

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 August 2011

Indian bank workers strike

Bank services across India were crippled on August 5 when one million workers from state and private banking sectors walked out to demand inclusion in welfare schemes and to oppose government moves to privatise state-run institutions. According to the United Forum of Bank Unions, 70,000 branches of 26 public sector banks, including the State Bank of India, and 26 private sector banks were closed for the day.

Workers oppose the government's plan to cut its stake in public sector banks from 51 percent to 33 percent. India's state-run banks control about 70 percent of the country's banking sector.

Manipur: Polytechnic teachers on strike

Manipur state polytechnic college teachers remain on strike after walking out August 1 to demand that the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE) sixth pay revision be implemented. According to the Government Polytechnic Gazetted Staff Association, the new pay scales were implemented for other state employees from April 1 last year. The association claimed that engineers were leaving the colleges to join other industry sectors because of the delay in introducing the pay revision. Teachers have said they will remain on strike until their demands are met.

Jammu Kashmir government employees strike again

For the second time in three weeks, 400,000 Jammu Kashmir government employees struck on August 5 for 48 hours to demand payment of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. The government workers want a wage rise and salary arrears, the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60, regular employment for 50,000 daily wage workers and ad hoc employees, and increased payments for Anganwadi (child care) workers. Numerous demonstrations were held at government buildings throughout the state.

According to the Joint Consultative Committee, which represents over 50 different associations and unions, the government has had three years to deliver the promised salary increases. Several department heads have invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act, which bans strikes and can impose heavy fines or imprisonment on strikers.

West Bengal tea plantation workers on strike

Hundreds of thousands of workers at 191 tea gardens in the Dooars and Terai plains in the Himalayan foothills walked off the job for the second time in two weeks on Monday to demand a pay rise. The Progressive Tea Workers Union wants the daily wage increased from 67 rupees to 250 rupees (\$US5.67). The Consultative Committee of Planters' Association has offered a miniscule annual 8-rupee increase in the daily wage over the next three years.

Unions at several plantations have told the media they would accept 90 rupees per day in the first year in line with agreements in the 47 neighbouring Darjeeling tea gardens. An estimated 2.5 million workers are employed on the Dooars and Terai plantations.

Bangladeshi pharmaceutical workers end strike

Opsonin pharmaceutical workers at two factories in the Rupatali Industrial Area in Barisal returned to work last Saturday afternoon after walking off the job in the morning to demand better pay and conditions. Their demands included timely payment of wages, a pay rise, a free meal during working hours, medical allowances, work training and regular meetings between workers and management.

The strike ended after factory management agreed to phased salary increases for permanent and temporary workers, to double the meal allowance, provide ambulance service for sick workers and take no action against employees involved in the strike.

Angkor beer workers in Cambodia end strike

Around 60 female Angkor beer promotion workers have ended a 13-day strike begun on July 28 over unpaid overtime. The workers had demanded that the company implement an Arbitration Council directive doubling their Sunday overtime wage to \$US4.

In an agreement reached on Tuesday between the Phnom Penh deputy governor and the Cambodia Food Workers' Federation, the city will pay retroactive overtime pay totaling \$US320 for the 60 striking workers and impose the Arbitration Council ruling on Sunday overtime pay on Angkor's owner, Cambrew.

Cambodian garment workers walk out

More than 500 workers at the Taiwanese-owned Nan Kuang Garment

factory in Phnom Penh walked off the job on August 4 to protest over labour law violations, including firing pregnant employees, forced overtime, employment of under-age girls and no sick leave.

Strikers rallying outside the factory said the sacking of two pregnant employees within the last week triggered the strike. They demanded the dismissed workers be reinstated with maternity leave.

Taiwan workers protest over industrial law

On Sunday, 200 workers from the service and manufacturing sectors marched in downtown Taipei and rallied outside the Council of Labor Affairs over excessive overtime demands. Protesters held placards saying “Working overtime without pay is illegal” and “Abolish the law that abuses laborers”.

One demonstrator said that many workers were being exploited because Article 84-1 of the Labor Standards Act (1996) allowed employers to exploit certain employees—supervisors, managers, specialists and medical staff—to work more than the eight-hour day and 84-hour fortnight without paying overtime. Workers called for the law to be scrapped.

Queensland Sunbus drivers extend industrial action

Around 200 bus drivers at Sunbus, north of Brisbane on the Sunshine Coast and Townsville, have voted to extend their current overtime bans in their 15-month dispute for a new work agreement. Transport Workers Union (TWU) members were locked out for three days from August 5 when the company suspended all services claiming that there would not be enough drivers to maintain full service while the overtime bans were in place. The new bans cover four days—from August 11 to 14—and Sunbus has indicated it will again suspend services.

According to the TWU, the company’s owner, Transit Australia Group (TAG), 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 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.

Veolia bus drivers in Brisbane stop work

For the second time in three weeks 120 Veolia Transport bus drivers, who service commuter routes in Brisbane and Redland Bay, south-east Queensland, stopped work for four hours on August 11 to discuss the company’s latest offer in a long-running pay dispute. A Transport Workers Union (TWU) official said the meeting was called because the company had ceased negotiations.

The company has offered 4 percent annual increases over three years and a 10-hour day. Drivers, who are currently paid only \$19 an hour, want 5 percent annual pay increases and a 7.6-hour day with overtime paid after that. The union and Veolia have been negotiating the issue for over six months.

New South Wales ceramics workers walk out

At least 60 employees of ceramics manufacturer Shinagawa Refractories in Unanderra, New South Wales walked off the job for two days on August 4, following four months of failed negotiations for a new work agreement. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and the Australian Workers Union claimed that the company wants to reduce existing entitlements and impose minimum award conditions at considerable loss to workers.

The company has refused to negotiate a wage increase without workers first agreeing to trade some conditions that will “benefit the company.” The dispute is being heard in the industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia.

Australian government workers strike

On Thursday, 3,000 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries, Forestry (DAFF) employees held a two-hour stoppage at 40 locations across the country following a breakdown in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. The stoppage caused delays at abattoirs, mail centres, sea ports and international airports. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members want annual pay increases of 3.6 percent over three years. A CPSU official said a four-hour stoppage will be implemented next week prior to resumption of negotiations with DAFF on August 18.

Enterprise agreements for thousands of commonwealth public servants expired on July 1. Over 58,000 public servants formally rejected the government’s offer of 3 percent annual pay rises over the term of the enterprise agreement claiming it was below inflation. 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. A CPSU official told the media, “It’s the combination of being asked to accept a cut in real wages and, in many cases, a cut in conditions, and then on top of that, many agencies are cutting jobs.”

On July 7, hundreds of Department of Parliamentary Services staff, including broadcasters, Hansard recorders, librarians, and food and drink services staff, walked off the job for four hours over the issue.

New Zealand firefighters implement work bans

Over 1,800 members of the New Zealand Professional Firefighters’ Union (NZPFU) imposed work bans on August 5, in a seven-month dispute with the Fire Service Commission (FSC) over a pay rise. Work bans have been placed on paperwork duties, training, equipment maintenance and installation of smoke alarms. Firefighters want a 3.75 percent pay increase for the first six months in their new work agreement, backdated to January 1, and a 5 percent increase for the following 12 months from July 1.

The FSC has refused to modify its original offer of 2.5 percent over twelve months. The projected cost of living increase rate for 2011 is 5.3 percent. Meetings between the FSC and NZPFU have been scheduled for once a fortnight.



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