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