

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 October 2015

## Hong Kong hospital doctors win pay rise

Following a sit-in by 1,300 senior doctors at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Central Hong Kong, the Hospital Authority (HA) has pledged to seek board approval for a 3 percent salary increase.

The protest was sparked by the HA deciding to exclude the doctors from the Civil Service Pay Level Survey, under which they should receive a 3 percent pay rise in line with other civil servants. The association claimed that at least 2,000 doctors were affected.

Doctors' wages were to be frozen until a review comparing their salaries to other civil servants was completed. The doctors feared that the review would recommend that only doctors receiving salaries below equivalent civil servant grades would be entitled to a wage increase. Civil servants' pay was frozen in 2009 and the hospital authority followed suit.

Those involved in the protest included members of the Hong Kong Medical Association, the Hong Kong Doctors Union, the Association of Private Medical Specialists of Hong Kong and Médecins Inspirés.

## Citybus workers in Hong Kong protest

Twelve drivers from Citybus, one of three major bus companies in Hong Kong, demonstrated outside the New World Tower in Central on October 15 to demand its parent company, NWS Holdings, discuss better staff benefits. The protest followed three failed meetings with Citybus management since August.

Protesting drivers said there have been discrepancies in the treatment of contract and permanent staff, especially with regard to overtime pay and a special bonus. They were also concerned that the starting salary of new recruits is higher than some existing experienced employees.

## South Korean food delivery drivers remain on strike

Forty contract delivery drivers for the food processing company Pulmuone, have been on strike since September 4 to demand a fee increase from subcontractors Daewon and Seoul Garam Logistics. The drivers are members of the Korea Confederation of Trade Union's cargo workers' unit and own their vehicles. They claimed that they have not had a fee increase for 20 years.

The workers are picketing Pulmuone's logistics centre in Eumseong, North Chungcheong Province. There are reports that thugs have raided the striking drivers' camps, beating and badly injuring the contract drivers.

## Philippines port workers protest

Around 50 port workers at the cold storage unit of Japanese giant Sumitomo Fruit Corp (Sumifru) picketed the Davao City wharf of AJMR Sumifru Port Corporation on October 16. The workers were demanding the company begin long overdue wage negotiations. According to the AJMR Labor Union-Association of Democratic Labor Organisations—Kilusang Mayo Uno, the workers' collective agreement proposal has not been responded to after 40 days. Philippines labour law stipulates that negotiations must begin within 10 days of its submission to the employer.

Workers want wage rises for regular rank-and-file employees—2,000 pesos (\$US43) per month for the first year—and 1,500-peso annual increases for the next two years on top of increased leave and other benefits.

## India: Unions close down plantation strike in Kerala

Indian plantation workers' unions have negotiated a sell-out deal with the plantation owners and the government and sent union members back to work with little to show for their 17-day strike. The media has reported that the majority of workers are "discontent" with the deal.

Close to 300,000 plantation workers at state-owned and private tea and rubber estates in Kerala walked off indefinitely on September 28. The mostly women workers demanded a 20 percent bonus increase and a daily wage rise, from 232 rupees (\$US3.55) to 500 rupees.

In an October 14 closed-door meeting of the Plantation Labour Committee, the unions struck a deal that falls far short of workers' demands. Estate workers will receive a miniscule 69-rupee increase, taking their poverty level daily wage to just 301 rupees (\$US4.64). No decision was made on bonuses or other measures to improve workers' living standards.

The unions claimed the new minimum wage was "reasonable" and accepted estate owners' claims that bonuses and other issues would be discussed at meetings in November. Those involved in the sell-out deal were 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).

Last month workers at four plantation estates of Harrison Malayalam Limited (HML) in Munnar, Kerala went on strike after their unions did a deal with HML that only paid a 10 percent bonus and no wage increase. The workers barred the unions from further negotiations and stoned their

offices.

### **Bellary district social health workers end strike**

Accredited Social Health Activists (ASHA) workers in Bellary district, Karnataka ended a two-week strike on Monday, following a vague assurance from the state government that it would meet their demands.

ASHAs throughout Karnataka walked out indefinitely on October 5 over several demands, including job permanency and pay increases. The media has not reported whether ASHAs in other districts remain on strike.

The Karnataka ASHA Workers Union also called for salaries on 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 premiums, and additional payments when workers provide extra services. Several workers told the media that they had not been paid for between 5 and 15 months.

### **Karnataka sanitation workers strike for minimum wage**

Raichur City Municipal Corporation (CMC) sanitation employees stopped work and demonstrated outside the CMC office on October 19 to demand the minimum wage, correct provident fund and Employee State Insurance (ESI) payments. A memorandum was submitted to the CMC office.

According to the Daily Wage and Contract Labourers Association, authorities had violated the Minimum Wages Act by forcing them to work for lower wages. Workers said they had been employed on a contract basis since 1996 and had faced intimidation from contractors when the wage discrepancy issue was raised.

### **Tamil Nadu state bank employees walk out**

Hundreds of employees of the Tamil Nadu Primary Cooperative Bank stopped work and demonstrated in Vellore on Monday over several demands. The bank employees want renewal of their wage agreement, payment on par with Tamil Nadu Civil Supplies Corporation employees, payment of arrears and pensions to retired workers. The strike was organised by the Tamil Nadu State Primary Cooperative Bank All Workers Sangam.

### **Andhra Pradesh health and childcare workers protest**

Childcare (Anganwadi), rural health (ASHA) and school mid-day meal workers demonstrated in Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh on October 19 to demand payment of outstanding wage arrears and rent payments for childcare centres. Workers blocked national highway NH-36 for a short period as part of the protest.

Anganwadi and ASHA workers said their six-month salary arrears totalled 130 million rupees (\$US13,000) and that rents for childcare centres remained unpaid. The protest was organised by the Stalinist CPM-

affiliated Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

### **Kerala state transport workers strike**

Kerala State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) workers struck at midnight on October 19 to oppose privatisation of the corporation. The KSRTC Employees Association also demanded that M-panel workers' daily wage be raised to 500 rupees and remittances for the participatory pension and allotment of arrears of Dearness Allowance be paid.

### **Pakistan: Punjab kiln workers on strike**

Brick kiln workers in Toba Tek Singh district in Punjab province are continuing their campaign for the officially mandated 962 rupees (\$US9.22) for 1,000 bricks per day. A sit-down protest outside the district labour office on October 17 was called off after government officials promised to arrange a meeting with kiln owners.

On Monday, however, the kiln owners refused to pay even the reduced rate of 800 rupees per 1,000 bricks it previously agreed to. The kiln workers responded by launching a hunger strike. Brick kiln workers are subjected to slave like conditions and there is widespread use of bonded labour in the sector.

### **Punjab health workers oppose privatisation**

Paramedics and nursing staff at the state run Shaikh Zaid Hospital in Lahore walked out on Sunday to oppose privatisation of the facility. The government has begun the restructuring by appointing a board of trustees to manage the hospital. The health workers' action is part of a state-wide campaign begun this month against the privatisation of almost 700 health facilities in Punjab.

The government has stepped up its restructuring and privatisation of state-owned enterprises and utilities as part of its agreement with the International Monetary Fund. Health workers have vowed to continue their action until the government withdraws its privatisation plans.

### **Karachi University administration workers protest**

Non-teaching staff at the Karachi University boycotted duties and blocked the administration offices on Monday to protest the lack of basic working facilities and irregularities in the administration and hiring of staff. The protest was called off after several hours when the vice chancellor agreed to address workers' demands.

Students at the university earlier held a sit-in protest in front of the vice chancellor's office to protest a 40 percent increase of examination fees and other fee increases.

### **Bangladesh garment workers protest sackings and unpaid wages**

Several hundred workers at the Jalal Ahmed Knit Composite garment factory in Savar on the outskirts of Dhaka blocked the Dhaka-Aricha highway on Monday to demand their unpaid wages. The blockade was lifted after factory management, accompanied by the police, said that the arrears would be paid by Wednesday.

The same day, Gaus Fashion workers in Chittagong demonstrated against the sacking of 115 workers and beatings by management. Workers alleged that some senior executives beat up around 12 workers, including the union secretary. The protesters returned to work at around mid-day after police were called to the factory.

The following day 150 Maskan Jeans and Fashion workers in Chittagong blocked the road at Colonel Hat to demand payment of their September wages. Industrial police were deployed to confront the protesters who removed the barricades after about one hour when the factory authorities said they would pay the arrears by the end of the day.

### **More public servants reject Australian government pay offer**

Public sector employees in the Prime Minister's Department (PM&C) on Sunday overwhelmingly rejected the department's proposed enterprise agreement. The Liberal-National government offer included 1.5 percent annual pay increases over the life of the agreement, no back pay, and more cuts to existing entitlements.

The vote is part of an 18-month pay dispute between 160,000 federal public servants and the Australian government.

Other departments that have voted down enterprise agreement "offers," include Immigration and Border Force, the Productivity Commission and the Department of Human Services, the government's largest agency. The government has declared that all annual pay rises be limited to below 1.5 percent and cuts to entitlements. Staff in most departments could lose up to \$8,000 a year if the government's offer is accepted.

Enterprise agreement negotiations covering 118 federal public servants' agreements have been underway since March 2014. Less than 2 percent of workers have accepted proposed agreements, leaving at least 150,000 without agreements and their wages frozen.

The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and other unions have asked for 4 percent annual pay increases for three years with no loss of conditions. CPSU national secretary Nadine Flood held a closed-door meeting with new Employment Minister Michaelia Cash last week but released no details on the discussions. For the 18 months, the CPSU has kept workers divided along departmental lines, while restricting all industrial action to ineffective limited stoppages and protests.

### **New Zealand hardware workers continue strike action**

Bunnings workers and supporters picketed the hardware retailer's stores at New Lynn, Botany, Mt Wellington and Manukau on October 17. The national dispute over a new collective agreement was sparked in early September when workers learnt that the Australian-owned retailer was attempting to lock them into insecure contracts. Bunnings wants a roster change that will remove workers' rights to determine their start and finish times.

The FIRST Union claims that under the current collective agreement Bunnings can only alter start and finish times under mutual agreement with workers. The firm wants to insert a clause that will allow individual store management to change the start and finish times at will.

Some 99 percent of the Bunnings' workforce has voted against the proposed collective agreement, which includes a 4 percent pay rise this year with a further two percent next year.

### **New Zealand public servants vote to strike**

Over 1,000 Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) workers have voted to take two days of strike action in November after three months of failed negotiations for a new collective agreement. The action will consist of two-hour stoppages on November 5 and 23.

According to a Public Service Association (PSA) official, the MBIE has offered no pay rises and will do nothing to improve poor working conditions. The union official claimed that the ministry had also refused to release any information to workers about how they were paid, which made negotiations impossible.

An MBIE press release on Tuesday said it would continue negotiations and offered an across-the-board 2 percent performance-based pay increase.

### **Auckland University of Technology staff stop work**

Members of the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) held a stop-work meeting on Thursday to discuss their efforts to limit the number of days the university can impose a compulsory shutdown. The union, which has been negotiating collective agreements for allied workers and academic staff, wants to limit compulsory summer shutdowns to no more than five days.

Last summer the university shut its doors and required its workers to take five days' annual leave. This summer it plans a compulsory shutdown of nine days for allied staff and eleven days for academics. Workers oppose being forced to use leave entitlements when it does not suit them. The TEU is also negotiating a pay rise with the university and several other issues which remain unresolved.



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