

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 June 2014

Asia

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Around 800 non-unionised employees at the Wincam Corporation garment factory in Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district have been on strike since June 11 with eight demands, including an additional 2,000 riel (\$US0.5) for every overtime hour and one day off for pregnant women to receive prenatal care. More than 300 striking workers took their protest to the Ministry of Labour on June 20 to demand government intervention.

Cardboard box workers in Cambodia protest

Around 200 dismissed employees of the Japanese-owned cardboard box maker Harta Packaging have been picketing the company's factory in Phnom Penh's Por Sen Chey district since June 20 in a long-running dispute over seniority pay. Workers went on strike in February demanding seniority wages, retroactive to 2004 which they said should have been paid when the factory changed ownership in 2012, as per the labour law. That strike was ended after six days by a court injunction ordering the employees to return to work, whereupon the factory fired 285 senior workers.

On May 30, the Arbitration Council issued a non-binding order saying the workers had to be given seniority pay but management ignored the order. Over 500 people are employed at the factory where production has been stopped by the walkout.

South Korean school teachers to strike

On June 21, 260 delegates of the 60,000 strong Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU) voted to hold "early-leave" demonstrations against a ruling by the Seoul Administrative Court that stripped the union of its legal status. KTU members plan to leave work early to participate in rallies near Seoul Station this week and on July 2 they plan to hold a nationwide rally, in which they expect at least 10,000 teachers to participate.

The Ministry of Labour revoked the registration of the KTU in October but this was temporarily stayed by the court, pending a review. If the KTU

is deregistered it will have no right to represent members in collective bargaining. Korean labour law does not allow union members who have retired or been dismissed to retain their union membership. Nine people, who the KTU maintains were wrongfully dismissed, are still union members.

The Korean Federation of Teachers' Associations (KFTA), which has 170,000 members, has condemned the KTU for taking industrial action, saying it will conduct a "disobedience" campaign against its own members who support the KTU members' action.

South Korean health workers protest

The Korean Health and Medical Workers' Union (KHMU) has called on its members in Seoul to take limited strike action and protests at the Seoul railway station on June 24. The action followed several months of limited protests for a new work agreement and in opposition to the government's drive to privatise the health care system through outsourcing. Further strike action has been delayed until July 22.

Workers' other demands include an 8.1 percent wage increase, regularisation of precarious workers, expansion of public healthcare providers from 6 percent to 30 percent, National Healthcare Insurance coverage increased from 60 percent to 90 percent, legislation of the medical staffing act and improvements in patients' rights.

Their action follows a one-day walkout in March by 7,000 doctor members of the 100,000-strong Korean Medical Association (KMA) against the Park Geun-hye government's plans to introduce telemedicine and allow hospitals to operate for-profit subsidiaries. The KMA capitulated to the government's request to form a consultative body that would supposedly minimise the effects of creating for-profit medical industries.

India: Karnataka community health workers walk out

Over 100 community health workers of Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA)—part of the National Rural Health Mission (NRHM)—have been on strike since June 24 to demand a monthly honorarium of 1,000 rupees (\$US16.6). They have set up a camp at Freedom Park in Bangalore.

An ASHA representative told the media that mobile phones and other incentives offered to the 33,000 ASHA workers were not enough. The workers are a crucial link between nurses and doctors and the community and assist pregnant women, monitor immunisation of children and scrutinise the overall health conditions in their local areas.

Indian Oil Corporation workers in Kerala strike

The cylinder-handling and housekeeping workers at the Indian Oil Corporation's (IOC) gas-bottling plant at Chelari in India's south-west state Kerala walked off the job on June 23 to demand better wages. The contracted employees want their wages increased as per an earlier agreement. The contractor has demanded that workers will not receive any improvement in the wages until they agree to increase their workload.

Head-load workers in Coimbatore walk out

Close to 2,000 head-load workers in Coimbatore city, Tamil Nadu walked off the job on June 23 to demand a new wage agreement. The Coimbatore Goods Transport Association agreement is revised every three years. It expired in December and affects around 3,000 head-loaders.

According to the Coimbatore District Transport Lorry Manual Workers' Union the strike was sparked when 50 retired employees were not paid gratuities.

Pakistan college teachers protest

Around 150 teachers from the Government Post-Graduate College in Sahiwal city in Punjab province, Pakistan held a street procession through the city on June 24 to oppose a government plan to privatise the college.

A Punjab Professor and Lecturers Association (PPLA) official told the media that privatising the college would deprive up to 8,000 students of education from a subsidised public college. "This is simply privatisation of higher education in the disguise of improving quality of education," the official said.

Australia and the Pacific

South Australian construction workers end safety strike

Around 1,000 workers at the Royal Adelaide Hospital (RAH) construction site in South Australia's capital Adelaide were ordered back to work on June 20, after walking off the job that morning over safety concerns. Their action followed a crane accident the previous day when a steel load fell out of the crane's sling and onto a concrete floor about seven metres below. A week earlier another load pierced a work shed. A Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union official claimed there have been more than a dozen crane-related mishaps at the site in the past 18 months.

Although SafeWork SA had not completed its investigation into the June 19 accident mishap, the building consortium HYLIC told the media on Monday that work across the site had fully resumed. A South Australian government spokesman said that the consortium was contracted to complete the hospital construction on time.

A founding member of the Voice of Industrial Deaths group said that little had changed in the industry since her son was killed in a workplace accident in 2004 in Adelaide or that of another Adelaide worker Brett Fritsch, who was killed when a steel beam fell on him during construction of Adelaide's desalination plant in 2010.

Western Australia's public hospital health workers vote for strike

Around 1,000 allied health workers employed at public hospitals in Western Australia protested outside the state parliament on June 25 to demand an improved pay offer. Workers voted for rolling 12-hour stoppages commencing July 7 but limited to non-emergency services at Perth hospitals. Their current enterprise bargaining agreement expired on June 30.

Health Services Union members, including medical administration clerks, physiotherapists, radiographers, medical scientists, technicians and social workers, want a 9 percent pay rise over two years in line with recent increases offered to public hospital doctors and nurses. The Liberal Barnett government has offered a pay rise of just 5.25 percent over two years, below Western Australia's current inflation rate of 3.1 percent.

CSIRO staff protest job cuts

Commonwealth Science and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) staff held lunchtime rallies on June 24 and 26 at 14 locations around Australia in opposition to federal budget cuts of \$115million, plus indirect cuts to scientific initiatives, that will cost up to 700 jobs in the coming year.

Research areas targeted include neuroscience and colorectal cancer, geothermal research, manufacturing research, urban water, terrestrial and marine biodiversity and radio astronomy. These job cuts come on top of over 470 axed during the past year and equivalent to 19 percent to CSIRO's total workforce over two years.

Protests were held on June 24 in Griffith and Newcastle in NSW, Geelong in Victoria, Geraldton in Western Australia, Townsville and Atherton in Queensland and Alice Springs in the Northern Territory, and in the states' capital cities on June 26. The workers are members of the CSIRO Staff Association, a section of the Community and Public Sector Workers Union.

Sydney ferry workers implement bans

Following six months of failed negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining agreement with Sydney's ferry operator Harbour City Ferries, members of the Maritime Union of Australia and the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers will not collect fares between 7 a.m. and 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. from Monday to Friday.

The limited industrial action follows a similar ban earlier in the month when fares were not collected over a four-day weekend period. Workers have rejected a 9 percent pay increase over four years, which is below the New South Wales inflation rate of 2.9 percent.

Papua New Guinea construction workers on strike

Workers involved in an upgrade of an eight-kilometre section of road linking two remote districts in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands are on strike because they have not been paid for six weeks. The local subcontracted employees were promised that wage payments would commence within a month of recruitment. One of the subcontractors, BK Construction, told workers that they were waiting for payment from the government before paying wages.

Meanwhile, in an unrelated dispute, 160 employees of the civil engineering and construction design company Curtain Brothers in Port Moresby have been on strike since June 19 in a dispute over pay. The strikers include supervisors and cleaners. The workers claim that a promised pay rise in January has not been paid. Protesting workers who gathered inside Curtain Brothers' premises on June 20 were removed by the company's security personnel.



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