

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 August 2011

Protests against Korean shipyard job-losses continue

Over 15,000 people demonstrated outside Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction's Yeongdo shipyard in Busan last weekend over the destruction of more than 400 jobs. Workers claim that the company is planning to transfer work to its shipyard in the Philippines where wages are just one-tenth of Korean pay. A similar protest involving 10,000 people was held two weeks earlier.

A local union official has been occupying a 35-metre high crane in the shipyard since December, in defiance of a Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) directive for workers to end the dispute. On June 27, KCTU officials concluded a secret deal with company management and the courts to end a 190-day strike by the shipyard construction workers.

Under the deal, terminated workers were to accept redundancy payouts in return for dropping of compensation legal action against them and union officials for lost production. There was no withdrawal of the job cuts.

In an attempt to dissipate the protests and move them from the Busan shipyard, the KCTU has called for a rally of workers in Seoul on August 20.

Chinese taxi drivers strike

Thousands of taxi drivers in Hangzhou and Shanghai struck on Monday to protest numerous issues, including rising fuel prices, charges and restrictions imposed by the cab companies and the lack of effective government regulation. The strike follows industrial action by taxi drivers in Zhengzhou in January against the municipal government's decision to abolish the six-day week. Zhengzhou drivers struck again on July 27, in a dispute over license ownership.

Bangladesh transport workers end strike

A two-day strike by members of the Khulna Divisional Transport Workers' Oiyko Parishad was called off on July 29. The walkout brought all commuter and goods traffic to a standstill in Khulna, Jessore, Narail, Magura, Jhenidah, Chuadanga, Meherpur, Kushtia, Bagerhat and Satkhira.

Transport employers have agreed to two of the union's demands—salary increases and regular appointments of workers—but calls for the withdrawal of Section 302 of Bangladesh Penal Code cases against drivers and the end of corruption and harassment at river ferry ghats (steps) and on the highways remain unresolved.

India: Doctors protest at Gujarat medical colleges

Teachers at six Gujarat medical colleges began wearing black armbands on Monday to protest government inaction over a two-year pay dispute. The teaching doctors want pay parity with their counterparts in arts, science, commerce and engineering colleges and an improved promotional scheme. The doctors complained that they also are required to fill in for staff shortages in government hospitals and do emergency duties. The teaching doctors' monthly salary is 75,000 rupees per month (\$US1,693) compared with central government employees' 85,000-rupee monthly pay.

Sri Lankan telecommunications workers strike

Sri Lanka Telecom (SLT) workers struck for two days on Tuesday in a sick-note campaign to demand improved pay and benefits. They want transport and meal allowances increased from 9,000 rupees to 25,000 rupees (\$US223), abolition of the SLT Manpower Solutions Company (MSC) and integration of its workforce into SLT, rectification of salary disparities, and executive salary rates made public.

The SLT Trade Union Alliance has rejected a company offer to increase the transport and food allowance to 12,500 rupees and for recruitment of 600 MSC workers. Since being privatised in 1997, SLT has cut its workforce by 1,500 and outsourced many services.

Sri Lankan power workers strike

Thousands of Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees held a one-day sick-note campaign on Wednesday to demand payment of salary arrears. According to the United Trade Union Alliance, ten months ago the Sri Lankan government stopped paying a wage increase won by employees in 2009, claiming it was needed for the rebuilding of the war-ravaged country.

Wednesday's strike followed two weeks of lunch protests at CEB depots and offices, and a demonstration by 1,500 workers on July 29 at the CEB head office in Colombo.

Sri Lankan university non-academic staff demonstrate

Hundreds of non-academic employees of public universities demonstrated outside the University Grants Commission (UGC) in Colombo on Thursday to demand a pay rise, abolition of salary anomalies, and an end to the privatisation of public education. The rally was called by the Inter University Trade Union Alliance.

The protestors have threatened further industrial action to win their demands. In April 2007, workers struck for a week on the same demands. The university authorities refused their demands and suspended dozens of workers.

Indonesian pilots strike

At least 200 Garuda Indonesia domestic and international pilots walked off the job for 12 hours on July 28 to demand pay parity with recently recruited foreign pilots. Garuda has recruited 34 foreign pilots on double the salary of Indonesian pilots since October. Garuda agreed to enter talks with the pilots' union after it threatened to involve all its members in strike action at the airline.

Queensland Sunbus drivers locked out

Around 200 bus drivers at Sunbus, north of Brisbane on the Sunshine Coast and Townsville, have been locked out after banning voluntary overtime for Friday, next Monday and Tuesday in a long-running dispute for a new work agreement. The company suspended all services for the three days, claiming that there would not be enough drivers to maintain full service.

The dispute, which included a lockout in February and Fair Work Australia hearings, has been ongoing since December. According to the Transport Workers Union, the company's owner, Transit Australia Group, wants to force drivers back onto award rates and conditions. This could mean wage cuts of up to \$4 an hour and the elimination of allowances won over the past 10 years. The TWU has proposed a 4 percent pay rise, with current entitlements maintained.

Queensland government roads department workers strike

Transport and Main Roads department office workers stopped work for five hours on Tuesday as part of statewide-protected industrial action for a new work agreement. The workers are involved in the planning and design of road projects throughout the state. According to an Australian Municipal, Administrative, Clerical and Services Union spokesperson, wage increases of between 1 to 2 percent offered by the Queensland government are pay cuts when compared with the current 3.8 percent inflation rate.

Western Australian maritime workers end strike

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at the Mermaid Marine Vessel Operations' Dampier supply base in the Pilbara called off its pay

strike after six days on Thursday, following an agreement with Mermaid. Details of the deal have not been announced.

Over 30 MUA members walked off the job on July 15, and again on July 30, after six months of negotiations for a new four-year work agreement reached deadlock. Major stumbling points were accommodation allowances and increased workforce casualisation. The union wanted the accommodation allowance lifted from \$670 per week to \$1,200, to cover high rents in Dampier, and casual numbers reduced from 65 percent at the Dampier base and from 85 percent on Mermaid's vessels.

Western Australian public hospital workers stop work

In an ongoing dispute with the Barnett state Liberal government over privatisation of Western Australia's public hospitals support services, 150 members of the United Voice (UV) held a stop-work meeting on Monday outside the Royal Perth Hospital. The health support workers were protesting a \$4.3 billion, 20-year state government agreement with UK-owned Serco to provide support services at the Fiona Stanley Hospital, which is still under construction.

Workers fear the deal is the first step in extending privatisation to all state public hospitals. While more protest meetings are planned, no industrial action has been proposed by the union.

Immigrant construction workers protest in Perth

About 20 Chinese construction workers demonstrated on Tuesday at Diploma Constructions' Queens Riverside Apartment site in Perth's CBD over the non-payment of wages and workers' compensation. The contract workers held placards saying "No pay for weeks." According to Unions WA, some workers have not been paid for eight weeks and the compensation claims of one injured worker have been ignored by contractors.

Unions WA has not called for a united campaign with other construction workers but is appealing to the two developers, Diploma Constructions and Frasers Property, to "intervene in the dispute."

Victorian airport cleaners threaten to strike

Up to 100 Spotless employees at Melbourne Airport have threatened to apply for a Protected-Action Ballot if their demand for fair pay is not met by the contract cleaning company by Monday. Airport cleaners have met with Spotless four times over the issue.

According to United Voice, Spotless has offered workers an annual pay increase but it is \$4,000 below other airport cleaners' wages. The company also wants to abolish paid breaks worth up to \$2,800 a year and is refusing to reinstate an airport allowance worth \$1,600 a year, which cleaners rely on to help cover transport costs.

New Zealand polytechnic teachers strike

Over 25 classes at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) were cancelled on Monday when technical instructors attended a stop-work meeting over management threats to force staff to work longer hours and give up weeks of leave. Sixty members of the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) voted overwhelmingly for industrial action, with 75 percent calling for an immediate strike.

A TEU spokesman said that many teachers had accepted reduced pay at CPIT because the leave conditions at the polytechnic better matched their family life and circumstances. Negotiations between CPIT and TEU have resumed.

New Zealand academics reject university's pay offer

TEU members at the University of Auckland have overwhelmingly rejected management's latest pay offer. The TEU claims that the university has not changed its pay offer, despite five months of negotiations. According to the union, management has agreed to increase pay and leave entitlements if TEU members accept cuts to key working conditions. The academics have rejected the offer and plan limited industrial action beginning on August 24, including a one-day strike and work bans.

Samoan nurses impose bans

More than 200 nurses have not been paid overtime and other allowances for two months, according to the Samoan Nurses' Association. A 1.9 percent wage rise due to commence on July 1 has also not been paid. Several nurses have banned call-back duties in protest and the union has called for a meeting with the National Health Board to resolve the issue. In January, the Samoan government cut government employees' working hours and increased taxes in an attempt to slash escalating government debt.



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