

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 November 2012

## India: Striking private hospital nurses in Kerala arrested

Thirty-five private hospital nurses were arrested and two injured while protesting outside the Mother Hospital in Thrissur, Kerala, on November 12. More than 2,000 nurses from other private hospitals marched to the Mother Hospital to protest against the arrests.

The arrests were in response to strike action over wages which began at the hospital on September 5. Eight nurses have been dismissed and five suspended for initiating the strike.

The strike is part of a wider campaign by the United Nurses' Association and the Indian Nurses Association at 63 private hospitals in the Thrissur district for implementation of the Balram Report. The report has called for a 10 percent annual increment for senior nurses and a three-shift duty system, which is already being followed at government hospitals and many private firms. The nurses' unions have presented 17 demands to the Association of Management of Private Hospitals.

## Jharkhand contract power workers maintain action

Jharkhand State Electricity Board contract workers in the Dhanbad district, in India's north-eastern state of Jharkhand have been on strike since November 10 to demand seven months of dues. The Jharkhand State Power Workers Union has threatened that permanent workers would join the walkout if wages and entitlements were not paid soon.

## Apollo tyre factory workers end strike

Close to 1,000 workers at Apollo Tyres' Waghodia plant in Gujarat agreed to end a 19-day strike on November 9, one day after the state government declared the strike illegal and ordered them back to work. While the tyre workers signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with management the deal fails to fully address their demands.

Workers walked off the job on October 23 to demand recognition of their newly-formed union, Bharatiya Majdoor Sangh (BMS), and for reinstatement of two suspended employees. The company, however, has only agreed to pay 50 percent of salaries lost during the strike, only reinstate some of the workers suspended during the strike, and "take up the issue" of union recognition within three months.

Apollo employs over 7,000 people at two plants and recognises three other unions. Waghodia workers told the media that despite attending numerous committee meetings the unions had failed to address their concerns.

## Bangladeshi land port workers end strike

Around 1,500 striking cargo loaders at the Benapole land port on the Indian border ended a three-day strike on November 12 after port officials agreed to pay dues for October. Workers are employed by contract companies and are paid just 13 taka (or 15 US cents) per tonne of goods unloaded.

Benapole is a major land port that handles 80 percent of raw materials for Bangladesh's garment industry. The strike was called by the Benapole Port Handling Workers Union.

## South Korean contract school workers strike

On November 9, 50,000 short-term contract workers at over 3,400 government schools throughout South Korea struck for the day to demand improved pay and employment status. Alliance of Unionized Irregular Workers members rallied outside 16 education offices and the ruling Saenuri Party's headquarters.

Workers want the same pay system as regular workers and for local education officers to be included in collective negotiations. Most workers are currently required to renew a contract every year with each individual school, making them vulnerable to pressure by the school management.

There are 150,000 non-regular workers, including administrative staff and food service employees, at public schools. Only 35,000 are union members.

## Vietnamese garment workers end strike

Around 1,400 employees of garment manufacturer Flexcom in Dinh Ke commune, in the northern province of Bac Giang, returned to work on November 7, ending a 15-day strike to demand better salaries and allowances. In a deal negotiated with the city's official union and the labour department Flexcom agreed to ensure wages meet the state regulated minimum monthly salary of \$US50.50 by January 2013.

Management also agreed to limit the working day to eight hours, with 150 percent overtime payment rates on weekdays, 200 percent on Sundays and 300 percent on national holidays. Free meals will be provided to those working more than four hours' overtime per a day.

## Burmese furniture workers locked out in defiance of court ruling

Around 300 daily-wage workers from Taw Win carpentry factory in Rangoon's Shwepyitha Industrial Zone have not been allowed back to work despite officially ending an almost three-week strike on November 11 and accepting a Labor Dispute Arbitration Court decision. The court ruled in favour of four of the strikers' demands. Workers said they planned to resume industrial action until the company accepted the court's ruling.

Daily-wage workers at Taw Win walked out on October 25, after the factory owner refused to provide an employment contract. Workers complained that they remained daily-wage employees and received no benefits after a decade of continuous employment for the company. Daily wage workers are paid as little as 2,000 kyat (\$US2.30) per day for women and 2,500 kyat for men.

### **BlueScope Steel workers end industrial action**

On November 10, hundreds of BlueScope Steel workers at Port Kembla, south of Sydney, New South Wales voted to accept a union recommendation that industrial action be suspended while Fair Work Australia arbitrates on an outstanding enterprise agreement.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and Australian Workers Union members previously ended several months of strikes and work bans on October 23, after union negotiators claimed they had reached an in-principle agreement. Workers resumed industrial action this month, after learning that a proposed 8 percent wage rise offer would be paid over four years, not three as they had been told by the unions.

Steel workers previously rejected company enterprise offers attacking sick leave provisions, removing departmental agreements and scrapping a clause requiring agreement with the unions on any significant changes.

The steel workers want annual increases to be paid each February, as in past agreements, and for the award to expire in February 2015. The unions also want a \$600 one-off payment, similar to a payment that had been made earlier this year to workers at BlueScope's Western Port facility in Victoria.

### **Private hospital nurses in New South Wales walk out**

NSW Nurses' Association members at Pulse Health's Forster Private Hospital, 300 km north of Sydney, walked off the job for eight hours on November 8 following 14 months of failed negotiations for a pay rise. The nurses have not had a pay rise since October 2010 and claim that their wages are 18 percent less than colleagues in other local hospitals.

Pulse made an offer on Wednesday, its first since negotiations began, which nurses said was an insult. Another eight-hour strike was planned for November 15 and work bans were implemented.

### **Western Australian health and education support workers protest**

Hospital and education workers rallied at the Broome Regional Hospital on the far-north coast of Western Australia on November 8 to oppose a 3.5 percent pay rise offer from the state Liberal government. The action was part of a state-wide campaign by United Voice (UV) which is

demanding an \$80 per week pay rise for education assistants, cleaners and gardeners in the public sector.

According to the UV union, the 10,000 workers affected by the dispute are among some of the lowest paid state government workers. The Western Australian government has flatly refused to improve its pay offer. In May, the government brought down a budget axing 1,500 public service jobs and slashing public sector spending by \$330 million.

### **Queensland coal miners strike over redundancy pay**

At least 30 miners at Rio Tinto's Blair Athol open-cut coal mine in Central Queensland walked off the job for three shifts on November 13 in a dispute over redundancy pay. While the mine is due to shut on November 23, after 28 years in operation, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union has refused to oppose the closure or defend any of the jobs. The union claims that the redundancy payout will be up to \$100,000 less than for contracted workers.

### **New Zealand public primary school teachers stop work**

Thousands of primary school teachers began a series of stop work meetings on November 9 to oppose National Party government education cost-cutting measures. Public rallies are to be held in Dunedin, Auckland, Wellington and Hamilton.

The teachers are members of the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), which claims the government policies are based on the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) which involves competition, data-based accountability and standardisation.

Under the scheme, individual teachers are held responsible for education system failures. "We're seeing GERM creeping into our education system here through National Standards, league tables and charter schools and proposals of performance pay for teachers," a NZEI official told media.

### **New Zealand miners reject union pay deal**

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at the state-owned Solid Energy's Stockton open cut mine in the Buller Coalfield, on the west coast of New Zealand's South Island, have rejected a pay cut deal negotiated by the union.

Workers ignored management and union claims that the mine was "not in a very good financial state," and overwhelmingly voted on November 8 and 12 (194 to 52) against a proposal to reduce shifts from 12 to 10 hours—a 17 percent pay cut.

According to the company's web site, the Stockton Mine is the largest opencast mine in New Zealand and can continue production for at least another 20 years. A \$60 million development to extend the operational area of the mine is planned.

### **NZ Bus workers ratify union pay deal**

Nine hundred drivers from NZ Bus in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, buckled under union pressure this week and voted to accept a union-company pay deal. The vote ends six months of negotiations and limited industrial action. The drivers are members of the Tramways Union and First Union.

The vote to ratify passed by 67 percent, 60 percent being the threshold for ratification. The collective agreement is the same one rejected in three previous votes.

Under the agreement drivers will receive a 6.6 percent pay increase by 2014. They currently receive between \$14.05 and \$16.75 an hour, with split shifts often keeping them away from home for long hours. The drivers were particularly angered by roster changes, which introduce longer hours and additional weekend shifts.

### **New Caledonia hospital staff strike**

After six months of fruitless approaches to management, workers at the main hospital in New Caledonia walked off the job for 24 hours on November 12 over the lack of resources. Workers at the Noumea hospital complained that patients were being treated in corridors and that the ambulance service was inadequate and forced medical staff to go to patients. The hospital workers have also demanded the hiring of additional doctors and security staff.



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