

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 October 2013

Indian municipal workers strike for improved conditions

Around 600 contract workers at the Eluru Municipal Corporation and another 2,100 employed by the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh began a four-day strike on October 21. The walkout impacted sanitation, water supply, street lighting, town planning and other municipal services.

The workers are fighting for a 19-point charter of demands, including establishment of a 12,500-rupee monthly wage, increases in the house rental allowance, and interim wages relief on par with permanent workers. Municipal employees also want the provision of safety equipment, such as masks, when working in unhygienic conditions. The Centre of Indian Trade Union members will decide on further action, including a possible indefinite strike, if there is no progress on their demands.

Ansell workers in Sri Lanka fight company attacks

Workers from Ansell Lanka—one of the world's leading producers of latex rubber goods—in the Biyagama Free Trade Zone demonstrated at the busy Fort Railway Station in Colombo on October 17.

Over 1,000 Ansell Lanka employees have been on strike since October 11 for reinstatement of a union representative dismissed for trade union activities. The strikers are also opposing a series of changes imposed by company management, including unilaterally increased production targets, and use of contract workers.

Former bank workers protest in Beijing

Thousands of former employees of the Industrial and Commercial Bank and the Construction Bank, two of China's state-run banks, have converged on Beijing over the past week and are continuing demonstrations outside the banks' headquarters.

The workers, who were laid off over ten years ago, want an increased compensation payout, declaring that the small amounts provided at the time were imposed on them ahead of public

listings. They also claim that the job cuts were carried out to mask high levels of bad debt that were amassed by the financial institutions before they went public in 2005 and 2006. The banks are now two of the largest in the world.

Hundreds of police were dispatched to disperse the protesters and at least 3,000 workers have been detained in a detention centre at Jiujiangzhuang. Workers also report that many of the demonstrators were beaten by the police and sustained injuries.

One former bank worker told the media: "We no longer enjoy even the right to existence, or the right to speak out. Didn't [President] Xi Jinping say he would sort out the social welfare issue? We have nothing to eat. What about our welfare?"

Seoul hospital workers oppose pay freeze

Administrative, technical, housekeeping, food and other service workers at three branches of Seoul National University Hospital in South Korea went on strike on October 23. It is the first time in six years that the ancillary workers have taken collective action. The workers are opposing an ongoing wage freeze.

A hospital management spokesperson claimed that the pay freeze was due to the worsening financial position of the hospital. Workers, however, said that the health facility had been profitable in recent years.

Seoul National University Hospital includes the SNU Healthcare System Gangnam Center and the SMG-SNU Boramae Medical Center. Doctors and nurses are not taking strike action.

Miners strike over unpaid wages

Hundreds of mine workers walked off the job on Wednesday at Gujarat NRE Coking Coal mines in Russell Vale and Wongawilli on the New South Wales south coast over the non-payment of wages. Around 500 workers have not been paid for a month and are collectively owed millions of dollars in wages and other benefits.

Despite the takeover this month of Gujarat NRE operations by Indian mining giant Jindal Steel & Power and the injection \$150

million, the company has still not guaranteed to pay the outstanding wages.

Within hours of the walkout the new management agreed to pay just one week's wages, claiming it had previously been restricted by a garnishee order from the Australian Tax Office (ATO) for \$8 million outstanding tax payments. An ATO spokesman told media this week, however, the tax office did not garnishee funds used to pay wages.

Tasmanian nurses begin industrial action

Public hospital nurses in the island state of Tasmania have started imposing bans and limitations in a dispute over a new workplace agreement. The Nursing and Midwifery Federation has accepted a 2 percent wage rise offer for the next 12 months by the Labor-Greens state government but other issues remain in dispute.

The nurses want recruitment of more grade-four nurses to fill senior positions and administration to stop using junior grade nurses to manage wards after hours and on weekends.

Union meetings to plan action have been held at hospitals in Launceston, Devonport and Burnie. Nurses plan to take all meal breaks and will claim for all overtime. The meetings also considered nurses refusing to perform any work that falls outside of normal nursing duties.

Queensland workers rally against compensation cuts

Around 500 workers rallied outside the Queensland state parliament in Brisbane last week to protest changes to WorkCover rushed through by the Liberal National state government on October 17. Up to 300,000 workers across Queensland could be affected by the changes.

The new laws will introduce a common law claim threshold of 5 percent impairment, a move that will reportedly eliminate 50 percent of common law claims and require that workers' injury and claims histories be made available to potential employers. In addition, redundancy payouts for government employees will now be capped at 16 weeks, down from the present 52 weeks.

Cemetery workers step up industrial action

Workers at Springvale Botanical Cemetery and Bunurong Memorial Park Cemetery in Victoria will step up industrial action in a dispute for a new enterprise work agreement. The Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust workers began a campaign of rolling stoppages on August 16 but have now decided to extend their action to several times a week.

The cemetery workers have rejected a 4 percent annual pay increase offer over the three-year life of the agreement because they would lose public holiday allowances and 13 of their 26 rostered days off. Negotiations between the company and the Australian Workers Union remain at a stalemate.

Woolworths workers demand improved pay offer

Workers at Woolworths' Barnawartha regional warehouse in Tasmania and at the company's Liquor Distribution Centre in Brisbane walked off the job on October 25 to demand an improved pay offer from the company.

Barnawartha centre workers are paid \$203 a week less than their counterparts employed in Melbourne. The company has offered Melbourne workers a \$1.04 per hour increase but only 74 cents per hour for regional employees. Woolworths Liquor Distribution Centre employees also stopped work for 24-hours on the same day.

Tasmanian meat workers strike for higher wages

Meat workers at Greenham's abattoir near Smithton in Tasmania's north-west struck for 24 hours on October 25 in a protracted dispute for a wage rise.

The 160 beef-processing workers want a 4 percent annual pay increase over the life of a new four-year work agreement. The company has offered just 2.5 percent annually and wants to cut wage rates for any new workers by up to \$200 a week.

The meat workers plan to impose work bans when they return to work. Negotiations between the Meat Workers Union and Greenham have been ongoing for the past six months.



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