Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 October 2013

India: Telecommunications workers on strike in Kerala

Over 650 employees of state-owned India Telephone Industries (ITI) have been on strike and picketing its production facility in Kanjikode, Kerala since September 12 to demand overdue wages. According to the ITI Joint Forum of Officers and Employees, most of ITI's 8,000 employees have not been paid salaries for August and September. Work at ITI's other facilities in Palakkad, Bangalore, Rai Bareli, Mangapur and Sreenagarhave almost ceased due to industrial action.

ITI, founded in 1948, has six facilities making switching, transmission, access and subscriber premises equipment for India and for export. ITI has had cash flow problems for over 30 months and has relied on profits from its Palakkad facility to pay wages at its other units.

Tamil Nadu electoral department workers protest

On October 1, section writers at the electoral department in Chennai, Tamil Nadu protested to demand regularisation of their services. Around 170 people were recruited in 2006-2007 in Chennai, Tiruvallur and Kancheepuram on daily wages. They earn just 180 rupees ($US3.30) per day. The government has ignored the chief electoral officer's demand that they be absorbed into the government service.

Pakistan: Punjab health workers resign

At least 22 Lady Health Workers (LHWs) in Rawalpindi’s Bakkar Mandi unit resigned on September 30 due to non-disbursement of salaries for the past five months. Their action follows a long campaign involving over 53,000 LHWs across Punjab for regular wage disbursement, wage revision and regularisation of service. They suspended the protest action before this year's state budget on the government’s false assurance that it would make provision in the budget for their demands.

More than 130,000 LHWs have been in dispute nationally for over five years over the same issues. In April last year, Pakistan’s Supreme Court ordered LHWs to end their strike and protest outside the Lahore Press Club after several set themselves alight. LHW workers, including drivers, administrators and women who assist in rural areas with child birth and family management, had demanded payment of dues, job regularisation, wage increases and other benefits.

In 2010, the workers ended a strike after promises to address their issues. The government at the time increased their minimum monthly wage to 7,000 rupees ($US77). However, workers complained of extended delays in receiving this meagre salary.

Hong Kong soft drink workers on strike

More than 100 employees, mostly storage and delivery workers, at Swire Beverages in Hong Kong walked off the job on October 3 and set up a picket outside the company's factory in Sha Tin to protest against long work hours and demand more staff to compensate for their increased workload. Strikers are also concerned that the company plans to contract out some of their jobs.

Production at the plant, which makes a variety of beverages including Coca Cola, has almost ceased. A

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union delegate said they would remain on strike until their demands were met. The company has agreed to negotiate.

Dubbo abattoir maintenance workers strike

Around 30 maintenance workers at Australia's largest meat exporter, Fletchers' abattoir in Dubbo, in central New South Wales, are maintaining work bans after striking for three hours on September 20 in a dispute over a new work agreement. According to the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) the fitters, welders, storemen and general workers are only paid a flat rate of $26.46 an hour with no overtime, despite being eligible under their award for allowances for working at heights, in cold storage and confined spaces.

Workers have demanded pay rises of 5 and 3 percent for a two-year agreement, a $2 per hour all-purpose allowance and a $160-a-fortnight attendance bonus currently paid to other employees. According to the AMWU, this would bring their overall pay rate to about $30 an hour, in line with other skilled workers at the abattoir. Management has offered annual pay increases of 3 percent and said it would pay either the all purpose allowance or the attendance allowance, but in return wants the work week raised from 38 to 40 hours.

The abattoir, owned by Roger Fletcher, one of the nation's richest businessmen, has about 700 employees processing some 45,000 sheep weekly for export to 80 countries.

Sydney hospital workers walk out

On October 1, cleaners, security guards and other support staff at Sydney's Prince of Wales Hospital walked off the job for two hours and protested in front of the hospital in response to a leaked management memo suggesting 300 jobs are to go. According to the Health Services Union (HSU), on top of previous cuts due to staff leaving and not being replaced, the hospital will have 400 less staff.

Hospital management told the media that the job losses were due to cuts imposed by the Liberal state government. The 2012-13 New South Wales budget reduced funding for public hospitals by more than $158 million, in a long term plan to cut $3 billion from the public health system. Although funding in the 2013-14 budget rose by 5.2 percent, according to the Australian Medical Association a 7 percent increase is the minimum needed to maintain current levels of care.

Latrobe Valley power generator workers union ends dispute

Seventy-five operators at the Yallourn power station, in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, returned to work on September 30, after a 100-day lockout. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) struck a deal with Energy Australia, ending a year-long dispute over a new work agreement.

The workers took industrial action in March and April, with a 48-hour strike in April, and were locked out on June 1. However, the CFMEU allowed more than 400 of its members to cross the operators' picket line to keep the power station operating, isolating the strikers and prolonging the dispute with the aim of wearing them down.

The unresolved issues in negotiations included plant staffing levels, dispute resolution mechanisms, and "consultation" arrangements related to shift times and annual leave. In the CFMEU-Energy Australia deal, still to be voted on by members, the union accepted a 22.5 percent pay increase over four years, below the company's original offer of 25 percent, in return for a minimum staffing level of 73 operators and a clause guaranteeing that no operator will be replaced by a contractor. The union claimed victory because it would now be involved in management decisions via a "genuine" consultation process and "sensible" dispute resolution procedures.

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