

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 September 2011

India: Orissa secondary teachers end six-week strike

Over 25,000 secondary teachers in Orissa block-grant schools ended a 42-day strike this week after the mass education minister “assured” them that the government would resolve their outstanding demands. Teachers in nearly 2,000 schools across the state walked off the job on August 1 to demand abolition of the block-grant system and regularisation of their services. Government-funded block grants can be spent by school authorities in any way that they decide.

The Orissa Block Grant Secondary Teachers’ Association wants the government to pay 100 percent of the school expenses in grant-in-aid. While teachers in government secondary schools only receive about \$US340 a month, block-grant school teachers are paid a third of that amount and have no pensions.

Maharashtra court staff on strike

At least 40,000 Class-C staff—clerks, typists and interpreters—in Maharashtra lower courts walked off the job on Tuesday to demand better wages and administrative changes. Pune district strikers returned to work the next day after a Bombay high court order prohibiting the walkout. All other districts remained on strike.

Unskilled employees, including office attendants and security guards, wore black badges to support the striking staff. The Maharashtra court workers are protesting because the state government has not implemented a Supreme Court order directing it pay employees a wage rise.

Sri Lankan non-academic university workers escalate action

On September 12, thousands of non-academic and administrative employees at 13 public universities across Sri Lanka began a sick-note campaign and failed to report for work. Members of the Inter University Trade Union Federation want a pay rise, removal of salary disparities and an end to privatisation.

The latest action follows lunch-hour demonstrations at the universities on September 3 and a week-long strike in April 2007 in which dozens of employees were suspended. Workers claim they have not had a pay rise since 2006. A federation representative threatened that if their demands are not addressed within 14 days members would strike again.

Chinese garment workers strike

On September 8, over 1,000 employees at the Hainan Youmei Underwear Company in Haikou, south China walked off the job to protest low pay and a new work schedule. Management is demanding employees improve their “work efficiency” by 40 percent in order to earn a 250-yuan bonus. The workers are only paid 700 yuan (\$US109) per month and say they cannot make ends meet.

The walkout was sparked when the factory management sent a text message to 800 workers who had complained about the speedup, threatening them with termination. The message stated, “Workers do not need to work on Thursday and Friday, and they should wait for a company notice telling them when to return.” While on strike, workers made several demands, such as a 250-yuan raise, shift changes, the elimination of the work-efficiency policy, and additional salary and bonus concessions.

This is the second strike at the plant since the European lingerie giant Triumph International opened it in 1992. In November 2009, about 3,000 workers walked out over low pay, bonuses and vacation.

Cambodian garment union accepts court order to end strike

Last Saturday, the Cambodian Arbitration Council ordered 700 employees at the Wei Xin garment factory in Phnom Penh to end a week-long strike over nine outstanding grievances. Major issues included alleged failure to regularly pay overtime and issue pay slips, and demands for work contracts longer than six months.

While many issues have not been resolved, including the pay slips issue, Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Unions president Chrin Noeurn declared the strike would end in order to show that workers “respect the law.”

Toyota Australia workers strike

Over 3,000 Toyota workers struck on Thursday and yesterday over a pay dispute. Production stopped at the company’s Altona manufacturing plant and its parts distribution centres in Sydney and Melbourne. More strikes are planned for next Thursday and Friday.

Industrial action was due to begin last week, but Fair Work Australia granted Toyota an interim suspension banning the strike while negotiations were in progress. A similar suspension application by Toyota this week was denied.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) wants a 12 percent pay rise over 36 months, with four percent each year. The company has offered 11 percent over 39 months. Workers have not had a pay increase since April last year. The current enterprise agreement expired in July.

With the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) reporting a 4.5 percent increase in the cost of living for employee households in the year to June, the union's pay demand represents a pay cut.

Australian government workers continue industrial action

As a part of ongoing industrial action for a new work agreement, 13,000 civilian workers at 70 Defence Department sites around Australia walked out for four hours on Tuesday. An Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia official said the Defence Department had refused to negotiate any wage rise above 3 percent. Increases above 3 percent will only be granted if staff agree to workplace savings to fund the rise.

Enterprise agreements for 60,000 commonwealth public servants expired on July 1. Workers in all departments have rejected 3 percent annual pay rises over the term of the new agreements, and are angered over the Labor government's attempts to slash leave, flexitime and overtime payments, and other conditions. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), which covers most government employees, wants annual pay increases above 4 percent over three years.

The latest walkout is the second by civil defence workers this year and follows stoppages in August by 3,000 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry customs officers at Australia's international airports and Department of Parliamentary Services staff in Canberra over the issue.

BHP miners in Queensland resume strike action

Over 3,500 coal miners at BHP Billiton-Mitsubishi Alliance's (BMA) central Queensland Bowen Basin have resumed industrial action after the company broke off negotiations with the union's single bargaining unit (SBU) for a new work agreement.

BMA said it will make an offer at the end of the month that includes annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker paid in weekly instalments. The SBU, which is made up of delegates from the Construction Forestry Manufacturing and Energy Union (CFMEU), the AMWU and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, wants a job security clause and for contractors to receive the same pay and conditions as BHP workers.

Miners are concerned because BMA wants extended overtime, longer rosters, unrestricted use of contract and part-time workers, more fly-in-fly-out employees, and the scrapping of Christmas and Boxing Day production shut downs. The unions are also opposing the terms of an individual flexibility arrangement (IFA) proposed by BMA. IFAs were introduced by the Gillard Labor government, and accepted by the unions.

BMA workers have held rolling stoppages and imposed overtime bans over recent months. Rolling full-shift stoppages occurred at two mines from Saturday through to Tuesday and the unions plan to extend this action to four other BMA mines.

Qantas ground crew to strike

Over 3,800 Qantas baggage handlers, freight, ground, transport and catering staff will strike at Australian airports for four hours next Tuesday. Qantas has warned passengers that international and domestic flights could be disrupted for two days. The Transport Workers Union (TWU) has been in negotiations with Qantas since June when their members' enterprise agreement expired. The union wants a 5 percent annual pay rise for three years and a job security clause in the new agreement.

Qantas has also been in dispute with its maintenance engineers and pilots since April over pay and conditions and a job security clause. While 80 percent of the 1,600 members of the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) have voted for industrial action, union officials have refused to mobilise its membership.

Likewise, the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) has not called for any industrial action, despite gaining approval to strike from its members and Fair Work Australia.

Qantas announced a sweeping five-year restructuring plan two weeks ago that will axe 1,000 jobs. The carrier plans to slash its Australian operations and expand into low-wage platforms throughout Asia. The airline recently announced a \$249 million after-tax profit for the 12 months to June 30.

Queensland construction workers walk out

Up to 80 construction workers at Gracemere in Rockhampton on Queensland's north coast walked off the job on September 7 over long-standing safety issues. CFMEU members are concerned about lack of water receptacles, poor access to toilet facilities and other health and safety issues. A union spokesman claimed that management at the \$30 million McConaghy Group development had ignored repeated requests to resolve these and other workplace issues.

Australian Capital Territory teachers suspend strike action

The Australian Education Union (AEU) suspended rolling stoppages planned for last Tuesday through to Friday, after claiming "sufficient" progress in enterprise agreement negotiations with the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) government.

The AEU said, however, that teachers would maintain bans on filing fortnightly absence forms or use of personal money for work purposes. Other work bans to be implemented next week include bans on the use of personal vehicles for work purposes, implementation of any new "system initiative" and computer-based learning systems.

The ACT government has capped all future public sector wage rises at 2.5 percent and anything above that would be dependent on productivity increases.

New Zealand steel manufacturing workers accept new contract

Following a 24-hour strike in August, NZ Steel workers have accepted a new collective agreement with a 6 percent pay rise over the two years.

Over 92 percent of the 900 workers represented by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) voted for the deal. As part of the settlement, NZ Steel agreed to withdraw a long-running court action to remove a clause from the contract that ensured contractors would receive the same wage as other workers.

Disability support workers accept settlement

Over 1,600 disability support and community mental health workers voted last week to accept a union-negotiated deal with the New Zealand government. The decision ends a four-year dispute to win full pay for doing overnight sleepover shifts. Employed by the state-funded IHC (Intellectually Handicapped Children), the workers, who are members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), were being paid \$4 an hour for working overnight shifts. This is a third of the official adult minimum wage of \$12.75 an hour.

SFWU members ended industrial action in February, after the New Zealand Court of Appeal ruled that intellectual disability support workers must be paid the adult minimum wage for overnight shifts. The government, however, has been dragging its feet on granting the payments.

Last month, IHC workers rejected a 25 per cent back pay offer and for all sleepover shifts to be paid on the minimum wage by 2015. In frustration, SFWU members this week accepted the deal negotiated by the union, which will deliver just 50 percent of back pay and will not see sleepover shifts properly paid until 2012.



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