

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 July 2012

Air India pilots' end strike without resolution

On July 3, the Indian Pilots Guild, representing 434 striking international pilots of Air India (AI) called off their 58-day strike without resolving any of their grievances. Isolated by the other nine AI unions who failed to support the striking pilots, The IPG ended all industrial action after the Delhi High Court asked AI management to "sympathetically consider" the pilots grievances and "work toward" the reinstatement of the 101 pilots sacked during the dispute.

IPG pilots began their industrial action on May 8, after AI management offered 50 percent of training places on its new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliners to lower-paid members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA). IPG pilots also demanded payment of outstanding salary arrears from 2007, first-class travel when not working and the opportunity to be promoted as commanders within six years. The nine other AI unions failed to support the striking IPG members.

India: Kingfisher pilots on strike

On July 1 around 200 pilots from Kingfisher Airlines struck on July 1 over unpaid wages. Most Kingfisher employees have not been paid since February. It is the third walkout in nine weeks over the issue. Executive pilots are trying to maintain flight schedules.

Pilots called off previous strike action in May after management falsely claimed that entitlements would be paid by the end of that month. The action followed a strike by 200 engineers in April over the same issue. A meeting of all employees, including pilots, engineers and cabin crew, was convened in Mumbai during the week to decide on further action.

Kingfisher has a total debt of about 70 billion rupees (\$US1.4 billion) and accumulated losses of about 60 billion rupees. According to media reports, the Service Tax department has frozen 40 of Kingfisher's bank accounts. The airline has drastically cut flights and its workforce to reduce losses.

Kerala houseboat workers strike in Kumarakom

Following three weeks of limited on-off strike action, houseboat workers in the tourist resort of Kumarakom on Vembanad Lake, Kerala struck again on July 2 over the wage agreement signed with the owners association.

The workers want the two-year deal, which gives workers 6,750 rupees (\$US123) per month and a monthly allowance of 170 rupees, reduced to

one year. The All Kerala Houseboats and Resorts Workers Union has condemned the workers' actions and sided with resort owners, who claim that the industrial action will "destroy the industry".

Tamil Nadu fishermen on strike

On July 1, fishermen operating up to 1,400 boats in the Tamil Nadu coastal town of Rameswaram began an indefinite strike to protest low fish prices.

A spokesman for the Rameswaram Fishermen's Association said that four large fishing companies had formed a cartel and were driving down the price they paid for fish. He said that the companies were taking the advantage of the fact that the fishermen did not have cold storage facilities. The association is diverting fishermen's anger into appeals for the Rajapakse government to intervene and help resolve the issue.

Orissa oil refinery workers walk out

Construction workers at the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC) refinery in Paradip have been on strike since July 2 in protest against violent attacks Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) personnel.

CISF members opened fire on workers demonstrating last week for better wages. Seven protestors were injured when they attempted to enter the refinery without a valid pass. At least 250 policemen and 400 CISF personnel were deployed to the refinery.

An Eastern India Oil Refinery Labour Union official warned that union members would not return to work until their demands were met. These include payment of injured labourers' medical expenses, suspension of CISF personnel, employment for one injured worker's family member, permanent gate pass to all workers and an inquiry into a shooting attack.

Gujarat textile mill workers resume work

A one-month strike by textile workers at mills owned by Arvind, Ankur, Ashima and Asarwa Limited ended on July 1, after management agreed to reinstate 400 sacked employees.

On June 4, 300 workers from denim-maker Arvind's Naroda plant walked out to demand a 40-percent wage hike. The strike rapidly spread across the whole textile belt, involving almost 15,000 workers. The Textile Labour Association (TLA) called off the strike after the

Ahmedabad Textile Mills' Association (ATMA) agreed to enter into negotiations. Talks began on July 3.

Workers claim that their 5,000-rupee (\$US87) monthly pay has not been increased for decades. The ATMA originally refused to enter talks unless they were presented with signatures from 80 percent of striking workers supporting the union's demands.

Hitachi workers in Ahmedabad on strike

Over 500 workers at the Kadi air conditioning manufacturing plant of Hitachi Home & Life Solutions have been on strike since June 8 over low wages and the sacking of ten workers. Strikers held a protest in Ahmadabad city on July 3 and plan more protests unless their demands are met. The company claims the walkout is illegal and has hired 300 strike-breakers.

A union representative of the Gujarat Mazdoor Sabha said that the striking contract and fixed-term employees work 12-hour days and have no rights. Permanent employees receive up to 20,000 rupees per month for the same work.

Sri Lanka university teachers on strike

Over 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) have been on strike since July 4, following failed talks with the government over unresolved pay issues from 2008. Talks are set to resume on July 12.

Following two 24-hour stoppages in August 2010 and March 2011, lecturers and professors in May 2011 resigned en masse demanding a 200 percent salary increase, creation of a special professional category for university teachers and the trebling of the budgetary allocation for education from 2 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product. The Court of Appeal ordered them back to work after nearly a week without resolving the issues.

Sri Lankan academics are among the poorest paid in Asia, with monthly salaries as low as 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors. They have not received a rise since 1996, and in 2006 the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse cut their academic allowances from 30 percent to 25 percent of their monthly salary.

Sri Lankan power workers resume strike action

After months of protests and limited strike action, over 15,000 non-executive employees of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) walked out for 24 hours on July 4 over a long-standing pay issue.

A spokesman for the United Trade Union Front said that although CEB workers had accepted a 25 percent pay rise in January, with no review until 2015, recent increases in fuel and other living expenses meant the wage hike was inadequate. The union wants wages lifted on par with the 45 percent rises recently granted to CEB executives and engineers.

Pakistan Army mobilised to break Lahore doctors strike

The Punjab government mobilised Pakistan Army doctors on July 2 in an attempt to break ongoing striking action by young doctors at Lahore public hospitals. At least 60 doctors have been arrested on alleged criminal charges and the government has petitioned the High Court to cancel the licenses of striking doctors. The court has ruled the strike illegal.

YDA members at Lahore public hospitals have been on strike since June 18 to demand service structure revision. Under the current structure, young resident doctors who do not share a private practice receive low wages and lower service-related benefits. According to the YDA, a commencing young doctor salary is only 24,000 rupees (\$US253) per month.

The Pakistan Medical Association, consisting of senior doctors, has pledged to back the YDA strike but has not taken any action.

Indonesian postal workers strike

Around 5,000 Pos Indonesia employees walked out for three days on June 28 and rallied in Jakarta for a six-point charter of demands that includes better pay and pension benefits. The SPPI, the postal workers' union, wants base salaries lifted from 15 percent of total take-home pay to 75 percent, and the retirement pension increased above the current 45 percent of final salary to bring them in line with other civil servants.

Workers also want employer funded health cover, improved workplace safety, revision of the employee restructure program, which they claim has not improved workers' welfare, and an end to outsourcing.

Philippine health workers protest

On July 2, over 150 health workers demonstrated outside the Department of Health (DOH) to demand restoration of hazard, uniform and subsistence allowances. An Alliance of Health Workers spokesman said that the allowances accounted for 25 percent of basic salary for over 33,000 Filipino health workers. Workers have been protesting since payments stopped in January.

The latest demonstration was triggered after DOH issued an order on June 25 to stop all benefit payments, pending a report from the department of Budget and Management on the availability of funds. Workers fear that the allowances will be severely reduced or cut altogether.

Queensland meat processing workers locked out

Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union members at Australia's largest meat processor JBS were locked out for 24 hours on July 6 after a planned four-hour strike over wages. The lockout at JBS's Fitzroy River plant at Nerimbera near Rockhampton follows similar action on June 29 at the company's Dinmore plant after workers threatened industrial action. Even though the Dinmore strike was called off, JBS closed the plant and locked out 2,000 workers.

The union wants a 4 percent annual pay rise and increased penalty rates for Saturday work. The Brazilian-owned meat processing company has only offered a 3 percent pay increase.

New South Wales water utility workers oppose job cuts

Over 1,200 Sydney Water Corporation workers walked off the job for four hours on July 5 and attended a meeting at Parramatta in Sydney's western suburbs to oppose job cuts and falling job standards due to the shrinking workforce.

According to the Australian Services Union, 300 jobs have been axed in the past 12 months and the NSW state government is pressuring Sydney Water management to make further cuts. Sydney Water expects to pay as much as \$250 million in dividends to the government in the year to June 2014.

Last month's state budget included a 1.2 percent annual labour expense cap, which will result in the loss of 10,000 public sector jobs over the next four years. This will be on top of 5,000 redundancies announced in September. Treasury documents show 3,600 jobs will be slashed from NSW hospitals and a further 2,400 are set to be axed from schools and TAFE colleges over the next four years.

Victorian community nurses stop work

On July 5, 150 community nurses of the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) stopped work for four hours to attend a rally in Melbourne for better pay and a reduced workload. Community nurses have not had a pay rise since October 2010 and the latest action follows 11 months of negotiations.

Last month, 800 nurses at RDNS centres across Victoria implemented work bans that included reduced patient assessments and non-processing of paperwork required for state government funding. Further industrial action has been suspended ahead of conciliation talks at Fair Work Australia that began on July 6.

The Australian Nursing Federation has limited its demand to the same real wage cut that it recently imposed upon public hospital-based nurses—a 2.5 percent annual wage increase (current CPI inflation is over 3 percent) and \$1,000 a year for professional development.

RDNS has offered a 2.5 percent annual wage increase for four years and annual allowances worth up to \$700 for full-time nurses and less for part-time nurses. The nurses' federation claims that RDNS management wants to reduce current entitlements, including sick leave, carers' leave and qualification allowances.

Vanuatu broadcasting workers threaten strike action

Employees of the Vanuatu Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), on the small South-Pacific island of Vanuatu, have threatened to strike by the end of July if management fail to sign a new contract promised two years ago. Members of the Vanuatu National Workers Union are concerned that the television broadcaster is planning to make cuts and they want a new contract to include severance arrangements.



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