

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 August 2015

India: Tamil Nadu power generating workers maintain strike

Over 12,000 permanent employees from the state-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu are ignoring a return-to-work court order and continuing strike action begun on July 20 for a five-point charter of demands. Production at NLC power generating facilities was being maintained by contract workers whose unions are not supporting the strike. Contract workers, however, walked out on Tuesday after NLC management sacked a union official.

At least 2,000 strikers were arrested last week when police tried to break up picket lines at several mines.

The workers' main demand was for a 30 percent wage rise to compensate for not receiving a pay increase since 2007. The Joint Action Council, representing 13 trade unions, however, reduced the wage claim to 24 percent during talks with the company on July 3. The NLC has stuck to its original offer of a 10 percent increase.

Telangana rural health workers protest

Rural health care (anganwadi) workers demonstrated outside the Collector's office in Khammam on August 3 over several demands. Although the government approved a 100 percent increase in honorarium payments from May 1, it imposed an increased workload (GO-14) on anganwadi workers and failed to address long-standing demands.

Telangana Anganwadi Workers and Helpers Union members have demanded the GO-14 be scrapped, that they be recognised as government employees, paid under the Minimum Wage Act and receive retirement benefits and other commitments made in 2013 that ended their 13-day strike.

Under the GO-14 workers can be sacked or have their pay cut if not performing duties. Anganwadi centres will be open for longer hours and workers would need to perform other extra duties.

Goa sewerage and water utility workers strike

Over 1,000 contract sewerage and water workers from Goa state Public Works Department (PWD) stopped work across the state on August 7 to demand government employee status, abolition of the labour contract system and a pay increase. Strikers included supervisors, operators, mechanics, helpers and others at various pumping stations causing water shortages and sewer overflows.

Many of the workers said they had been employed on a contract basis

for over ten years. Others said that they are often not paid for up to six months. The PWD contract workers' union, which is affiliated to the Goa Trade Unions Confederation, wants the monthly minimum pay rate increased by 10,000 rupees from 4,000 rupees (\$US61.6).

Tamil Nadu public health care workers on hunger strike

Around 1,000 public health care workers held a one-day hunger strike on Monday in Chennai to push their demands for a wage rise and job promotions. Workers said they had not been paid arrears or given promotions due to them. They also complained of being given additional heavy workloads without any extra payment.

Pondicherry government transport workers protest

Pondicherry Road Transport Corporation (PRTC) workers protested outside the PRTC depot on Monday for 15 demands. Their major claim was for payment of a 35 percent pay rise outstanding since 2009. Workers also demanded job permanency for 12 female workers, the filling of all job vacancies and promotions. The protest followed strikes in December and March over the same issues.

Karnataka government residential school contract workers protest

Contract workers at state-run Hostel and Residential schools demonstrated outside the Deputy Commissioner's office in Chitradurga on Tuesday. They want regular pay rises and a 15,000-rupee (\$US230) minimum monthly wage. Protesters said they had not been paid for seven months, their provident fund had not been deposited, and they had not received identity cards or provided promised insurance. The workers submitted a memorandum to the Deputy Commissioner.

Pakistan: Islamabad government hospital staff protest

Workers at five major government hospitals in Islamabad walked off the job for two hours on Monday, the second time this month, to protest federal government moves to slash the health risk allowance. They want

the allowance increased on a par with salaries.

Workers have been holding daily protests over the issue since July 11. Without the allowance, Grade 17 employees' monthly take-home pay is cut by 7,000 rupees (\$US68).

Up to 10,000 workers at the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Polyclinic, Capital Hospital, Federal Government General Hospital and National Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine are affected by the allowance cut.

Government hospital employees won the Health Risk Allowance in 2011, after a 35-day protest campaign outside parliament. The allowance covers the risk of exposure to blood-borne and radiation-related diseases, such as cancer, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis and needle injuries. The government increased the salary of federal employees by seven percent earlier in the year but froze the health risk allowance for medical workers.

Brick kiln workers in Faisalabad locked out

Up to 60,000 workers at 500 brick kilns in Faisalabad, Punjab province have been locked out since August 7 in a wage dispute. The Kiln owners shut their businesses because workers are demanding the companies pay a government-mandated fixed rate of 962 rupees (\$US9.43) for making 1,000 bricks per day. Kiln workers are currently paid between 400 and 500 rupees (depending on the district they are in) for 1,000 bricks.

Workers, including women and children, held a sit-down protest outside the district coordination officer's office on August 8, one of several demonstrations this year. Kiln workers have been campaigning for the increase for over 10 months. They ended previous protests after the government gave false commitments that it would hold talks with kiln owners.

Protesting Islamabad teachers attacked by the police

A demonstration by striking government school teachers in Islamabad was attacked by police on August 5. Police assaulted both male and female teachers, beating and dragging them along the road. Fourteen teachers were arrested.

About 1,250 qualified teachers are working in more than 350 government educational institutes as daily wage employees and paid just 7,500 rupees (\$US73.50) per month.

The teachers warned that the sit-in protest would continue until their demands are met. They want permanency, promotions based on service and outstanding back-pay.

Hong Kong domestic workers protest

About 50 domestic helpers protested in front of the Hong Kong Labour Department on August 7 to demand their minimum monthly wage be increased from \$HK4,110 (\$US530) to \$HK4,500. They also want the monthly food allowance to be increased by \$HK600. The government is set to announce results of its annual wage review next month.

There are over 320,000 domestic helpers in Hong Kong, mainly from the Philippines (48 percent) and Indonesia (49 percent). They make up around three percent of the total population.

Western Australian hospital support staff end work bans

Support staff at four major public hospitals in Perth, the capital of Western Australia, lifted work bans after the Liberal state government agreed to reopen negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Members of the United Voice (UV) union, including cleaners, orderlies, catering and sterilisation staff, at the Royal Perth, Sir Charles Gairdner, Fremantle and Armadale hospitals imposed the bans last week, affecting the movement of patients to surgeries, meal deliveries and ward cleaning.

Enterprise bargaining negotiations with the government stalled over three key issues. Workers want better job security for casual employees and a \$50-a-week wage increase to keep up with the high cost of living in Western Australia. They also fear that the state government is planning to remove an enterprise agreement clause guaranteeing no privatisation of services in established hospitals.

UV wants the Liberal government to publicly pledge that there will be no more public health privatisation before it recommends members accept any offer. The union, however, has previously endorsed the privatisation of hospital support jobs at the new Fiona Stanley Hospital. Negotiations were due to restart on Wednesday.

Laboratory workers in Victoria stop work

Workers employed at the flu-vaccine maker CSL in Victoria stopped work for four hours on Tuesday to demand a better wage deal in a new work place agreement. Maintenance, laboratory, research and store workers want a 4.5 percent pay rise and to maintain existing conditions. CSL has offered 3.25 percent and a cut in conditions.

The dispute involves members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the National Union of Workers (NUW).

CSL wants workers to accept a freeze on all allowances and performance pay lowered for some workers. Allowances make up a significant part of the take-home pay of laboratory and shift workers. CSL is also demanding a two-tier agreement for maintenance workers with new employees forced to work ten-day fortnights. Existing employees have a nine-day fortnight.

New South Wales: Sydney bus drivers picket depot

Around 50 bus drivers blockaded buses entering or leaving the western Sydney, Smithfield depot of Transit Systems on Monday morning protesting against the company's last pay offer. The Transport Workers Union (TWU), representing a portion of the 300 workers at the depot, said the company received funding from the NSW government to provide a 2.37 percent taxpayer-funded wage increase for bus drivers on July 1. The company has said it will incorporate this in its 3 percent pay rise offer but is not backdating the increase.

Illawarra coal miners vote for strike

Some 90 percent of workers at the Dendrobium underground coal mine in the Illawarra region, 80km south of Sydney, have voted in a protected ballot to authorise their union to take strike action over their pay dispute. The vote, which was run by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), authorises the union to call a range of industrial action – from limitations on production through to strikes – provided they give the mine owner South32 at least 72 hours' notice.

The enterprise agreement expired in April 2014 when the business was owned by BHP Billiton. The dispute mainly centres on job security clauses, which workers want included in a new workplace agreement to protect themselves against the introduction of casual staff. South32 has started giving Dendrobium workers a six-month interim pay increase in an attempt to avert industrial action.

The workplace agreement for staff at South32's other Illawarra coal mines, at Appin and West Cliff, expired last month. It is expected those workers will seek similar security clauses in their next workplace deal.

Victorian public transport workers to strike

A four-hour stoppage of Melbourne's trains and trams has been called for August 21, after workers at Metro Trains and Yarra Trams voted by 99.4 percent in favour of industrial action in two separate disputes for a new work agreement.

The 3,000 workers, members of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) rejected the offer from both employers of a nine percent wage increase over three years. Workers want an 18 percent increase and improvements to rostering guidelines, redundancy provisions and the disciplinary process.

V-line regional trains may also stop, as Metro signallers, who control the metropolitan rail network that V-line shares, will join the strike. 'Free travel days' for train commuters will apply on August 19 and 21, as workers will not check tickets or issue infringement notices on those days. The stoppage will be the first public transport strike in Melbourne since 1997.

Victorian private hospital nurses to vote on industrial action

Cabrini Health nurses in Melbourne's south east could stop work or refuse to work overtime from early next month after being granted permission by the Fair Work Commission to hold a protected industrial action ballot. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) will conduct the ballot between August 17 and 31.

Over 1,000 nurses rejected the private company's backdated wage offer of two percent to October 2014 and 2.5 percent from October 2015 with parking fees charged by the company to offset the cost of the wage settlement. Nurses want a 3.25 percent wage adjustment to October 2016 with no change in conditions. The Cabrini enterprise agreement does not include minimum staff/patient ratios, which is included in the enterprise agreement offered to nurses in public hospitals.





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