Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 July 2014

India: Maharashtra government doctors end strike

Some 12,000 government doctors in Maharashtra ended a six-day strike on July 7, following assurances from the chief minister that he would discuss their demands in the state cabinet. Last week, the government dismissed 265 striking doctors, after invoking the Maharashtra Essential Services and Maintenance Act.

This was the third time doctors had struck in the past three years over demands previously agreed by the government. Their demands included implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and a pay rise, the retirement age increased from 58 to 62, regularisation of contract workers and promotion procedures and fixed working hours.

The strike was called by the Maharashtra Association of Gazetted Medical Officers and included permanent employees, temporary employees and "bonded" doctors.

Pondicherry bread and milk scheme workers protest

At least 40 members of the Bread and Milk Supplying Employees' Association in Pondicherry, India began a hunger strike outside the Nehru Statue on July 4 to demand that the territory government recommence the suspended Bread and Milk Scheme. Other demands included payment of outstanding wages and regularisation of their services.

The Bread and Milk scheme, which employs over 800 people, was introduced in 2002 to children in all government-aided schools in a bid to ensure their regular attendance. It was suspended by the government in February, after it claimed there was a shortage of milk.

India: Kerala public transport workers strike

Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) workers in Kozhikode stopped work on July 7 after police detained a bus driver and conductor over an alleged parking infringement. The police arrested several striking workers when they refused to move parked buses at the Mofussil bus station on the Kozhikode-Sulthan Bathery route causing a traffic jam and affecting commuter services.

The strike ended after five hours, following a meeting between the KSRTC Employees' Association and commissioner of police. Union leaders were assured that there would not be any charges against the driver and conductor and the protesting workers were released.

Jute mill workers in Bangladesh protest

About 50,000 workers of nine state-owned jute mills in the Khulna-Jessore region, south-west Bangladesh, went on strike on July 7 and protested outside their respective mills to protest against the government's decision to turn Bangladesh Jute Mills Corporation into a holding company. The following day, they blocked the Khulna-Jessore highway and rail tracks for about two hours.

Meanwhile, in an unrelated issue, workers of recently closed private jute mills in Khulna demonstrated on Sunday to demand that the plants be reopened and payment of their dues. They blocked the Khulna-Jessore highway for three hours.

Bangladeshi police shoot protesting garment workers

At least 20 garment workers were injured when industrial police fired bullets at protesting workers on the Dhaka-Narayanganj link road on July 8. Employees of Radical Design Ltd in Narayanganj (about 17km from Dhaka), had been demonstrating to demand unpaid wages. Workers complained that their factory has been closed for six months and that wage arrears had not been paid.

Pakistan: Punjab government contract employees protest

On July 6, around 1,000 Punjab province contract employees from 16 government departments, including pharmacy and education, protested outside the Multan Press Club to demand regularisation of their services. Workers complained that the Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had promised before the March 2013 elections that he would regularise all contractual employees.

According to a Civil Society Network South Punjab official, the promise was not honoured and the future of 150,000 contract employees was uncertain.

Protesters have threatened to join planned anti-government protests in Lahore during August if the government continues to ignore their demands.

Pakistan municipal workers protest

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On July 7, about 600 garbage workers at the District Municipal Corporation (DMC) South Lyari zone in Karachi, demonstrated in the city centre to demand outstanding wages. They parked 25 municipal sanitary vehicles at the Arts Council roundabout causing a major traffic jam.

The protesting workers said that at least 7,200 DMC South Lyari employees had not been paid for two months. They also demanded the payment of the provident fund and medical bills. The protest ended later that day, after the Sindh provincial government announced that it would pay three months' salaries and a one-month bonus salary to the DMC South employees.

Meanwhile, on July 7, Tehsil Municipal Administration (TMA) employees in Mardan, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province demonstrated outside the TMA building over the non-payment of salaries and pensions for last two months. Workers threatened to cut the city's water supply if their demands were not met by July 11.

Pakistan: Brick workers in Punjab protest

Over 150 brick-kiln workers and supporters protested outside the local government assembly in Lahore on July 7 to demand better wages and conditions. Kiln workers are brutally exploited. While the minimum wage is set at 750 rupees for every 1,000 bricks, in most cases they are only paid between 300 and 500 rupees.

The Kiln workers want their wage lifted to 1,500 rupees ($US15) per 1,000 bricks. One worker told the media that producing 1,000 bricks involved a minimum of two workers and took at least a full day.

The kiln industry managers use physical violence to impose slave-like conditions on entire families of workers, including their children. Frame-up charges are frequently used to repress those demanding better working conditions. In the absence of strike action, the workers' long-running protest campaigns and appeals for government intervention have been ignored.

South Korean autoworkers vote for strike

Over 90 percent of union members at Renault Samsung Motors' Busan plant, south of Seoul, voted last week for strike action following three months of failed negotiations for a new work agreement. The autoworkers are demanding a wage increase above 10 percent.

The unions also claim that the company is forcing employees to accept voluntary retirement, in defiance of an agreement made last year, and is outsourcing work without notifying the union. Over the past two years, the company has slashed 22 percent of its 4,300-strong workforce through voluntary retirement.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Around 200 Pollysa Home Textile factory workers in Cambodia's Preah Sihanouk province walked off the job on July 2, after the company sacked five employees who refused to work overtime. Strikers have advanced 17 demands, including reinstatement of the sacked workers, a daily 2,000 riel ($US0.5) food allowance during overtime worked, and for management to treat employees in a more respectful manner. The dispute has been submitted to the Arbitrations Council.

Cambodian waste disposal workers strike

On July 7 over 1,000 employees of the waste disposal firm Cintri in Phnom Penh walked off the job to demand the company honour agreements reached to end a strike in February.

Around 100 striking workers protested outside the company's Dangkao district depot to demand the depot chief resign and the removal of military police stationed there after the February strike.

A spokesman for the workers said the company had agreed in February to pay housing and travel stipends and health insurance worth $35 per month, and a pay rise of between $20 and $25 a month, the first salary increase for Cintri staff in 10 years.

Western Australian public health workers to strike

Public hospital health workers, including medical administration clerks, physiotherapists, radiographers, medical scientists, technicians and social workers, have notified the Western Australian Liberal Barnett government that they will strike next week over a wage dispute. Health Services Union (HSU) members will hold 12-hour stoppages at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital on July 15 and Royal Perth Hospital on July 17.

The health workers want a 9 percent pay rise over two years, in line with recent increases offered to public hospital doctors and nurses. The government has offered a pay rise of just 5.25 percent over two years, below the state current annual inflation rate of 3.1 percent. The current enterprise bargaining agreement expired on June 30.

Victorian dairy workers walk out

Some 110 maintenance workers at six Murray Goulburn dairy-processing factories in Victoria stopped work for 24 hours on July 4 as part of a state-wide dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) organiser said that workers had also banned overtime for the next six months and attending callouts.

The protected industrial action follows six months of negotiations between the company and unions. According to the AMWU, management made a pay increase offer below the current Consumer Price Index figure of 2.8 percent, refused to employ more local apprentices and wants to reduce redundancy entitlements.

Murray Goulburn is a farm cooperative with over 2,400 farms in New South Wales and Victoria. Producing 33 percent of Australia's milk, it is the largest dairy-processing company in Australia and has over 2,000 employees.

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