

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 August 2016

Taiwan railway train drivers confirm plan to strike

Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) workers announced on Wednesday that they will strike during the mid-autumn festival holiday (September 15 to 18) after a scheduled meeting between the TRA, the Railway Workers Union and the Train Drivers Union failed to resolve a dispute over staffing levels.

Around 400 of TRA's 4,000 employees signed a petition last week calling for a minimum eight-hour break between shifts for train crews and for a full-day off for station staff. They also demanded extra payments for night work, a benefit they currently do not receive.

One station worker told the media that the current 12-hour shift rotations meant that employees are at stations every day whilst conductors sometimes have only five hours rest overnight between train runs.

The drivers' union is currently in talks with TRA over demands that its members are often unable to take paid annual leave because of driver shortages.

The union claims that the state-owned rail operator currently has 1,074 drivers plus 74 in training at present, well short of the full staffing requirement of 1,345 drivers. Rail workers want staffing levels increased or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced.

South Korean auto-parts workers locked out

Hundreds of workers at the auto parts manufacturer KB Autotech in Asan have been locked out for over a week after they attempted to form a union at the plant. The company has withdrawn hired goons from the factory has demanded that workers cease their union activity before wage bargaining can begin. Workers have insisted that the lockout be lifted first.

Cambodian garment workers paid wages after protest

Following two days of protest, the H&L Apparel factory in Phnom Penh reached an agreement with 400 employees on Monday to pay outstanding wages. Six days earlier the South Korean-owned company told employees the factory was to close.

A spokesman from the Collective Union of Movement of Workers said that although long-term workers were paid immediately those on short-term contracts would not receive their outstanding salaries until August 19. Factory administration blamed a drop in orders from major buyers for the closure.

Bangladesh: Starving tea garden workers on strike

About 400 workers living on the Baikunthapur Tea Garden in Hadiganj district, north-east Bangladesh, downed tools on August 12 to demand payment of wages. The workers and families, who have not been paid wages and food supplements for 15 weeks, demonstrated near the deputy commissioner's office appealing for emergency food relief. The strike erupted after the tea garden owners failed to meet a promise to pay wages by August 11.

An official from the Bangladesh Tea Labour Union, Lashkarpur Valley unit, told the media that workers from all 23 tea estates in Habiganj will begin indefinite strike action and block the highways if workers' demands were not met by August 17.

A strike organiser said that around 2,400 workers and their family members at the Baikunthapur tea garden were on liquid extract from boiled rice, mashed tea leaves and chilli peppers. He said the workers "miserable conditions reflected modern-day slavery in the tea industry."

Nepal: Unilever workers locked out

Over 150 employees at personal care products manufacturer Unilever in Hetauda, Nepal were locked out indefinitely on August 7 despite reaching an agreement with management to end a 28-day strike.

Workers began limited strike action on July 10 after management refused to implement an agreement reached on May 29 in which 200,000 rupees (\$1,870) would be allocated to a "residential fund."

The factory workers said they ended the strike after reaching a three-point agreement with management at the District Administration Office. Management claimed, however, that the union was still disrupting production and imposed the lockout.

India: Punjab liquor factory workers end strike

Jagatjit Private Limited liquor production workers in Hamira, Jalandhar district, ended a two-day strike on August 14. The workers downed tools after a co-worker, Chand Singh, was killed in a plant accident. The Pendu Mazdoor Union leadership ended the strike after management accepted the workers' demand that 700,000 rupees (\$US10,460) compensation be paid to Singh's family by August 16.

Uttarakhand police attack protesting teachers

Over 25,000 teachers from government schools in the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand took one-day's leave on August 17 to protest against government and education department inaction over long-pending teachers' demands. Police in Dehradun attacked teachers with canes when their 2,000-strong march approached the secretariat building.

Teachers want three-day earned leave, a salary increase, assured career progression, provision of travel leave, transparent annual teacher transfers and inclusion of physical education as a regular subject in the school curriculum.

The State Teachers Union leadership called off the protest after a meeting with the government. Union officials claimed that the chief minister had agreed to meet the union's demands. The union gave the government until September 5 to honour the assurance.

Victorian community nurses and care aides stop work

Nurses and care aides employed by the Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) in Victoria held four two-hour stop work meetings this week and have imposed administrative bans to demand better pay and defend their benefits.

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) has been negotiating a new enterprise agreement with RDNS management since May. The current agreement expired on June 1.

Nurses and care aides rejected management's two-year agreement "offer" on August 10, including wage rises of between 1.71 and 2.3 percent in 2016 and 2.5 per cent in 2017.

The ANMF wants a four-year agreement with the roll-in of a special allowance in the first year and then a 3 percent wage increase on top and yearly increases to match the public sector nurses' and midwives' pay.

Victorian car seat manufacturing workers on strike

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at Australia's last baby car seat manufacturer Britax Australia walked off the job this week to protest the closure of the plant in Sunshine, Melbourne. The workers have ignored a Fair Work Commission directive that they return to work. The union has isolated the Britax workers told them to hold protest rallies in local shopping centres.

The company announced in May that it was moving production to China after 50 years of manufacturing in Australia. At least 80 workers will lose their jobs when the factory closes in 2017.

New South Wales corrective services teachers continue protests

Corrective Services Teachers Association members have been holding protest meetings outside prisons in nine cities and towns in New South Wales over the past month. They are opposing the state government's plan to sack experienced and qualified teachers from prisons and replace them with administrative staff and trainers on lower pay rates. Recognised teaching qualifications will no longer be required within state prisons.

Teachers complained that the Baird government's decision to contract-out prison education services will cost the jobs of 138 adult educators and leave prisoners unable to access the broad adult education curriculum. The union has lodged a case in the NSW Industrial Relations Commission opposing the cost-cutting measures.

The teachers allege that the job cuts are in preparation for further privatisation of the state's prisons. Two prisons already privatised and another one is now out for tender.

The state Liberal government will progressively roll out "performance reporting" for prisons, "benchmarked budgets" and operational changes to "increase productivity" to drive down costs.

Western Australian coal mine workers protest

Mine workers, supported by family and community groups in Collie, Western Australia demonstrated outside the Griffin Coal-owned Ewington Mine last weekend against proposed wage cuts and shift changes imposed on maintenance workers.

In June the Fair Work Commission endorsed the company's move to scrap an existing enterprise agreement and force 70 maintenance workers onto the Black Coal Award. The Black Coal Award annual pay rate is \$81,000. Maintenance workers under the cancelled Griffin Coal Maintenance Enterprise Agreement were paid \$139,000 a year.

Griffin Coal plans to reduce maintenance workers pay by 19 percent for the next six months while it negotiates a new enterprise agreement with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU).

According to the union, the company wants workers to take a 43 percent pay cut, work an extra seven hours per week for free, allow the company to appropriate redundancy entitlements, work two-thirds of weekends per year without extra pay and give up travel allowances.

New Zealand hardware retail store workers stop work

Retail workers at the Mitre 10 Mega hardware store in Invercargill, on New Zealand's South Island, walked off the job for an hour on August 11 after rejecting the company's pay offer.

Twelve members of the FIRST Union were protesting against the company's \$0.25 hourly pay rise "offer," stating it is not sufficient for them to live on and failed to bring their pay into line with other retail workers in New Zealand. According to the union, Mitre 10 Mega staff receive \$2 to \$2.50 less per hour than their counterparts.



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