Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 July 2014

Asia

South Korean hospital workers strike

At least 500 unionised Seoul National University Hospital (SNUH) workers walked off the job for 48 hours on July 21 in opposition to the Park Geun-hye government's drive to privatise the health care system through outsourcing. Last month, the government announced a plan to allow hospitals to build subsidiaries to run profit-making tourism hot springs resorts and hotels.

SNUH is at the forefront of the government's drive to privatise medical services, establishing HealthConnect, a profit-oriented subsidiary, and pushing for telemedicine and medical tourism projects, even though it is a public hospital. The Korea Health and Medical Workers Union, with 44,000 members in hospitals across the country, claimed it would take further strike action over the issue during the week.

In March, 7,000 doctor members of the 100,000-strong Korean Medical Association (KMA) held a stoppage against the government's privatisation plans. But 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.

Bangladeshi workers demand festival bonuses and overdue wages

Some 15,000 workers of Zaber and Zubair Fabrics staged protests in the Tongi industrial area of Gazipur on July 18, demanding the payment of wages arrears and a hike in their salaries and festival bonuses. They blocked traffic on the Tongi-Pagar road for more than two hours. The police fired teargas shells and baton-charged the workers, injuring around 30.

Workers complained that the authorities had assured them they would be paid arrears on July 4 and receive increased salaries and Eid bonuses on July 14.

Garment workers in Savar and Chittagong provinces demonstrated on July 21, demanding immediate payment of festival bonuses and wage arrears ahead of Eid-ul-Fitr, a Muslim festival that begins on July 26.

In Chittagong city, nearly 100 workers from Maggie and Liz Corporation blocked the Nur Ahmed Road for about half an hour, until authorities agreed to pay Eid bonuses on time. In Savar, over 100 SMN Sweater garment workers marched on the Dhaka-Aricha highway, demanding festival bonuses and arrears for May and June. The workers complained that following previous demonstrations, management falsely promised to pay the arrears by July 10.

On July 20, workers from the state-run Crescent Jute Mill in Khulna besieged the administrative building, confining 15 officials, while demanding overdue wages and Eid bonuses. The occupation ended after the state's jute minister gave an assurance that their demands would be met.

India: Kerala government doctors impose work bans

Around 4,000 government doctors in India's southern state of Kerala imposed statewide "non-cooperation" work bans on July 21 to oppose the government's decision to compulsorily shift specialists from the Health Service to new medical colleges, and to demand the immediate filling of specialists' vacancies in state-run hospitals. Bans include not attending duties outside the hospitals, such as training programs, performing VIP duty, holding camps, attending meetings and keeping administration records.

Although the doctors' action has not affected the treatment of patients, the government threatened to invoke "dies non" (no work no pay) against striking doctors. The Kerala Government Medical Officers Association (KGMOA) said the bans would stay in place until their demands were satisfied.

Sanitary workers in Jammu and Kashmir strike

Sanitary workers (safai karamcharis) of the Municipal Council of Udhampur, in India's northern state of Jammu and Kashmir, have been on strike since July 4 to demand back pay and permanency. The Safai Karamcharis Union demanded that the government make permanent employees who have worked for more than seven years and provide them with wages arrears for the past eight months. In December, the union ended a statewide strike after the government promised to address their issues.

The district administration has threatened to invoke the Essential Service Maintenance Act, which will make the strike illegal, leaving workers open to heavy fines.

Safai karamcharis are employed in manual scavenging. It is considered one of the lowest, polluted and most degrading occupations, involving the removal of human excreta from dry latrines with bare hands and brooms. It is an occupation linked to the caste system and untouchability. Most manual scavengers are Dalits and about 95 percent are women. Safai karamcharis in some districts are paid as little as 500 rupees ($US8.40) a month.

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Karnataka tobacco workers protest

Beedi (hand-rolled cigarette) workers protested on July 22 in front of the Kudroli Bharat Beedi Company in Mangalore, Karnataka to demand Dearness Allowances. The protest was called by the Kannada Beedi Workers' Federation, affiliated to the Stalinist All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). Workers complained that a government order for a rise in Dearness Allowances of 21.15 rupees ($US35 cents) for every 1,000 cigarettes rolled was issued four months ago but never implemented by employers.

Pakistan: Sindh police baton charge protesting health workers

Several Lady Health Workers (LHWs), polio vaccinators and office-bearers of the Pakistan Nursing Association suffered injuries on July 17 when plainclothed police used batons in an attempt to break up their protest in Hyderabad. The LHWs were demanding that the Sindh government regularise their services, pay allowances for fuel and maintenance of vehicles and the salaries of 200 colleagues who were not paid for ten months.

Fuel and vehicle maintenance allowances have not been paid for the past four years. LHWs ended their five-hour protest and dispersed when a Sindh Health Services official invited them to his office on July 18 to hold talks.

For years, the Sindh government has refused to regularise tens of thousands of health workers who provide essential health services, especially in rural areas that lack permanent facilities.

Sri Lankan transport workers demand regular salaries

Sri Lanka Transport Board (SLTB) workers in the Gampaha bus depot, near Colombo, struck on July 17 to demand the regularisation of their pay date, which has been inconsistent since February.

The SLTB is what is left of the Ceylon Transport Board after the privatisation of passenger transport services in early 1980s. Bus depot workers are forced to earn their salaries from their monthly collections and most depots are struggling. Private operators dominate all the lucrative routes so state bus depots have to run non-profitable routes.

Sri Lankan hospital workers strike

Hospital workers, including matrons, junior staff heads, ward clerks, telephone operators and food inspectors, struck for four hours across Sri Lanka on July 21 to fight for overtime rate increments and the regularisation of casual workers, among other demands. A group of workers have been on a hunger strike outside the National Hospital in Colombo since July 14.

The Joint Trade Unions Committee has threatened to "intensify" the struggle because the authorities have failed to address their demands.

Burmese shoe factory workers protest

Former employees of the South Korean-owned Master Sports shoe factory in Hlaing Tharyar township protested outside the South Korean embassy in Yangon on July 17 over the sudden closure of their factory. They were accompanied by family members and members of a township workers' union. Workers complained that they did not receive appropriate compensation after the factory shut down illegally on June 26.

Employees had been told the factory would close temporarily between June 20 and 25 because of a lack of raw materials, but on June 26 they were told it would shut permanently. They were falsely promised that the 755 workers would receive their salaries for June as well as compensation. In a meeting with the Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security on June 30, Master Sports agreed to pay the June salaries and compensation by July 10 but failed to do so.

Most workers at the factory earned as little as 70,000 kyat ($US72) a month.

Strikes continue in Cambodia's garment sector

Over 900 employees at the Sun Well Shoes factory in Phnom Penh have been on strike since July 15 following failed talks with management over their seven demands for improved wages and conditions. Demands include a monthly $5 attendance bonus, a $15 per month travel and accommodation subsidy, severance pay and better safety equipment. Workers said management hired soldiers from Cambodia's RCAF Brigade to guard the factory and intimidate them during the strike.

Meanwhile, 500 workers at the Teng Xun handbag factory in Kompong Speu have been on strike since July 21 over demands that include the provision of lunch money, permission to have mobile phones at work and an end to their wages being taxed. Workers complained that the new tax has reduced their wages by 5 percent but a Free Trade Union spokesman told media the union would accept a lesser amount.

Cambodia: Ocean Garment workers end protests

Ocean Garments workers in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district ended two months of protests after coming to an agreement with their employer over furlough pay following the temporary closure of their factory on May 24. Over 1,000 workers had protested outside the factory to demand compensation for lost wages after the factory suspended its operations following reduced demand from buyers.

The company originally offered just $US15 a month, but later increased it to $50. Only 60 workers took up the offer. Ocean Garment management ignored an Arbitration Council ruling ordering the company to pay its workers the full salary of $120 a month during the factory closure. In the agreement reached this week, workers accepted the factory's offer of $100 payouts for senior employees and $50 for newer workers.

Wollongong Catholic school teachers continue rolling strikes

Following a four-hour strike by Catholic school teachers and support

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staff last week in the Illawarra region, south of Sydney, 500 teachers and staff rallied in Sydney on July 22 to protest against changes to their working conditions proposed in a new work agreement by the Catholic Commission for Employment Relations, which represents the Catholic Education Office (CEO). The action was part of a series of rolling stoppages across the state of New South Wales, which involved a further 6,000 staff walking off the job this week, and stoppages in Tasmania in late June.

Teachers are concerned that class size limits and entitlements are under threat in the proposed agreement, which would replace an existing 13-step incremental salary model with a system based on national standards set by the Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership. Teachers who were currently earning between $7,000 and $21,000, in addition to their base pay, for performing extra duties risk losing those entitlements.

The Independent Education Union (IEU) has lodged over 30 claims nationwide. These include a pay increase, entitlements and classifications on par with government schools, and minimum 12-month contracts for staff. Negotiations began 18 months ago. The last agreement between the IEU and the CEO was signed in 2009.

Sydney's Barangaroo site workers ordered back to work

About 1,000 workers were ordered back to work at Sydney Harbour's Barangaroo construction site after walking out on July 24. Despite a series of safety breakdowns on the site—including two fires in March—the federal government's Fair Work Commission ruled unlawful a stoppage over a union delegate who was stood down for speaking out on safety breaches. It banned further industrial action for three months.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) accepted the ruling. Developer Lend Lease threatened to take the union to the Federal Court if it did not comply with the order.

Victorian brewery workers strike

Thirty maintenance fitters at the SABMiller Abbotsford brewery in Melbourne, which produces VB and Carlton Draught beer, walked off the job on July 13 and picketed the factory's front gate. Their action followed failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement between the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the maintenance contract employer ABB. The AMWU said work bans have been planned, along with further strike action.

The union's demands include a 9 percent pay increase over three years and one week's extra annual leave or an equivalent bonus. Workers have rejected a demand by SABMiller to include rotating shifts—day, afternoon and night—in the new agreement, which workers said would radically disrupt their lives.

New Zealand: CHEP pallet workers walk out again

Thirty-three workers at the Brambles-owned CHEP pallet plant in Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island, walked off the job on July 21 in a dispute over wage parity with fellow workers at CHEP's Wiri pallet plant in Auckland. Workers in Auckland are paid an average of $2 an hour more. CHEP has refused to negotiate an improved offer since workers first walked off on July 10.

A FIRST Union official said management falsely claimed that the cost of living in Christchurch was less than Auckland, so wages should be lower.

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