Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 September 2011

Jammu Kashmir government employees strike again

For the third time in seven weeks, 400,000 Jammu Kashmir government employees walked off the job for three days this week 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.

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. The government has invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act, which bans strikes and can impose heavy fines or imprisonment on strikers.

Karnataka rural health workers continue protests

Up to 2,000 Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers from across Karnataka protested in Bangalore, the state capital, on September 3 to demand revised pay recommendations and outstanding salaries. The Karnataka State ASHA Workers Federation, which is affiliated to Centre for Indian Trade Unions organised the protest, the second in two weeks.

The pay recommendations, which were approved in July, include monthly salary payments and social security. Workers also want confirmation as permanent employees, regular payment of travel expenses, bus passes and mobile phones.

Around 38,000 ASHA workers were appointed under the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) in 2010 to serve in the rural districts across the State. ASHAs are local women trained to act as health educators and promoters in their communities.

Bangladeshi coal miners end strike

Up to 1,200 striking contract workers at the state-owned Barapukuria Coal Mine Company Ltd (BCMCL) in Dinajpur ended their 14-day strike on Tuesday after the Barapukuria Miners' and Workers' Union told members it had reached an agreement with their Chinese employer, XMC.

Miners walked off the job on August 23, after a series of false promises from BCMCL and XMC. Their demands included regularisation of employment, fixed weekly holidays and annual holidays with pay, festival bonus with three days holiday, and death compensation for workers killed on the job set at 500,000 take ($US6,700).

The union claimed that employers had agreed to meet "some of our demands" but refused to give details to the media.

Sri Lankan university non-academic workers demonstrate

Thousands of non-academic and administrative employees at 13 public universities held lunch-hour demonstrations outside their respective universities on Wednesday to demand a pay rise, removal of salary disparities between them and similar grades in the public sector, and an end to privatisation.

After a protest in August, the University Grant Commission (UGC) claimed it would negotiate on the removal of pay anomalies but it has not responded to submissions from the Inter University Trade Union Confederation. Workers claim they have not had a pay rise since 2006.

In April 2007, workers struck for a week over the same demands. University management refused their demands and suspended dozens of workers. Union members have threatened to begin a sick-leave campaign on Monday if the government continues to ignore their demands.

Cambodian garment workers end strike

More than 300 striking workers at Jie Wei garment factory in Dangkor district, Phnom Penh returned to work on Tuesday, ending a three-day strike over pay and conditions, and targeted sackings.

Factory management agreed to nine of the workers' 11 demands but refused to grant half-pay for workers on maternity leave and re-employment of seven union representatives. The unresolved demands have been forwarded to the Arbitration Council for review.

Hong Kong workers protest over rising living costs

An estimated 5,000 protesters led by the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (HKFTU) marched to the Special Administration Region (SAR) headquarters in Hong Kong on Sunday threatening to hold further demonstrations if the administration fails to tackle the housing problem and spiraling inflation.

Protesters demanded that the number of housing units built increased to 30,000 per year and for 6,000 flats to be sold annually under the Home Ownership Scheme. Other demands included higher transportation subsidies, provision of school textbook assistance, increased help to the elderly, and a reduction in the prices of essential commodities.

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Census and Statistics Department figures report that the consumer price index rose 7.9 percent in July compared to a year ago, the steepest rise in 16 years. The Society for Community Organization said the backlog of those waiting for public housing reached 150,000 last month. According to the HKFTU, 1.2 million people in Hong Kong live in poverty—out of a population of seven million. Oxfam reported in 2010 that one in ten households with a working member live below the poverty threshold.

Qantas engineers in Brisbane stop work

In a long-running work agreement dispute between Qantas and the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA), 40 engineers stopped work for one hour at Brisbane Airport on Monday. Fifteen domestic flights were delayed and two cancelled. The engineers have been negotiating for over 12 months to have a job security clause inserted in their new enterprise agreement. Last month, the airline announced a sweeping five-year restructuring plan that will axe 1,000 jobs. The carrier plans to slash its Australian operations and expand into low-wage platforms throughout Asia.

The union has accused Qantas of planning to outsource maintenance work to the Philippines, Singapore and Hong Kong. While Qantas claims that it has no plan to cut the 90 percent of engineering jobs still done in Australia, it has refused to negotiate job security clauses. The engineers also want 3 percent annual pay increases over three years, which Qantas has rejected claiming that along with new classification increments and travel the claim could cost an additional 28.6 percent over three years.

The Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) and the Transport Workers Union (TWU) want job security clauses in new enterprise agreements. All three unions have received approval from Fair Work Australia to take industrial action.

Australian door manufacturing workers locked out

Over 300 employees of JELD-WEN, a US-owned door and window manufacturer, have been locked since Thursday after taking 48-hour protected strike action earlier this week in a long-running pay dispute. JELD-WEN has factories in New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia operating under various trade names, including Airlite, Regency and Stegbar. About 200 workers are employed at the company's Corinthian Doors factory in Sydney's western suburbs.

JELD-WEN management said the workers would remain locked out until Tuesday. Along with its American operation, the company generates over $3 billion in annual sales.

According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), enterprise bargaining negotiations became deadlocked after the company offered a 2.5 percent annual pay increase over the next three years. JELD-WEN also wants to axe a bonus scheme for employees who do not take leave during the year. The locked-out workers, who have been holding protest pickets outside the Australian plants since Thursday, are demanding 3.5 percent annual wage rises.

Toyota workers suspend industrial action

Up to 3,200 Toyota workers in Melbourne and Sydney have suspended industrial action after management and unions agreed in the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal to restart negotiations on a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union walked off the job on September 2 and voted to ban all overtime and to take further strike action on every Thursday and Friday for the next four weeks.

Toyota's offer included a 1 percent pay rise payable from July 26 with a $500 cash bonus, followed by two annual rises of 3 percent from April next year. The unions put up a counter claim for 3 percent annual rises over two years from July, plus $1,000, followed by a 4 percent rise, which Toyota has rejected.

Earlier in the year, the unions working with Toyota management oversaw the halving of production at the company's Altona assembly plant in Melbourne and 25 percent wage cuts following the Japanese tsunami.

Hospital security guards locked out in pay dispute Specialty security guards at the Thomas Embling mental healthcare facility in Melbourne have been locked out since September 1 over a wages dispute. The 10 Health and Community Services Union (HCSU) members, who are currently paid $18 an hour, want a $2 an hour rise to bring them into line with security guards in public hospitals. Management has filled their jobs with guards working for G4S, a contract company. An HCSU spokesperson said that the workers, who require special qualifications to deal with mental healthcare patients, were locked out just before they imposed work bans to pressure management to address outstanding demands.

Sydney ferry workers reject privatisation deal

Sydney Harbour ferry services stopped for four hours on Tuesday when workers attended a stop-work meeting to discuss a proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) that would retain existing employment conditions for operational and maintenance staff for a year after the new private operator takes control of the services in late 2012. Members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) voted to reject the offer and the planned privatisation of Sydney Ferries.

In May 2009, the MUA and AMWU did a deal with the then Labor government for a new EBA, which MUA branch secretary Warren Smith claimed would deliver major reforms and help keep the ferries in public hands. The new single agreement replaced three separate EBAs covering workers on the Sydney Harbour, Manly and Parramatta services. Employees were to work additional days in return for a modest wage increase that is, on average, less than the government's 2.5 percent wages policy.

New Zealand: Fisher & Paykel workers vote for industrial action

On Wednesday, 900 workers at Fisher & Paykel Healthcare's Highbrook plant in south Auckland, which manufactures devices and systems for use in respiratory care, voted for industrial action in a dispute over a new work agreement. Because the south Auckland plant is covered by the essential services provision of the Employment Relations Act, employees are required to give 14 days' notice and exact details of planned industrial action.

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The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and National Distribution Union (NDU) have been negotiating with F & P Healthcare since May. The unions want a one-year agreement that provides a 5.7 percent pay increase. The company is offering a 22-month deal, with 3 percent in the first eleven months and 2 percent in the second; well below the official annual inflation rate of 5.3 percent.

This will be the first industrial action at F & P Healthcare since it split from Fisher & Paykel Industries in 2001. Over the last financial year, the unions have allowed F & P Healthcare to reduce its workforce by 10 percent while it sustained its after-tax profits at around $63 million ($US51.6 million). The company is in the process of moving its manufacturing to Mexico. In 2008, 450 manufacturing jobs were lost when Fisher and Paykel moved most of its whitegoods appliance production from New Zealand to China.

Solomon Islands hospital staff issue strike notice

Medical staff and health workers at the Kilufi`I hospital on the island of Malaita, in the Solomon Islands have issued a 28-day strike notice to the ministry of health. Workers said the government was made aware in May of their concerns about OH&S issues caused by a lack of adequate clean water for the hospital and nearby residents. Medical staff said they have to travel several kilometres by truck to fetch water in containers, which they said was the cause of many infectious diseases affecting the residents and staff members.

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