

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 November 2011

PepsiCo workers in China strike

Several thousand employees at PepsiCo's bottling plants staged coordinated protests in at least five Chinese cities in opposition to the takeover of 24 mainland bottling plants by the Taiwanese food and beverage conglomerate, Tingyi Holdings.

Employees walked out on November 15 when they heard that PepsiCo plans to terminate up to 20,000 bottling workers who would then have to renegotiate new employment contracts with Tingyi. While PepsiCo told employees that their contracts would not vary, the company said it could not guarantee there would be changes after Tingyi takes full control of the bottling plants in two years.

Korean bus drivers return to work

A 37-day lockout of 400 bus drivers of Samwha Express Company in Incheon (40km west of Seoul) ended on November 15 after 93 percent of union members endorsed a new wage deal. The drivers were locked out on October 11 when they struck following two months of failed negotiations for a 20 percent pay rise. They have not had a wage increase for 10 years. The drivers also wanted a shorter working day and for 20 percent of contract workers to be regularised.

Samwha Express had previously offered a 3.5 percent pay rise and a cut in daily working hours from 21 to 18 hours. Under the new wage deal, drivers will receive pay increases between 4.5 and 6 percent and working hours per shift will be reduced. No further details, however, were made available to the media.

India: Dr Reddy's pharmaceutical strike plant in 14th week

A 14-week strike by 650 contract workers at the Pydibhimavaram plant of Dr. Reddy's Laboratory (DRL) in Andhra Pradesh escalated this week when picketing workers blockaded the plant.

Workers struck on August 13 to demand an increase in the current 5,557-rupee (\$US121) monthly wage to 12,000 rupees, improved allowances, and regularisation of employment for those who have completed five years' service.

Several workers and a reporter were hospitalised on November 4 when police fired teargas shells and baton-charged the picket line after 10,000 workers from 25 factories in the industrial belt joined the picket to support the strikers. DRL is India's second-largest pharmaceutical manufacturer, employing 13,500 people and with markets in India, Europe and the US.

A tripartite meeting on November 8, that included DRL, the contract labour company and the workers, failed after the strikers rejected an offer to raise daily wages to 260 rupees for the next two years, up from the present 213 rupees.

Goa health workers on hunger strike

Over 60 malaria-control workers in Campal, in India's west-coast state of Goa, have been on a hunger strike since November 9 to demand regularisation. On November 14 the protesting workers moved their picket from the District Health Services building to the chief minister's residence and presented him with their demands. Most of the striking workers have been employed on a contract basis for 16 years.

The latest hunger strike is the fourth in a two-year battle for regularisation. Workers said they ended previous strikes after the chief minister promised they would be regularised. An Injustice Malaria Workers Union official said workers had decided to maintain their protest until appointment letters were issued. "We don't want any assurances from politicians, we want justice," the union official said.

Andhra Pradesh rural medical staff on strike

At least 70 percent of emergency medical services in rural Andhra Pradesh have been affected since November 9 when contract employees of '104' ambulance and mobile health services walked off the job over several demands. These include on-time salary payments, increased staffing levels, resolution of relocation issues, adequate medicines and the repair of 470 faulty ambulances.

Up to 3,500 contract workers provide basic medical and ambulance services in rural areas. A 104 Contract Employees Union official said the union wants the government, which is providing 95 percent of funds towards provision of 104 services, to directly operate the services instead of outsourcing to private companies.

Beedi workers in Karnataka protest

Thousands of beedi workers (cigarette rollers) struck and protested in eight locations in Karnataka's Dakshina district on November 15 to demand higher wages and improved conditions. One of the protesters, a single mother, demonstrating outside the Udupi District Labour Office

told the media that she was finding it increasingly difficult on her current wage to meet day-to-day expenses and her child's school fees.

The Karnataka State Beedi Workers' Federation, representing nearly one million beedi workers, wants the minimum wage raised from 103 rupees per 1,000 beedis to 133 rupees (\$US2.93). Beedi workers usually roll 1,000 beedis per day.

Sri Lankan provincial tax collectors protest

Provincial Inland Revenue Department tax collectors marched in Colombo on November 16 to demand that they be absorbed into the Inland Revenue Department. The march, which began at the Fort Railway Station, was stopped by police before reaching the Sri Lankan president's office. Protesters sat on the road and were forcibly removed by police.

The tax collectors said that they have been out of work since their tasks were assigned to the Inland Revenue Department in the 2011 budget.

New South Wales nurses close hospital beds

Members of the NSW Nurses' Association (NSWNA) have closed some beds at seven public hospitals across the state as part of industrial action over staffing levels. Westmead Children's Hospital nurses in Sydney closed five beds and midwives refused bookings from outside the local area on November 14. The bans follow bed closures and industrial action at Parramatta, Lismore, Bathurst, Orange, Cobar and Muswellbrook hospitals in recent weeks.

The NSWNA told the media that Westmead's maternity unit was struggling with an inadequate staffing establishment of only 135 full-time-equivalent nurses and midwives. The unit required at least 152 personnel. Administrators at hospitals hit by the dispute have agreed to review staffing levels but only a few have made concrete offers.

Nurses closed nearly 600 beds at 70 hospitals in a staffing-level dispute in January. The NSWNA ended the industrial campaign after a week and eventually accepted a 9.7 percent pay rise over three years and an offer to progressively increase nurse numbers by 1,400. This was far short of the estimated 6,000 required for the one-to-four ratio nurses had demanded.

Victorian child protection workers begin industrial action

Department of Human Services child protection workers have begun capping the number of abuse reports that they will follow up. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members want to reduce the overloading of cases due to chronic understaffing. The average number of cases for child protection workers has been about 15 but many in understaffed regional offices have reported caseloads of 30 or more over the past two years.

The industrial campaign involves workers with more than one-year's experience limiting the number of cases they handle to 12. Those with less experience will only take on 6 cases of reported child abuse. The Victorian government claims it has already reduced the workload, but according to the CPSU, the state government has falsely halved the number of unallocated child abuse cases—from 14.6 percent to 7.8 percent—by fast-tracking cases and closing them prematurely.

While 1,200 front-line child protection workers have been offered pay rises as part of a wide-ranging restructure, the department has not agreed to cap caseloads.

Western Australian public hospital workers protest

Around 70 Royal Perth Hospital support workers walked off the job for an hour on November 14 to protest management plans to install swipe cards to monitor workers' movements around the facility.

Orderlies, catering staff and cleaners walked to the Department of Health's administration offices in Perth's CBD to oppose the plan. The support workers voted to boycott the system, pointing out that they were the only employees being targeted under the plan.

BHP Billiton mine dispute in Queensland continues

Over 3,500 coal miners at BHP Billiton-Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) mines in central Queensland's Bowen Basin are maintaining overtime bans in a year-long dispute for a new work agreement.

The dispute involves members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, who have threatened to resume rolling stoppages at BMA's seven mines. Union members voted by 93 percent to reject the company's latest offer.

BMA's offer included annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker and paid in weekly instalments. The company, however, is demanding 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 have opposed the terms of an individual flexibility arrangement or IFA proposed by BMA. IFAs were introduced by the Gillard Labor government, and accepted by the unions.

Australian tax office unions accept pay cut

On Monday, 24,000 employees of the Australian Taxation Office (ATO), represented by the Australian Services Union (ASU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), narrowly voted to accept a new wage deal approved by the unions. While the deal offers some improvement in bonuses it delivers just 3 percent annual pay increases over three years, a wage cut in real terms.

One media report claimed that the Gillard Labor government had "won a crucial victory in its campaign to keep public service wage growth in check."

ASU taxation office secretary Jeff Lapidos, who negotiated the agreement, brushed aside criticism that it represented a real wage cut, telling members that it "ensured ATO staff remained among the highest paid in the bureaucracy."

The Gillard 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.

In October, the CPSU negotiated an enterprise agreement covering 3,000 employees in the Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry

that delivered a pay rise of about 11 percent over three years to customs officers. The CPSU's original claim was for annual increases above 4 percent.

Striking cement workers in Papua New Guinea sacked

On November 9, the Japanese-owned Taiheiyo Cement company in Lae (300km north of Port Moresby) sacked its entire indigenous work force of 145 in a dispute over working conditions.

Employees walked off the job four days earlier protesting that the cement manufacturing company had ignored a petition containing demands presented to management on October 25. As well as accusing the company of discrimination against Papua New Guinea nationals, workers called for provision of company vehicles for staff on 24-hour call, changes in upper management, provision of housing for all employees as promised in 2005, and adequate training.

A spokesman for the locked-out workers said they were not demanding a pay rise. "All we wanted was for the company to address a number of issues we felt were not right," he said.

Strike at Christmas Island phosphate mine in third week

Around 180 workers at a phosphate mine on Christmas Island (an Australian territory in the Indian Ocean) are maintaining a strike begun on November 2 to demand a wage increase. Members of the Christmas Island Workers Union want a 20 percent annual pay rise to give them parity with mine workers in Western Australia's Pilbara region, plus an increase of the district allowance to \$9,879 a year.

Mine workers rejected Phosphate Resources's latest offer of 7.5 percent annual increases 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 place the dispute under compulsory arbitration in Fair Work Australia. The company claims that the strike is damaging the Christmas Island economy and could force the 100-year-old mine to close.



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