

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 November 2013

Nokia workers in China walk out

Close to 1,500 employees at Nokia's mobile phone factory in the industrial city of Dongguan, in southern China, walked off the job on November 20 and rallied at the factory's gate to protest unfair treatment following the sale of the company's mobile phones business to Microsoft Corporation. At least ten protesters were detained and several injured, and a pregnant worker was hospitalised, when police in full riot gear attempted to end the protest. Management fired at least ten workers they allege led the strike, and refused to enter talks with workers' representatives.

Workers are demanding redundancy payments, fearing that even though they will retain their jobs, new contracts issued by Microsoft will contain reduced conditions. This happens regularly in China when factories change hands.

On November 8, over 2,000 employees at the Dongguan Zhangmutou Towada Electronics Factory in Guangdong province struck for six days to demand compensation after they were issued with less favourable contracts when the factory changed its ownership structure and name. Workers complained that the new contracts removed all seniority, requiring them all to start again with a loss of privileges, as if they were new hires.

Hong Kong construction workers on strike

Around 60 workers at the construction site of a private housing estate at Tseung Kwan O in Hong Kong have been on strike since November 18 over back pay. A Hong Kong Construction Industry Employees General Union official said about 230 workers were owed \$HK9 million (\$US1.2 million) in wages from September to October. Their employer, a subcontracting company, claimed it could only afford 60 percent of what it owed them.

Workers fear that the main contractor and subcontractor are deliberately delaying paying them because the work is nearing completion, after which they are unlikely to receive what is owed to them.

South Korean education workers protest

On November 15, over 1,000 striking irregular public school workers, including cooks, nutritionists and office administrators, from schools in North Jeolla, North Chungcheong and Gyeonggi Provinces in central South Korea, marched through Cheongju city to the Office of Education as part of a national campaign for higher wages and job security.

The 60,000-strong union representing public school irregular workers has threatened to call a national stoppage. Demands include annual salary increases of 30,000 won (\$28), pay bonuses and allowances matching their regular counterparts, and permanent contracts. Last November, irregular workers at public schools in Seoul went on strike over similar issues.

India: Bosch workers in Bangalore end strike

A four-day tools-down strike at the Adugodi facility of Mico Bosch in Bangalore, Karnataka, which forced the closure of the factory, ended on November 18 with management agreeing to withdraw charge sheets issued against three workers. The charge sheets were filed after workers clashed with supervisors when a colleague was refused a gate pass for an early exit on November 14. Work resumed on November 19.

Uttar Pradesh government employees' strike in second week

Close to 1.8 million workers—60 percent of government employees in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh—have been on strike since November 12 for a charter of 15 demands. Workers from 250 unions want removal of salary anomalies, assured promotions or a promotion scale and pension benefits.

Following the government's activation of the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), union leaders exempted some essential services like medical and health departments from the strike. However, the government warned that ESMA also applies to post and telegraph, railways, airports and most government departments.

Following the government's refusal to restart negotiations after several rounds of failed talks earlier this month, the Allahabad

High Court on Tuesday directed the government to start a dialogue with unions. Union leaders said the first round of talks this week broke up after two hours without any advancement on any of the demands in the charter.

Pakistani health workers begin boycott

About 1,200 employees of the Lady Health Workers (LHW) program, who provide health services for children in rural areas in the Swat district in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, have boycotted a vaccination campaign to protest non-payment of salaries for the past three months. The money owed includes additional payments for election duties they performed in May's general elections.

LHW workers are one of the most exploited sections of the Pakistan working class. Their minimum monthly wage stands at a meagre 7,000 rupees (\$US77) and frequently pay is delayed. Many employees are denied job regularisation despite years of service.

Northern Territory teachers continue stoppages

As part of a campaign for a new work agreement and to protect jobs, public school teachers in regional areas of Australia's Northern Territory struck for four hours on November 19. This followed a full day strike last week. Another four-hour stoppage is scheduled for November 27 at schools in the territory's capital Darwin and in Palmerston. Work-to-rule bans will commence on November 25.

Teachers have rejected the territory's Country Liberal government's offer of 3 percent annual pay increases over four years—the current inflation rate for the territory is 3.9 percent. According to the Australian Education Union, a major sticking point in its negotiations is job security. A union official told the WWS the government plans to cut at least 420 teaching positions within three years from the current 2,500, while increasing the number of students in each classroom by up to 30 percent. In addition, contract teaching and ancillary positions are not being renewed, with close to 1,000 of the current 4,000 education staff targeted for termination.

In May, the government announced an overall cut to education of \$47 million during 2013-14, including a \$32 million cut for salaries of teachers and support staff.

Victorian adult education workers on strike

About 80 teachers and administrative staff at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne took indefinite strike action on November 18 and picketed the centre in a dispute for a new

enterprise agreement. The strike, by members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), is the first since the CAE was founded in 1947. Management has offered a pay rise that is effectively less than 2 percent per year, which amounts to a real wage cut.

CAE session teachers are paid 20 percent less than teachers at Training and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, even though TAFE took over the CAE in 2012. Staff are also opposed to proposed changes to working conditions that include cuts to personal leave and other long-held conditions.

RMIT University staff stop work

For the second time in two months, staff at Melbourne's RMIT University struck for 24 hours on November 20 in a 15-month dispute over an enterprise bargaining agreement. NTEU members, including academics, librarians, gardeners, technical specialists and administrative staff, set up picket lines at both Melbourne and Bundoora campuses.

NTEU members have rejected a 3 percent annual pay increase offer that included an increase in workload, and are seeking an upper limit to teaching and teaching-related duties along with more secure employment for casual academics.

Papua New Guinea council workers protest in Lae

City Council workers and contractors in Lae, PNG's second largest city, protested outside the council's administration offices on November 18 over repeated non-payment of wages and contract fees throughout 2013. Over 300 workers are affected. Workers from the city's workshop and garbage division joined workers from the city's beautification program to dump bags of garbage outside the council's offices, declaring the administration was "dirty with corruption."

Four times this year, the council has failed to pay workers on their pay day, with beautification program workers not receiving any wages since June.



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