

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 November 2011

India: Police break up Punjab government employees' protest

Large contingents of police forcefully broke up a demonstration by thousands of female Punjab government employees in Chandigarh on October 30. The workers had been protesting for three hours.

The employees, including part-time sewing teachers, midday meal workers and accredited social health activists from many areas of the far northern state of India, are paid meagre monthly salaries of between 750 rupees (\$US15.30) and 1,000 rupees.

Demonstrators said they had handed their charter of demands to Punjab's chief minister several times before, but with no response. They want the state government to provide them with at least the minimum wage for an unskilled government employee of 147 rupees per day—around 3,000 rupees a month.

Pakistan power workers protest privatisation

Nearly 800 employees of the power generator Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO), along with hundreds of power distribution utility workers in Islamabad, Faisalabad, Lahore and Gujranwala, walked off the job for the day on Tuesday to protest the government's plan to privatise the utilities. Workers locked down 126 sub-divisional offices during the strike. Protests over the planned privatisation began in January when thousands of power utility workers struck in major cities across the nation.

Power generation and distribution comes under the jurisdiction of the Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA). Striking workers said the government wanted to destroy WAPDA as it destroyed Pakistan Railways and Pakistan International Airlines. In the first step toward privatisation, the government plans to transfer the duties of PEPCO to a new Central Power Purchasing Agency acting under the ministry of water and power. The WAPDA Hydroelectric Union has threatened to shut down the country's power supply if the government proceeds.

Non-academic staff at Sri Lankan universities strike again

For the second time in two months, thousands of non-academic and administrative employees at 13 public universities across Sri Lanka struck work for 24 hours on Wednesday, following a breakdown in talks over pay and conditions. Members of the Inter University Trade Union Federation (IUTUF) want a pay rise, removal of salary disparities and an end to privatisation.

The latest action follows a one-day sick-note campaign and lunchtime

protests in September. Despite a week-long strike in April 2007, in which dozens of employees were suspended, the workers have not had a pay rise since 2006.

Workers injured in attack on Philippine Airlines picket

An attack by 40 alleged hired goons on a Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA) strike camp outside the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Pasay City last Saturday ended with a bystander killed and six picketers seriously injured. One of the attackers was identified as a security guard employed by Philippine Airlines (PAL). Last month, the police attempted to dismantle the camp, but were withdrawn when challenged by the protesters.

Around 1,000 PALEA members are manning the camp to protest the sacking of over 2,600 PAL ground staff following the outsourcing of their jobs last month. The camp serves no purpose except to provide an avenue for sacked workers to let off steam and to give the impression that the union is doing something. Many of the sacked workers have had to accept contract employment on half their previous wages and with no benefits.

Since 2009, when the airline's program of retrenchment was announced, the union has repeatedly refused to conduct a principled struggle. It has instead appealed to one section of the ruling class after another, peddling the illusion that under the pressure of workers some "reformist" sections of the Philippine government would intervene on behalf of employees.

Australian dock workers begin strike action

Several hundred members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) at DB World's container terminals in Brisbane and Fremantle walked off the job for 24 hours on Wednesday in a dispute over a new work agreement. Workers want 5 percent annual pay increases and improved work conditions and safety. The action precedes planned 24-hour stoppages at Sydney's Port Botany on Friday and on Sunday at Melbourne's West Swanton terminal.

An MUA official said negotiations have been ongoing for several months. Talks are scheduled to reconvene next week.

Western Australian port workers accept pay deal

A three-month wages dispute, which included strike action and work bans by dock workers employed by Mermaid Marine Australia at the Dampier Supply Base in the Pilbara, Western Australia, ended this week with MUA members accepting a 27 percent pay increase over four years.

MUA members first walked off the job on July 15, after six months of negotiations 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 at the Dampier base and on Mermaid's vessels.

Workers also wanted a \$90 per day allowance, in line with that paid to over 3,500 construction workers on the massive Gorgon LNG project off the Pilbara coast. Although the MUA boasted that its members would now be paid about \$180,000 a year, including allowances and accommodation, details of the agreement have not been made public.

Queensland construction workers walk out after fatal accident

Workers at 20 construction sites across Queensland walked off the job for three hours on Wednesday following the death of a 65-year-old foreman at the University of Queensland's St Lucia campus in Brisbane on Monday. The man was crushed when equipment fell from a crane. A Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union official said the walkout was to facilitate safety audits at major construction sites. "It's been a tradition for many years, it's not a protest, it's not to disrupt work," the official told the media.

The "traditional" stoppage is an attempt by the union to put a lid on the anger of construction workers who have witnessed an escalating number of fatalities. Deaths on Queensland construction sites have already totalled 12 this year, up from eight last year.

Queensland health union accepts state government's pay policy

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) this week accepted a pay deal with Queensland Health (QH) that endorses the Labor state government's below-inflation pay policy set in 2009. The deal confines 14,000 public health support workers, including cleaners, wards men, stores and security staff, to 2.5 percent annual pay increases over three years plus 0.5 percent each year for productivity improvements. The increase is far short of the original demand for 4 percent annual increases, itself not enough to cover the rising cost of living. No details of the productivity requirements have been released.

Although AWU members are yet to vote on the deal, the union has ordered an end to all industrial action. In a joint statement, Treasurer Andrew Fraser and Health Minister Geoff Wilson paid homage to the AWU bureaucracy. They said the outcome reflected the Bligh government's ability to work with unions "who are willing to have constructive discussions in regard to workers' rights and fair pay."

Another health union, Together, this week agreed for its pay dispute with QH to be arbitrated in the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission. Members of Together, which include administrative staff and health professionals, have demanded annual pay increases of between 3.6 and 4 percent with no productivity trade-offs.

New South Wales teachers stop work

More than 17,000 teachers stopped work for two hours on Wednesday and voted overwhelmingly to reject the New South Wales state government's offer of 2.5 percent annual wage increases in a new enterprise agreement. According to the NSW Teachers Federation, over 99 percent of teachers voted for a 24-hour strike on November 29 if an improved offer is not made.

The government's below-inflation offer would see teachers lose \$17 a week next year and \$35 per week the following year. In June, the state parliament passed legislation affecting 400,000 state public servants that capped wage rises at 2.5 percent, with an additional 1.5 percent "productivity" increase available only if financed from "employee-related savings" such as job losses and increased workloads. The legislation also allows the state government to reduce core conditions, such as penalty rates, sick and long-service leave entitlements and holidays.

Sydney charity workers protest sackings

Six sacked textile workers at the Villawood factory of the charity group The Smith Family set up a picket on Tuesday to protest their sudden termination. The sackings were sparked when 22 textile workers at the factory held a meeting to discuss protected industrial action following a deadlock in negotiations for a wage increase.

Textile workers want a 3.5 percent pay rise similar to that granted to rag sorters at the factory. Mario Delgado, who had worked for the charity as a machine operator and forklift driver for more than 10 years, said he was called into the office at the end of his shift and told his job had been made redundant, effective immediately.

The charity group said the terminations were part of a restructure to transfer its textile manufacturing to United Bonded Fabrics. The Smith Family owns two commercial businesses, namely clothing recycling and non-woven technical textile manufacturing.

Victorian doctors and nurses vote for strike action

Doctors and nurses at public hospitals in the western suburbs of Melbourne voted on Thursday to take industrial action in support of a wage rise in a new enterprise agreement. Proposed industrial action by 30,000 members of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) includes bed closures, elective surgery cancellations and administrative bans.

Nurses had previously rejected the Victorian Liberal government's 2.5 percent annual pay rises over four years, with additional increases only through productivity concessions. The proposed trade-offs include abolishing nurse and midwife patient ratios, replacement of nurses with health assistants, and introduction of unlimited short shifts and split shifts. The ANF proposes 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.

Christmas Island workers on strike

Two strikes have broken out on Christmas Island, the site of an Australian government refugee detention centre in the Indian Ocean. Around 30 maintenance workers, including cleaners and gardeners, employed by contractor Resolve FM at the North West Point immigration detention centre began a week-long strike on Monday to demand improved pay and conditions.

The Christmas Island Workers Union proposes pay parity with workers employed in similar work on mainland Australia. According to a union official, the cost of living on the island has “gone through the roof” during the past two years.

More than 150 workers employed at the island’s phosphate mine, owned by Phosphate Resources, have walked off the job to demand a wage increase. On Wednesday they rejected the company’s offer of a 15.5 percent rise over three years and voted to stay out indefinitely, saying they could not afford a decent standard of living on the island, where two litres of milk sells for \$19.50. Rents on the island have doubled in the past 12 months. The company has threatened to close the mine if the dispute is not settled soon.



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