Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 November 2011

India: Striking teachers in Chhattisgarh arrested

Up to 2,000 striking contract teachers in the central Indian state of Chhattisgarh were arrested this week after the government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act. Over 1,000 were arrested in Raipur, where teachers had travelled from across the state to protest. Police set up roadblocks around the city and began detaining teachers trying to get to the protest.

Teachers walked off the job on November 1 to demand that the state government honour an earlier agreement to regularise their positions and increase salaries. There are roughly 20,000 contract teachers in Chhattisgarh who are only paid between 6,000 rupees ($US132) to 9,000 rupees a month. The government threatened to recruit strike breakers if the contract teachers failed to return to work on Wednesday.

Police attack picketing pharmaceutical workers in Andhra Pradesh

Several workers and a reporter were hospitalised on November 4 when police lobbed teargas shells and baton-charged a picket line outside the Pydibhimavaram plant of Dr. Reddy's Laboratory (DRL) in Andhra Pradesh. DRL management called police when 10,000 workers from 25 factories in the industrial belt joined the picket to support 650 DRL contract workers on strike since August 13.

Workers' demands include an increase in the current 5,557-rupee ($US121) monthly wage to 12,000 rupees, improved allowances, and regularisation of employees who have completed five years' service.

DRL is India's second-largest pharmaceutical manufacturer employing 13,500 people, with markets in India, Europe and the US.

Haryana public hospital doctors strike

Up to 2,400 government doctors in India's northern state of Haryana took casual leave for two days on Tuesday over several demands. The doctors want a non-practising allowance made part of the basic salary and the payment of outstanding higher wages for promotions. The government has installed cameras in hospitals to monitor doctors' action and withdrawn all leave and pay for the striking doctors.

A Haryana Civil Medical Services Association representative told the media that the doctors planned to strike indefinitely if their demands were not met.

Tamil Nadu railway workers protest

Thousands of Southern Railway Mazdoor Union members demonstrated at railway stations across the state for six demands on November 8. These included scrapping of the new pension scheme introduced in 2004 and for management to honour an agreement to provide jobs for the children of employees previously encouraged to accept early retirement. The rail workers were also protesting government plans to privatise parcel-loading and cleaning.

Sri Lankan school principals' strike in fifth week

Over 100 acting school principals on a hunger strike since September 28 moved their protest to the Education Ministry Secretary's office on November 9. The principals said they had been in acting posts for at least seven years and some had risked their lives running schools in combat zones during the war.

According to the All Island Performing Principals Union, there are over 16,500 principals in Sri Lanka's state schools but only 5,500 on permanent contracts. Strikers have threatened to begin a "fast-until-death" campaign on November 14 if their demands are not addressed.

Pakistan power loom workers protest

Thousands of power loom workers from different industrial sectors rallied in Karachi on November 5 to protest the conviction of six workers on trumped-up "terrorism" charges. Workers held a procession from Fountain Chowk to Karachi Press Club. An anti-terrorism court in Faisalabad had sentenced the six workers to life imprisonment. The protest was organised by the National Trade Union Federation and Etehad Power Looms Workers' Union.

The convicted workers played leading roles in a wage strike by over 100,000 power loom workers last year. The unions have denied allegations that workers burned down a factory during the strike. Counsel representing the workers has accused thugs hired by factory owners of starting the factory fire.

China: Hospital support workers walk out

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Health services at the Xinhua Hospital in Shanghai were affected for nearly 24 hours on Monday when 400 employees of a labour hire company, including auxiliary nurses, porters and cleaners, walked off the job. The hospital support workers were demanding social insurance payments, an allowance for working in high temperatures, overtime rates, and holiday pay.

The walkout ended after the employer, Shanghai Jichen Sanitation and Logistics Management, was threatened with legal action by the hospital and quickly reached a settlement with strikers.

Workers told the media that the labour hire company was not paying decent social insurance on their behalf and that because the contributions were not fully paid between 2002 and 2005 it would reduce their pension entitlements.

Victorian public servants impose work bans

Over 30,000 Victorian public servants have begun implementing 63 work bans that will be applied progressively over the next weeks. The campaign includes adding information about the industrial action to the end of official emails, non-compliance with a government gag that prevents public servants speaking to the media, and displaying stickers on government cars supporting their wage claim.

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members want annual 6 percent wage rises over four years, a 1.75 percent increase of employer contributions to superannuation, and improved career structures. The Baillieu state government has offered 2.5 percent annual pay increases with an additional increase through productivity trade-offs. The state government recently approved a 19 percent pay rise over four years with the Victorian Police Association.

Victorian airport cleaners' union accepts wage deal

Over 100 cleaners employed by contractor Spotless at Melbourne's Tullamarine airport and Avalon airport, ended two months of industrial action, including strikes and a lockout, this week. The return to work followed a wage agreement between their union, United Voice (UV), and the company. The offer includes a 4.4 percent pay increase this year and a 4 percent increase next year, plus a higher allowance for cleaning toilets, and improved safety standards.

Cleaners had originally demanded a wage increase along with the restoration of a $1,600 annual allowance paid by other airport contractors. The allowance is for parking fees and car maintenance costs to compensate for the lack of public transport to the airports. UV has not revealed whether the $1,600 allowance has been restored.

Meanwhile, Fair Work Australia has given approval for cleaners employed by Spotless at 11 shopping centres across Victoria to vote on strike action for a new work agreement that includes a pay rise and reduced workload.

Patrick Stevedores and maritime union reach agreement

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), representing 1,200 dock workers at Patrick Stevedores' container and general cargo terminals around Australia, this week agreed to relax some safety requirements in an in-principled agreement with Patrick for a five-year work agreement. The deal ends a 12-month dispute that involved lockouts, strikes and work-bans.

The agreement provides for a pay increase of 22.5 percent over five years, back-dated to October 2010, with an extra 0.75 percent annual increase linked to productivity targets. In return, the union has agreed to speedups including relaxing safety requirements that imposed unofficial caps on crane movements and continuous operations.

The MUA originally proposed a 40-point log of claims that included a back-dated rise or sign-on bonus equivalent to a 5 percent pay rise, along with a further three annual 5 percent rises. MUA members are yet to ratify the agreement.

The MUA is currently in dispute with stevedore companies POAGS and DB World over new work agreements. MUA members at DB World container terminals in Fremantle, Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne walked off the job for 24-hours on separate days last week while members at POAGS terminals in Melbourne and Port Bunbury, south of Perth, have struck for 48 hours on separate occasions over the past two weeks.

Christmas Island mine workers remain on strike

More than 150 workers employed at a Christmas Island phosphate mine, owned by Phosphate Resources, have vowed to maintain strike action begun on November 2 for a wage rise. 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 rents have doubled in the past 12 months.

Mine management has called on the Gillard government to intervene and force the dispute into compulsory arbitration by Fair Work Australia, claiming the strike is damaging the Christmas Island economy and could force the 100-year-old mine to close.

New Zealand meat processing workers' union accepts pay cut

The NZ Meat Workers and Related Trades Union, representing 120 locked-out workers at the Canterbury Meat Packers' (CMP) Rangitikei plant in Marton, on New Zealand's North Island, this week signalled that it is willing to consider a sell-out agreement that included changes to wage rates and shift structures, "but only if pay cuts were across the board."

The sheep-slaughter and processing workers have been locked out since October 19, when negotiations for a new collective agreement broke down.

CMP wants a new agreement that include pay cuts and longer working hours during the peak season. The company originally wanted employees to sign individual contracts and work a 40-hour week, instead of the current 35-hour week, with a 25 percent wage cut.

Workers picketed the Department of Labour in Palmerston North on November 9, where CMP negotiators were due to hand the union their latest proposal. Workers were expected to vote on the proposal by the end of the week. The Employment Court has ruled that the lockout is legal and can remain until a new collective agreement is ratified by union members.

New Zealand non-teaching staff protest

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Non-academic staff at the University of Auckland held lunchtime protests at the Alfred Nathan House in Auckland on Thursday and Friday to demand a “fairer” pay system.

The Public Service Association and the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) have been campaigning for two years for a new pay system to replace the current performance pay system. A TEU official said both unions have been negotiating with management for four months but the university has not yet made an offer. Negotiations resumed on Thursday.

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