

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 October 2011

Citizen watch workers strike in China

Over 1,000 workers have been on strike since October 17 at the Japanese watchmaker Citizen Holdings' Shenzhen plant in south China's Guangdong province. Workers claim that management has illegally deducted 40 minutes from their timecards every day since 2005 to account for washroom breaks. Strikers also claim that the company has failed to make pension payments.

The walkout was triggered when managers proposed changing how wages were calculated. Management has agreed to pay compensation for the deducted wages but workers have refused to end the strike while other issues, such as overtime payments and work conditions, are unresolved. The local government and human resources bureau have taken over management of the dispute.

India: Fuel tanker drivers in Kerala strike

On Sunday, drivers of 250 privately-owned fuel tankers serving the Indian Oil Corporation's Irumpanam Terminal walked off the job for 48 hours to demand pay and allowance increases for themselves and cleaners. Lorry owners currently pay drivers 10 percent of the total rent amount for the lorry and cleaners pay 5 percent.

The Tanker Lorry Workers Union want payments increased to 12 percent for drivers and 6 percent for cleaners, and other allowances lifted to 6,000 rupees (\$US120) and 3,000 rupees (\$60) respectively. The union withdrew planned strikes in 2009 over these issues after lorry owners agreed to begin negotiations.

The union has threatened an indefinite walkout if their demands are not accepted.

Mumbai police attack protesting nurses

At least three nurses were hospitalised and others injured after police cane-charged a demonstration by 250 striking nurses outside the Asian Heart Institute in Mumbai on October 21. Nurses were protesting a two-year bond that allows the hospital to retain their original certificates. The certificates are released only after the bond expires or after a payment of 50,000 rupees (\$US1002).

Later that day, the hospital management agreed to issue the certificates but threatened nurses with dismissal and eviction from hospital accommodation within 24 hours if they took up the offer. "We are all from Kerala. How can we vacate our rooms so soon? We did not take the

certificates," said a staff nurse.

Rajasthan: SMS Hospital contract workers on strike

Contract employees at the Sawai Man Singh (SMS) Hospital in Jaipur, Rajasthan walked off the job on October 24 to demand payment of September salaries. Three days earlier, 150 contract workers, including lab technicians, computer operators and inquiry desk personnel, ended strike action after management falsely claimed that September salaries had been issued.

A representative of the Jaipur District Contract Employees Union said that workers would remain on strike until the payments were deposited into their accounts.

Sri Lankan school principals demonstrate

Over 100 school principals have been on a hunger strike since September 28 outside the ministry of education in Battaramulla on the outskirts of Colombo to demand permanent contracts.

According to the All Island Performing Principals Union (AIPU), there are over 16,500 principals in Sri Lanka's state schools but only 5,500 are on permanent contracts. Many principals have been on temporary contracts for over seven years. The striking principals said that they would continue their hunger strike until the government gives them permanent contracts.

Sri Lankan industrial court workers on strike

Over 500 members of the State Service Labour Officers Union employed in labour courts across Sri Lanka have been on strike since October 14 to demand that six years of salary anomalies be corrected. At least 4,000 labour cases have been delayed by the strike.

The officers' latest action follows a one-day strike on September 28 and a demonstration at the Labour Department in Narahenpita over the issue. The union claims that the government has accepted that salary anomalies exist but is unwilling to review them.

Retired Pakistan railways workers protest

A group of retired Pakistan Railways workers demonstrated outside a Lahore bank over the non-payment of pensions. Demonstrators claimed that they had not received a pension payment for at least two months and that more than 1,500 retired workers in other areas had not been paid for six months.

The protest follows a two-day strike by railway workers on October 18 over the non-payment of salaries for two months. Workers also walked off the job in September over outstanding pay and complaints about the rundown state of the entire rail system. The International Monetary Fund has demanded the Pakistani government cut all subsidies to the utility and that it begin restructuring Pakistan Railways and downsizing its workforce.

Australian customs officers' union accepts pay deal

After three months of limited industrial action by 3,000 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) customs, quarantine and border protection officers, the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) has reached agreement with management on a new pay deal. The agreement was reached during a 24-hour stoppage by custom officers at Sydney, Melbourne and Perth international airports this week and two- to four-hour stoppages at other DAFF locations across the country.

The union claims that the deal will deliver a pay rise of about 11 percent over three years to "almost" all customs officers. The CPSU's original claim was for annual increases above 4 percent.

The Gillard Labor government has placed a 3 percent cap on annual pay rises for over 120,000 federal public servants and demanded trade-offs through cuts to leave, flexitime and overtime payments and other conditions. Details of the CPSU-DAFF deal have not been made public.

Australian meteorologists and government media staff walk out

CPSU members at the Australian Communications and Media Authority walked off the job for an hour in Parramatta, Brisbane, Melbourne and Canberra on October 26. The next day CPSU members at the Bureau of Meteorology walked out for an hour over the same issues. Staff in both departments are concerned that the government's current 3 percent pay offer is below the 3.6 inflation rate and will leave them behind most other Australian public sector employees. They are also protesting proposed cuts in working conditions. Workplace agreements in both departments expired four months ago.

Qantas ground crew stop work again

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members, including baggage handlers, catering staff and ground crew, walked out for an hour yesterday at Qantas terminals in Melbourne, Sydney and Perth to vote on the airline's latest pay offer. Details of the offer have not been made public.

The TWU wants 5 percent annual pay rises for three years, job security clauses to prevent outsourcing, and a limit on contract labour. A TWU official claimed that Qantas proposed employing new staff on lower rates, with 1,000 jobs to be axed and no limits on outsourcing jobs. Several years ago the airline established a subsidiary, Qantas Ground Services,

which employs workers on lower pay rates.

Queensland local government workers strike

Over 300 outdoor employees of the Mackay Regional Council, 950km north of Brisbane, walked off the job on October 20 after rejecting the council's latest pay offer. Management was offering a nine-day fortnight and 3.4 percent annual pay increases, backdated to July 1 for all staff and no forced redundancies.

According to the Queensland Services Union, the outdoor workers are deeply opposed to the second-tier part of the agreement. New staff would be required to work any five days of the week with a reduced weekend rate. Workers also want an improved pay offer that matches Queensland's current inflation rate of 3.8 percent.

Victorian government employees vote to strike

More than 35,000 nurses and 32,000 state public servants have started voting in postal ballots for industrial action in a pay dispute with the state government. The nurses' current agreement expires on Tuesday and a mass meeting of union members is scheduled three days later. The nurses' ballot, which closes on November 4, lists a range of industrial action, including bed closures, elective surgery cancellations and administrative bans.

Nurses overwhelmingly rejected the Victorian Liberal government's 2.5 percent pay rise over four years, with an additional increase through productivity trade-offs. The proposed trade-offs include abolishing nurse and midwife patient ratios, replacement of nurses with health assistants, and the introduction of unlimited short shifts and split shifts. The Australian Nurses Federation want an 18.5 percent pay rise over four years, with 8 percent in the first year, followed by annual rises of 3.5 percent, and improved staffing levels.

Meanwhile, the Community and Public Sector Union said it was confident that its Victorian members would vote for industrial action to begin in early November. The CPSU's limited bans will include ministerial drivers refusing to pick up politicians before 8 a.m., not waiting more than 30 minutes for them at meetings, and carrying slogans on the side of government cars criticising the state's wages policy. Industrial bans and limited stoppages will also be implemented in the prison system.

The CPSU's initial claim was 6 percent a year plus a 35-hour working week, but an official claimed that the union had "moved on from that position" following the latest government pay deal with the Victorian Police Association. This week, the Liberal government granted Victorian police a 19 percent pay rise over four years.

The state teachers' enterprise agreement expires at the end of the year. The Australian Education Union has rejected a 2.5 percent wage offer and demanded 10 percent annual pay increases over three years to bring Victorian teachers' pay in line with their counterparts in Western Australia.

Victorian food processing workers stop work

On October 21, 45 members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) at the Sunbeam dried fruit and packaging factory in Mildura held a four-hour stop-work meeting after rejecting the company's latest pay offer.

Sunbeam offered annual pay increases over three years of 3.25, 3.5 and 4 percent and redundancy payouts capped at 45 weeks. The AWU wants 4 percent annual rises over three years and a 52-week redundancy payout cap. More four-hour stoppages are planned.

New South Wales teachers protest

Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers from the Newcastle campus, north of Sydney, stopped work and rallied outside the local electoral office of state Liberal MP Tim Owen on October 20 to protest the O'Farrell government's proposal to transfer TAFE teachers onto federal awards. The NSW Teachers Federation claimed the shift would have a detrimental effect on employment conditions by allowing the NSW TAFE Commission to directly hire and fire teachers and split them from other public school teachers. The education minister claimed that working conditions would be maintained while new agreements were negotiated.

Meanwhile, the Teachers Federation has called for a two-hour stop-work meeting of TAFE and other public school teachers on November 2 to protest the government's refusal to enter negotiations for a new work agreement. The current enterprise agreement expires on December 31.

New South Wales firefighters ordered to lift work bans

The NSW Industrial Relations Commission ordered the Fire Brigade Employees Union (FBEU) to lift work bans on October 21, a few hours after they were imposed.

The union bans were in protest against the state government's failure to implement an agreement made in February 2010 over staffing levels, the closure and amalgamation of fire stations, and provision of essential equipment. The Fire and Rescue NSW (FRNSW) reportedly shut down 25 fire stations in response to the bans.

Firefighters are particularly concerned that management have not allowed injured firefighters to be included in the normal 14/10 roster system and drive logistic support vehicles to major incidents.

New Zealand mental health workers suspend industrial action

Over 200 mental health workers at PACT, the mental health and disability services accommodation provider in New Zealand's south island West Coast, this week suspended all industrial action in their long-running pay dispute. The Public Service Association (PSA) and the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) called off paperwork bans and a two-hour stop work meeting scheduled for October 26 after PACT management locked out some workers and issued 13 staff with suspension notices.

PSA and SFWU are in dispute over a wage increase. PACT employees, who are only paid a maximum of \$16 (\$US12.50) an hour, want an increase of 4.5 percent. PACT is offering 1 percent. The current inflation rate is 5.3 percent. Mediation talks are due to recommence early next month.

New Zealand meat processing workers locked out

Up to 120 members of the Aotearoa Meat Workers Union have been locked out at the Canterbury Meat Packers' Rangitikei plant following two months of stalled negotiations for a new work agreement. Management told employees on October 20 that they would not be allowed to return to work until they signed individual work agreements. Over a dozen police have been mobilised to the picket at the company's main gate.

The company's proposed individual contracts require employees to work a 40-hour week instead of the current 35-hour week. According to a union spokesman, the company wants a 25 percent wage cut in a new work agreement.



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