

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 October 2015

## India: Tea plantation workers in Kerala remain on strike

Close to 300,000 plantation workers at state-owned and private tea and rubber estates in Kerala are maintaining strike action begun on September 28. Production has shut down on all plantations across the southern Indian state. The workers, mostly women, are demanding a 20 percent bonus increase and a daily wage rise from 232 rupees (\$US3.55) to 500 rupees.

Following the failure of the fourth round of Plantation Labour Committee (PLC) talks on Wednesday, striking workers blocked roads at 15 places in Idukki district, bringing traffic in the tourist city of Munnar to a standstill.

A joint council of trade unions called the strike in response to popular support for a nine-day wildcat strike last month by about 6,000 workers employed by Kannan Devan Hills Plantations Limited in Munnar. The mainly women workers struck in protest over a sell-out 10 percent bonus deal worked out in the tripartite trade union-employer-government PLC. Striking workers barred the unions from attending their meetings or negotiating on their behalf.

The joint council of unions includes the All India Trade Union Congress and Centre of India Trade Unions—affiliated to the Stalinist Communist Party of India and Communist Party of India (Marxist) respectively—the Indian National Trade Union Congress, aligned to the Congress Party, and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sabha, affiliated to the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

Due to years of betrayals by the trade unions, plantation workers in Kerala are among the most impoverished sections of the Indian working class. While plantation workers receive just 232 rupees per day, coconut climbers are paid 1,250 rupees and casual labourers 700 rupees.

## Social health workers strike in Karnataka

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHAs) in Bangalore, Karnataka went on strike for an indefinite period on Monday on several demands that included job permanency and pay increases. Strikers rallied at Abedkar circle in Karnataka and marched to the office of the deputy commissioner of health on Tuesday.

Other demands were salaries on a par with central government social health workers, a 50-million rupee welfare fund, online payment, health and life insurance facilities with the government paying half the premium amounts, and additional payments when workers provide extra services. Several workers complained they have not been paid for five to 15 months.

The strike follows a statewide walkout by 38,000 ASHA workers in May on similar demands. At the time, the Karnataka ASHA Workers Union wanted the state government to pass on an honorarium payment

from the central government, which it had promised to do in October 2013. The union also demanded regular monthly payments, mobile phones with sim cards, uniforms, social security and inclusion in the Vajpayee Arogyashri Health Insurance scheme.

## Maharashtra film and TV industry workers walk out

Around 22 associations of the Federation of Western Indian Cine Employees called their members out on strike on October 3 in a dispute over new contracts. Strikers included artists, writers and other workers. All TV and film production in Mumbai and other cities stalled during the strike. The strike ended the following day after producers reportedly agreed to meet their demands.

The strike was sparked when producers refused to respond to a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) issued to them in February. The MoU is revised every five years and its demands are included in individual association contracts. Workers affected included members of the Indian Film & Television Directors Association, Association of Film & TV Editors, Cine Costume & Make-up Artist, Hair Dresser Association, Film Writers Association, Western India Cinematographers Association and Film Writers Association.

## Pakistan International Airlines pilots on strike

Unionised pilots at Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) have been on strike since October 1 in a dispute over safety and the increasing use of contract pilots. The Pakistan Airlines Pilot Association called the strike after the Civil Aviation Authority suspended two PIA pilots for going on a PIA-sanctioned flight in violation of flight duty time limitations (FDTL).

Pilots said PIA has repeatedly forced its pilots to breach FDTL requirements, which limit the number of hours pilots can fly on international routes in a single day to mitigate fatigue. Pilots are also concerned that PIA is attempting to bypass labour laws by hiring pilots on a temporary contractual basis, thereby putting their job security at risk and making them more prone to being pressured into breaking duty time regulations.

The pilots association, which has allowed PIA to violate FDTL in the past, has now blamed the airline for the suspension of the pilots and requested the sacking of PIA's director of flight operations before returning to work.

### **Pakistan: Sindh irrigation workers protest**

Several hundred workers covered by the All Sindh Irrigation Trade Unions Federation rallied in Garhi Khuda Bukhsh village on October 5 with a 19-point charter of demands. They marched to Karachi to protest at the Chief Minister's house. Two major demands are a time-scale salary system for the 30,000 workers, similar to that in the education and health departments, and job permanency for 10,000 irregular employees.

### **Punjab elementary teachers demand unpaid salaries**

More than 700 teachers protested outside the Government Elementary College of Education in Muzaffargarh, Punjab province on October 5 to demand six months of unpaid wages. The teachers have not been paid since they were appointed in April. Other demands of the Punjab Teachers Union included a time pay scale and permanent status for educators recruited in 2012.

### **Power utility workers continue anti-privatisation rallies**

On Wednesday, thousands of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers protested in Lahore against the privatisation of the state-run utility. Their action follows at least eight individual protests and limited strike action by tens of thousands of power utility workers in major cities across Pakistan this year.

The privatisation of WAPDA and its power distribution companies are part of the government's agenda to restructure and sell state-owned industries. It is increasingly under pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to speed up the process.

Throughout the three-year campaign, the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union has ensured that workers' opposition is restricted to isolated protests.

### **Sri Lankan hospital staff protest unfair punishment**

Health workers, including doctors and nurses, at the public hospital at Ambilipitiya, in Sri Lanka's Rathnapura district held a protest at the hospital on Tuesday, accusing the authorities of unjust disciplinary action against a midwife. Workers said she was transferred to another hospital following a biased inquiry held by the provincial health secretary.

The midwife was blamed for the death of an infant who died during birth when she was on duty in 2012. Protesting staff insisted that if hospital authorities did not reverse their decision they would escalate their campaign.

### **Broken Hill water utility workers hold stoppage**

Maintenance workers at Essential Water in Broken Hill, in the far west of the Australian state of New South Wales, stopped work for 24 hours on

October 2 following two years of failed negotiations between the company and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union on a replacement enterprise agreement. Workers rejected several offers of annual wage increases that included reduced redundancy payments, job security and superannuation payments.

### **New Zealand: Toll logistics workers strike**

On Monday, twenty workers of Toll Logistics walked off the job for a planned three-day strike and picketed the company's South Auckland office over stalled wage negotiations. They also demanded Toll Australia and owners Japan Post investigate systemic breaches to their collective agreement, including unpaid overtime and underpayments.

Toll is New Zealand's largest logistics company, covering freight, international courier and parcel delivery. During protracted negotiations with the FIRST trade union for a new collective agreement, it demanded that the union withdraw a number of proceedings it has against the company in the Employment Relations Authority.

The strike ended shortly after it began when Toll agreed to conclude the new collective agreement and settle outstanding legal cases. The agreement reportedly included back pay and a pay increase of 8 percent over three years.

### **New Zealand hardware workers maintain rolling stoppages**

About 40 staff at the Australian-owned New Lynn Bunnings hardware retail outlet in West Auckland walked off the job and picketed the front of the store on October 3 over a proposed collective agreement. Their action follows two weeks of limited two-hour rolling stoppages by over 300 workers at 50 stores across New Zealand.

Some 99 percent of workers voted against the proposed collective agreement, which included a minimum wage increase of 4 percent this year with a further minimum of 2 percent next year. The FIRST union claimed that the company was attempting to lock workers into insecure contracts.

Bunnings is proposing a roster change that will remove workers' rights to reject changes to their start and finish times. The firm wants to insert a clause to allow store managements to change the start and finish times at will.



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