

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 November 2013

South Korean teachers' union deregistered

The South Korean government of President Park Geun-hye deregistered the 60,000-strong Korea Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU) on October 24 and ordered 76 teachers working full-time as union representatives to return to school duties. The government directed education offices to end all negotiations with the KTU and nullify any collective agreements.

The government's action came after the union refused to follow a court order directing it to terminate the membership of 22 teachers who had been sacked by the previous government. Over 67 percent of KTU members have voted to ignore the court order and maintain the membership of the 22 teachers. A union spokesman claimed that the teachers were dismissed after they "expressed political opinions" and "for fighting against corruption in private schools."

A KTU official said the union would reject the government's demand for full-time union representatives to return to school. The union has filed an injunction with the Seoul Administrative Court to challenge the government's decision.

The KTU was founded in 1989 but denied legal recognition under laws banning all public sector workers from participating in political activities or expressing their political views. The union legalised in 1999.

Indonesian workers mount nationwide strike

About 2 million workers in 20 of Indonesia's 34 provinces walked off the job for 48 hours on October 31 to demand improved benefits, a 40-percent minimum pay increase and an end to the hiring of temporary contract workers. The Confederation of Indonesian Trade Unions wants the minimum wage increased to 3.7 million rupiah (\$US330) per month. Workers were given a 44-percent pay rise following similar nationwide protests last year.

The cost of living has increased dramatically in Indonesia in the past months after the government cut fuel subsidies amid soaring inflation and a falling rupiah. While the Indonesian economy has registered above 6 percent growth and record levels of foreign investment over several years, most workers remain on poverty wages.

Indian airport workers strike against privatisation

Airport employees at six major Indian airports—Chennai, Kolkata, Guwahati, Jaipur, Ahmedabad and Lucknow—stopped work for five days from October 22 to protest the government's plan to privatise the airports. The action, which followed lunchtime protests and a walkout at Chennai Airport earlier in the month, was coordinated by the Airport Authority Employees Union and involved all airport unions.

The Indian government announced earlier this year that it intends to sell 15 major revenue-earning airports and has invited global bids. Airport employees are concerned that their jobs and working conditions could be eliminated.

Tamil Nadu ambulance workers strike

On October 28, '108' Ambulance Service staff in Erode, Tamil Nadu held a one-day hunger strike to demand better wages and conditions. Members of the 108 Ambulance Workers' Union, which is affiliated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, demanded job security, rectification of defective ambulances, bonuses and salary hikes based on seniority, payment of overtime wages, basic facilities at 108 call centres and legal support for workers involved in vehicle accidents.

Ambulance Service workers, including paramedics and drivers, are employed by contract company GVK EMRI which also manages the service. Workers complained that they are forced to work 12 hours a day, six days a week but their recruitment contract stipulates an 8-hour day. The average monthly salary for staff who have worked for the organisation for five years is 9,000 rupees (\$US480).

Andhra Pradesh 108 Ambulance Service workers of GVK-EMRI struck for several days in August demanding that the government's contract with GVK-EMRI be ended and employees absorbed back into the public service.

Tamil Nadu university non-teaching staff walk out

Temporary non-teaching employees at the Thiruvalluvar University in Vellore, Tamil Nadu have been on strike since October 21. Thiruvalluvar University Employees' Union members want restoration of pay cuts imposed on temporary staff involved in a one-hour demonstration on the university campus in July, revocation of the inter-departmental transfers effected on 14 temporary non-teaching employees, and regularisation of 91 temporary non-teaching

employees.

Uttarakhand government employees strike

At least 200,000 state government workers at 57 departments in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand have been on strike since October 17. They want three promotions during their service period, removal of anomalies in the pay structure, a new transfer policy and monthly salaries increased from 2,800 to 4,200 rupees.

According to a Rajya Karamchari Sanyukt Parishad official, the government accepted the union's demands two months ago but failed to issue orders for their implementation.

Karnataka village panchayat workers demonstrate

Village panchayat (village government) employees demonstrated in Rainchur on October 28 to demand outstanding dues. A Karnataka State Gram Panchayat Employees Union official told the media that 50,000 employees from over 5,600 village panchayats in Karnataka have not been paid wages for the last six months. The union said that the demonstration would continue until the dues were paid.

Water canon used on striking Bangladeshi garment workers

On October 29, riot police in Kaliakair, Gazipur, on the outskirts of Dhaka, used water canon in an attempt to disperse striking garment workers who had blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway to demand a near-tripling of their monthly wage to 8,000 taka (\$US100). The strike began when workers in a few factories downed tools earlier in the morning to demand the wage increase. Inter Stop, Tropical, Ahsan Composite, Equ Tex, Appex Holdings Limited, Far East and Devine employees later joined the walk out. At least ten factories were closed by the strike.

The latest action follows a recent strike by thousands of garment workers in industrial zones around Dhaka in September to demand wage rises. That action erupted after a paltry 20-percent wage rise offer by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association. Garment workers were last granted a wage rise in 2010, when their unions accepted 3,000 taka (\$US36) monthly minimum wage. At the time thousands of garment workers took to the streets to protest against the unions' acceptance of the poverty wage.

Victorian emergency services workers protest

On October 29, emergency workers, including paramedics, fire fighters and the police, protested in Melbourne's Treasury Gardens to oppose state Liberal government moves to deny their right to access

mental health compensation for workplace trauma.

Reforms to the Transport Accident Commission (TAC), which tighten the eligibility criteria for mental health compensation, were introduced in state parliament in early October. Ambulance Employees Australia, the United Firefighters Union and the Police Association claim that the proposed new definition of a "severe long-term mental disorder" is so onerous that it effectively abolishes common law rights for psychiatric injury.

An official of the Ambulance Employees Union told the media that paramedics regularly attended traumatic vehicle accidents that can cause post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, with up to 10 committing suicide over the past five years.

McDonalds workers in New Zealand protest

Around 30 employees at the McDonalds fast food outlet in Auckland, on New Zealand's North Island, picketed the restaurant's entrance on October 26 to protest the sacking of Sean Bailey, a union delegate employed at the restaurant. Unite union members allege that Bailey was dismissed because he reported to a parliamentary select committee that McDonalds regularly breaches a law requiring meal breaks for staff who work shifts longer than four hours. According to Unite, McDonalds, which employs over 9,000 people, owes its workers about \$2.5 million in stolen wages across their 160 stores.

The latest action was part of an ongoing dispute with McDonalds for a guaranteed 40-hour week and improved wages that began in April when 1,500 Unite members walked off the job nationwide after they rejected a 25 cent per hour pay rise offer. The union has limited its pay demand to pay parity with low paid workers at the restaurant chain KFC, who begin training on \$10.80 (\$US9.00) an hour, and after six months are paid an increase of one dollar. The official New Zealand minimum wage for adults (employees over 16 years of age) is \$13.75 an hour.

New Zealand aged-care workers protest

On October 25, eight employees for aged-care provider Metlifecare demonstrated during the company's annual meeting to protest low wages. According to a Service & Food Workers Union official, the starting rate at Metlifecare facilities is \$14.42 an hour. Many workers with 25 years' service are only paid between \$15 and \$16 an hour.

Metlifecare is the second largest aged-care provider in New Zealand with 24 facilities. It posted an after-tax profit of \$120.3million in 2013. Aged-care workers are among the lowest paid professionals in New Zealand.



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