

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 September 2012

Bangladeshi mill workers protest

On September 23, workers of privately owned jute, cotton, and textile mills in Khulna—300km southwest of Dhaka—held a two-hour march for 10 demands. These include payment of the 5,500 taka (\$US65) monthly minimum wage. Four people were arrested and several injured when police broke up the demonstration after protesters moved onto the Dhaka-Khulna railway line. The Jute, Cotton, and Textile Mills Sangram Parishad union, which called the demonstration, claimed that if authorities did not to meet their demands immediately there would be “tougher agitation”. India: Karnataka childcare workers protest

Members of the Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers and Assistants’ Federation, which represents 120,000 childcare workers throughout the state, marched to the local government office in Mysore on September 21. Demands included job regularisation, a wage instead of honorarium and monthly pension on retirement.

Workers want a monthly wage of 10,000 rupees (\$US201) and 7,000 rupees for assistants, to replace their current honorarium of 4,500 rupees and 2,250 rupees respectively, and monthly pension of 3,000 rupees and 2,000 rupees to assistants after retirement. Most anganwadi workers are paid below the minimum wage and do not receive the benefits available to regular government employees.

Andhra Pradesh steel plant unions serve 48-hour strike notice

On September 22, unions representing over 38,000 Vizag Steel Plant (VSP) workers in Visakhapatnam, served a strike notice for October 12 and 13 in protest against central government plans to sell 10 percent of its equity in Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL). RINL is the corporate entity of VSP. The Congress-led central government hopes to raise 25 billion rupees (\$US445 million) from the sale.

VSP workers struck for 24 hours in July over the issue. According to union leaders, the steel plant paid the total cost of an expansion project from internal accruals and that its present reserves were \$1.2 billion. Workers fear that the 10 percent equity sale is the first step to full privatisation.

India: Gujarat government employees strike

Following a mass protest last month, around 600,000 state government employees in India’s north-west coast state of Gujarat took casual leave en masse on September 27 to demand full implementation of

recommendations of the Sixth Pay Commission and extension of the retirement age from 58 to 60. The one-day action severely disrupted work in all government departments. The pay commission recommendations apply to over one million state government employees.

The Gujarat state government tried to avert the strike by saying it would enter into talks with the unions, but later backed down when unions insisted that the government should withdraw cases filed against their union leaders, and revoke the transfer of union office bearers.

In an unrelated dispute, 45,000 employees in Gujarat involved in the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM) took mass casual leave on September 24 to demand a pay rise as per the Sixth Pay Commission’s recommendation.

Jharkhand electricity workers strike

Up to 4,000 permanent and 3,000 day workers from Jharkhand State Electricity Board (JSEB), in India’s north east, struck for 72 hours on September 25 over a charter of five demands. The Jharkhand Rajya Bijli Kamgar Union (JRBKU) wants 20 percent payment of an officiating allowance to Grade IV employees working as clerks, implementation of modified assured progression scheme for workers, payment of overtime allowance, minimum daily payment of 200 rupees for day workers, including 50,000 rupees for injured workers and job security when work is handed over to private franchisees.

Tamil Nadu LPG transport contractors strike

Indane LPG cylinders transport workers and contractors struck on September 24 to demand a better deal from the Indian Oil Company Limited (IOCL). Contractors complained that the current payment of 4,300 rupees per load does not cover increases in diesel prices and wages for drivers and assistants.

The National Federation of LPG Distributors of India has announced a strike on October 1 following the government announcement to reduce the subsidies on gas cylinders. Dealers said they would not participate in the strike.

Surgical glove manufacturing workers on strike in Malaysia

At least 700 Nepali workers at the Maxter Glove Manufacturing plant in

Selangor, on the west coast of Malaysia, walked off the job on September 20 to protest unlawful pay deductions. All production ceased. The strikers want reimbursement of the deducted amounts.

Workers said that Maxter plant management had fined them between 500 and 1,000 ringgits (\$US300) for having food outside the company's hostel. Maxter has been deducting 180 ringgit a month for food from each worker's salary but workers told media that the hostel exploited employees serving them with inferior quality food.

Western Australian construction workers down-tools after accident

Around 800 workers on a hospital construction site in Perth downed tools on September 21 after a crane on the site failed, sending wire rope and a two tonne part from the crane crashing 50 metres to the ground. A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) official said that workers had reported several operational problems with one of two cranes at the John Holland site but no investigation had been conducted into any of the issues.

Since December 2011 there have been 18 fatal accidents on construction sites around Australia. The company has agreed to a CFMEU call for an independent inquiry into the Perth hospital site accident.

Public school workers in Western Australia vote for industrial action

On September 25, 2,000 United Voice (UV) union members at Western Australian public schools voted at meetings across the state to implement limited work bans as part of their push for an \$80 per week pay rise in a new enterprise agreement. The workers are employed as education assistants, cleaners and gardeners. The UV has limited the industrial action to a few minor work bans, such as refusing to empty bins and complete paper work.

UV members rejected the state Barnett Liberal government's offer of \$28 per week pay rise—around 3.3 percent—after two months of negotiations for a new work agreement covering 10,000 employees. According to the union, these workers are among some of the lowest paid in the public sector.

Nurses in Perth continue protest over parking fees

One hundred nurses and support staff protested this week outside the Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital in Nedlands against the increase in parking fees at government hospitals in Perth and surrounding suburbs.

Workers held placards saying "\$2,000 a Year to Park" and "Stop the Parking Tax." The action follows two demonstrations at state parliament over the issue. A UV union member pointed out that MPs are not required to pay to park at parliament. The government plans to increase parking fees at some hospitals from \$1.50 per day to \$7.50.

The Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) has not opposed parking fees or called for decisive industrial action to have them removed. The ANF has restricted its demands to "affordable parking", while giving an assurance to the health minister that there will be no disruption over the issue.

Victorian brewery workers walk out

Around 160 employees at the Carlton and United Breweries' (CUB) Abbotsford factory in Melbourne downed tools in mid afternoon on September 26 over safety issues. According to media reports, CUB has reduced the number of workers on a production line and that one worker has been injured.

Workers are also concerned that management will remove targeted employees instead of honouring the previously offered voluntary redundancies. The union United Voice and CUB are before the industrial tribunal Fair Work Australia for an emergency hearing on the dispute.

Victorian Fairfax print workers stop work

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union planned two stop-work meetings at the *Age* newspaper's Tullamarine printing plant yesterday to vote on possible industrial action over Fairfax management's refusal to meet their demands on redundancy pay. The plant is due to close in 2014.

Workers have threatened to strike this weekend severely disrupting the daily broadsheet's weekend sports reports.

Fairfax is slashing 1,900 jobs around Australia—400 at Tullamarine—as it attempts to cut costs and rebuild its ailing share price. Printing at Tullamarine, which began in 2003, will stop. Fairfax Media will shift the printing to its Ballarat and Albury facilities, where workers are paid less.

Queensland firefighters delay strike action

Queensland firefighters voted on September 24 to impose rolling stoppages around the state commencing on September 28. The United Firefighters Union (UFU), however, has delayed the action until "some time" next week.

In an obvious attempt to drag out its dispute with the Liberal National Party (LNP) state government over wages and cuts to conditions, the UFU claimed that it wants more time to discuss how to avoid affecting the wider community with the stoppages.

Firefighters have opposed Queensland Premier Campbell Newman's last pay increase offer of 2.7 percent and are concerned over an attempt to remove management consultation clauses over operational changes in their enterprise agreement.

The state government also proposes to erode workplace health and safety conditions. Instead of directing safety concerns to their employer, firefighters will have to report to divisional workplace health and safety officers. The firefighters are also opposed to management's plan to use "lesser trained" people as casual firefighters in Queensland metropolitan areas.

The proposed rolling stoppages will follow demonstrations and limited strike action that began in August.

New Zealand teachers and parents protest school closures

On September 23, thousands of protesters, including teachers, students and parents, gathered in Christchurch, capital of the Canterbury Region on

New Zealand's South Island, to oppose school closures. The government plans to axe 13 Canterbury schools; merge 18 into nine; and relocate another seven. A speaker at the rally told protesters that this was the beginning of a process and that the government would target small schools throughout the country after dealing with Christchurch.

The NZ Education Institute, which covers 50,000 teachers and support staff working in primary and secondary schools and early childhood centres across the nation, has not called for industrial action against the closures but appealed for consultation with the government on its education program.



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