

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 September 2012

## India: Protesting Karnataka weavers arrested

More than 80 weavers of the Karnataka Handloom Development Corporation (KHDC) were arrested on September 14 when they tried to demonstrate outside the chief minister's house in Dharwad north-west of Bangalore. Their demands were for wage revision, registration of houses in their names and for an inquiry into alleged corruption in the KHDC.

A protester told the media that the government had failed to respond to several memorandums previously submitted. The protest was organised by the All Karnataka Handloom weavers' trade union, representing 10,000 weavers of the KHDC.

## Karnataka transport workers end strike

Karnataka state-owned transport corporations workers in Bangalore, Hassan, Mandya, Mysore, Gulbarga, Bellary and several other districts, ended a two-day strike on September 15, following assurances given to the union on workers' demands. Transport workers defied the Essential Services Maintenance Act and walked out to demand a 30 percent salary increase. At least 3,000 striking workers were sacked during the strike.

The Joint Committee of Trade Unions of State Road Transport Undertakings had demanded wage revision for both senior and junior drivers and conductors and regularisation of contract training workers. The government has committed to increase contract trainees' monthly wages by 1,000 rupees (\$US18.5) and limit the trainee period to two years before regularisation. The dearness allowance will also be included in regular workers' basic salary.

## Karnataka health workers protest

Karnataka State Senior and Junior Health Assistants' Association members protested outside the district health office in Mysore on September 14 to demand regular pay and reduced workloads. Their demands included payment of salaries on time, proper allowances for extra work, more appointments to reduce "back breaking" workloads and other claims. Workers' salaries are currently paid randomly over three or four months. Each health worker is responsible for more than 3,000 people.

The nurses' association announced that action would be intensified to include a hunger strike and bans on providing health reports if their demands were not dealt with by October 18.

## Tamil Nadu sanitary workers protest

Tiruchi Corporation sanitary workers protested near the Tiruchirappalli railway station on September 14. The Tiruchi District Local Bodies Workers Union wants appointment of more sanitary workers, uniforms supplied, disbursement of tailoring charges, promotion to supervisors as per seniority, and payment of retirement benefits and superannuation to retired employees.

## Tamil Nadu lorry drivers strike over fuel price increase

On September 14, contract lorry drivers who deliver to ration shops and noon-meal centres for Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies stopped work without notice following the midnight increase in the price of diesel. Drivers have demanded compensation for the increase. The strike was withdrawn after government officials gave an assurance that their grievances would be addressed.

## West Bengal bus operators strike over fuel price increase

West Bengal bus operators ended a two-day strike on September 19 over diesel price increases after the government assured operators it would respond to their demand within ten days. The Joint Council of Bengal Bus Syndicate, which represents operators of 40,000 buses, demanded that minimum fares be increased to compensate for the 5 rupee per litre increase in diesel. The strike affected over 500,000 commuters.

## Pakistan: Lahore doctors resume strike action

Young Doctors' Association (YDA) members defied a no-strike court order at government hospitals in Lahore and walked off the job on September 19 and held a two-hour sit-down protest in their long-running dispute over wages and benefits. Similar protests were reported at Allied Hospital, Faisalabad and Nishtar Hospital, Multan.

Under their current service 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's salary is only 24,000 rupees (\$US253) per month.

Protesting doctors demanded a "health professional allowance" of

10,000 rupees (\$US105) and the dropping of criminal charges against doctors who participated in previous industrial action. The YDA has threatened to call provincial sit-in protests at government offices until their demands are met.

### **Cambodian timber processing workers end strike**

Around 300 employees of Angkor Plywood in Kampong Cham province, in Cambodia's central highlands, ended a five-day strike after the employer agreed to all but one of their demands: an increase in wages.

Workers walked off the job on September 12 to demand pregnant employees leave work 10 minutes early, two days' paid leave if their family members are seriously ill or die, an end to forced overtime work and other claims. One worker complained, "Our working hours are supposed to be from 7am to 4pm, but workers have to work until 7pm."

A Building and Wood Workers Trade Union Federation of Cambodia official claimed that salary increase negotiations will begin on September 29. Workers want the daily wage lifted by 1,000 riel to 8,500 riel (\$US2.11).

### **Queensland construction workers strike in seventh week**

Up to 600 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and other building unions have been on strike at the Children's Hospital construction site in South Brisbane since August 6 over a new enterprise agreement.

The workers are ignoring Fair Work Australia return-to-work orders and said they will remain on strike until contractor Abigroup agrees to guarantee that employees of sub-contractors receive equal pay for doing the same job.

At the heart of the dispute was a decision by Abigroup to have sub-contractors bid against each other—effectively undercutting wages. Several sub-contractors have reportedly gone bankrupt because of Abigroup's policy. The company is refusing to enter into talks with the union.

### **Queensland public school teachers vote for strike action**

After several months of limited protests, public school teachers across Queensland have voted for strike action and work bans to oppose the state Liberal National Party government's proposed new enterprise agreement. The offer was rejected by teachers in June. It included a 2.7 percent annual pay increase and the removal of class size guidelines and other basic working conditions that will cut jobs.

While a 24-hour strike was being planned for October 16, along with work bans, the Queensland Teachers' Union is already in negotiations with the government in the Industrial Relations Commission.

Meanwhile, Queensland Catholic school teachers are implementing 30-minute rolling stoppages and work bans in opposition to a new work agreement proposed by the Queensland Catholic Education Commission. The wage offer and changes in conditions are similar to that offered to public school teachers.

### **Melbourne Metro Trains maintenance workers to strike**

Around 700 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, and the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists & Managers Australia at four Metro Train maintenance depots plan strike action on September 24 and 26 in a new work agreement dispute. The action follows four weeks of overtime bans and a stop-work meeting on August 21.

Track and signal maintenance workers are opposed to Metro Trains' proposal to slash the number of night-time rosters. According to an ETU spokesman, compulsory shift changes in the new enterprise agreement could reduce members' income by up to \$10,000. The spokesman told the media that Metro had threatened that if workers didn't accept the roster changes it would outsource work and make 100 employees redundant.

The RTBU is opposed to the company's proposal for longer shifts at less pay but with the option of a four-day week. The union claims this would lead to serious safety problems, with some drivers working for more than 10 hours at a time, including driving for up to 5.5 hours without a break.

### **New South Wales water utility workers oppose job cuts**

For the second time since July, over 1,000 Sydney Water Corporation workers walked off the job for four hours on September 20 and met at Parramatta in Sydney's western suburbs to oppose job cuts and falling job standards. Workers voted for rolling stoppages starting next month.

According to the Australian Services Union, 335 jobs have been axed in the past 12 months and workers fear that a review of existing enterprise agreements is designed to make it easier for the corporation to sack more staff. A union spokesman said workers had been negotiating with Sydney Water regarding the cutbacks since the July industrial action, but the talks had stalled.

The NSW state budget in June 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.

### **New South Wales TAFE teachers protest**

Teachers and supporters filled the Wollongong TAFE campus auditorium on September 20 as part of a statewide campaign against the NSW state Liberal government's \$1.7 billion cuts to education, which will include 800 TAFE job losses. Demonstrators condemned the 9.5 percent increase to course fees, the doubling of the concession fee from \$53 to \$100, and cuts to fine arts courses.

The NSW Teachers' Federation is opposing any concrete industrial action and convinced teachers to endorse a weekend "day of action" during Term Four.

### **NSW steel workers walk out**

Over 500 workers of three unions at BlueScope Steel planned to stop work for four hours on September 21 and rally outside the Port Kembla steelworks (south of Sydney) while negotiations over a new enterprise agreement remain at an impasse.

The action follows a week of smaller two- and three-hour stoppages across multiple departments. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union began negotiations with BlueScope in February.

An AMWU delegate told media last month that BlueScope was trying to change sick leave provisions, remove departmental agreements and a clause requiring BlueScope not to make significant changes until there is agreement with unions.

### **New Zealand bus drivers reject union-backed agreement**

Planned strike action, which would have affected Auckland bus services beginning Monday, was called off on Friday, after NZ Bus met with two unions representing the 800 drivers at Auckland's largest bus provider and offered a further pay increase.

Services by Metrolink, North Star, Go West, Waka Pacific and all Link buses, including school services, were to be cancelled. Future additional strike action was also cancelled.

While First Union and the Tramways Union officials, as well as Council of Trade Unions president Helen Kelly, had previously endorsed the NZ Bus's initial offer, this had been rejected by drivers.

NZ Bus drivers voted to hold all-day strikes every Monday from September 24, after rejecting an offer of a 6.6 percent pay rise across 27 months, and a \$20 per hour pay rate applied by December. They were particularly angered by roster changes at two depots introducing longer hours and additional weekend shifts.

NZ Bus CEO Shane McMahon had previously expressed frustration that the union leadership had failed to bring workers into line, telling RadioLIVE: "We actually went out to celebrate with the union leadership post that meeting ... The president of the Council of Trade Unions had done a great job, and also spoke at that meeting in support of our offer... so, I'm at a loss."

Full details of the latest deal are not yet available.



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