

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 September 2016

Taiwan workers rally against pension cuts

Around 140,000 people, mostly civil servants and government retirees, demonstrated in Taipei last Saturday in protest against President Tsai Ing-wen's planned reforms to the island's pension system. Pension schemes vary in Taiwan, according to occupations, with public sector retirees receiving more generous packages than workers from other sectors.

In the past, the Taiwan government had to offer generous pension incentives to public sector employees because the salaries were so low. Retired public sector workers typically receive a pension equivalent to 90 percent of their last drawn salary. The government wants to reduce this to 60 percent, increase workers' contributions and lift the pension age. The government has established a 37-member committee to develop measures to reduce the cost of all pension schemes by mid-2017.

Hong Kong domestic workers demonstrate

Hundreds of domestic helpers, joined by 500 foreign maids, marched in central Hong Kong on Sunday calling for wage and meal allowance increases and safer working conditions. The protest followed the death of several maids who fell from tower blocks when they were forced to clean outside windows.

Domestic workers want the government to ban employers from asking maids to clean outside windows and for their minimum monthly wage to be raised from \$HK4,119 to \$5,000 (\$US644) and meal allowances lifted to \$HK1,600 from \$995 a month.

There are 300,000 maids in Hong Kong, mostly from the Philippines and Indonesia, who want the government to abolish the "two-week rule" which forces them to leave Hong Kong within 14 days of quitting a job, unless they can find other employment within that time. The rule forces them to stay with their current employer even if they are being abused or subjected to slave-like conditions.

Pakistan: Abbottabad doctors strike over pay

Doctors at the government-run Ayub Teaching Hospital in Abbottabad walked out on an indefinite strike on September 1 to demand overdue wages. The hospital's outpatient department was closed and only emergency services provided. Rallies and a sit-in protest were carried out within hospital premises during the strike.

The striking doctors said that their 10 percent salary increase and health practice allowance had not been paid since July and that 240 medical

house officers had not been paid for two months. They also demanded accommodation facilities and proper security and criticised the administration for inefficiency and negligence.

The strike was called off after three days, following a promise by the hospital authorities that the wages and allowances would be paid and the provincial government asked to fund the construction of 50 hostel rooms to accommodate doctors.

Bangladesh: Dhaka tannery workers strike

Savar tannery estate workers in Hazaribagh area, Dhaka announced on September 1 that they would begin a campaign of demonstrations and a half-day strike to demand job security, accommodation and medical facilities. The Tannery Workers Union and the Bangladesh Labour Welfare Foundation called for an end to the "miserable situation" of the 600,000 tannery workers.

The tannery workers labour for 12 to 14 hours a day, seven days a week in hazardous conditions using harmful chemicals for less than \$2 a day. An experienced worker with 10 or more years on the job rarely earns more than \$150 a month.

India: Delhi nurses end two-day industrial action

Around 20,000 striking nurses from local government and central government hospitals in Delhi returned to work last Saturday night, after reaching an agreement with authorities.

The nurses walked out the previous day over salary and allowance issues. The Indian government immediately invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act, which bans strikes by government employees, and Delhi police began arresting nurses.

Following a late night meeting Saturday between the All India Government Nurses' Federation and health officials, the nurses were told that their demands will be put before the Union Ministry of Finance on September 12. They have been also assured that strikers would not be penalised, police charges dropped and the two-day walkout considered as leave.

Gujarat sanitation workers walk out

Over 600 contract sanitation workers from the Ahmedabad Municipal

Corporation (AMC), New West Zone have been on strike since August 22 to demand permanent jobs. The AMC has begun hiring strike-breaking contractors to remove hundreds of tonnes of garbage accumulating in the city.

A spokesman for the workers from the Gujarat Mazdoor Sabha (GMS) said that the sanitation workers would not return until their demands were accepted by the AMC.

Jharkhand contract teachers demand jobs

Contract teachers protested in Ranchi on September 5 against the scheduling of the Jharkhand Teachers Entrance Test (JTET), which is to be held on November 20. The teachers said that when the test was introduced in 2013, 11,000 qualified for employment but close to 4,000 have still not been given jobs. The teachers demanded that all those who previously qualified be recruited into positions before the next test.

Karnataka rural health workers protest

Anganwadi workers (rural health workers) and their assistants held demonstrations in several towns in Karnataka state last week to demand permanency, government employee status and an 18,000-rupee minimum monthly wage. The protests were organised by the Karnataka Rajya Anganwadi Karyakariyara Mathu Sahakiyara Federation.

Workers in Kalburagi went on a two-day hunger strike on Tuesday with the same demands and also called to for an end to the “punishment transfers” of militant anganwadi workers to distant centres. Anganwadi workers in Dharwad district held demonstrations on Thursday.

Uttarakhand nurses and midwives strike

Thousands of auxiliary nurse midwifery (ANM) workers in Uttarakhand took state-wide strike action on September 6 over the non-payment of salary increases and the filling of permanent posts. A representative from the ANMs’ union said that health department officials had given numerous assurances in the past but nothing had happened.

The ANMs want their grade pay, which had been reduced from 2,800 rupees a month to 2,000, increased to 4,200 rupees (\$US63) and 440 vacant positions filled. They also want 257 positions upgraded to Women Health Inspector posts. More than 8,000 ANMs are involved in the dispute.

Melbourne and Brisbane workers protest against brewery sackings and wage cuts

Thousands of workers marched in the central business districts (CBDs) in Melbourne, Victoria and Brisbane, Queensland on Thursday to denounce Carlton United Breweries’ termination of 55 maintenance workers in a dispute over a wage cut. Traffic came to a standstill during the marches.

Carlton United Breweries (CUB) outsourced its factory maintenance work at its Abbotsford plant to a new contractor Programmed Skilled in June, effectively sacking its entire maintenance workforce of 32 fitters and 22 electricians. Programmed Skilled offered to reemploy the workers, who are members of Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades Union, on the minimum safety net award rate, plus 50 cents—a total of just \$19.50 an hour. The impact on these 24 hours a day, 7 days a week maintenance workers amounted to a 65 percent reduction in real wages. The workers refused the offer and are maintaining a 24-hour picket at the plant.

Programmed Skilled used strike-breaking semi-skilled workers to maintain the plant’s machinery but production has declined by around 70 percent. Late last week the company announced that it was ending its contract with the giant brewing corporation.

While Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Electrical Trades officials told Thursday’s rallies that CUB must reemploy the sacked maintenance workers, the unions have refused to organise any industrial action over the wage- and job-cutting attacks. Union organisers insisted that none of the workers involved in the rallies were on strike but had “taken leave” to attend the protest.

Child care workers in Melbourne and Sydney stop work

At least four child care centres in Melbourne and one in Sydney closed early on Thursday afternoon after staff walked out to demand pay parity with their male counterparts. The walkout, the first in almost 20 years, was part of a national campaign for improved pay rates for early childhood educators. A case is currently underway in the Fair Work Commission for equal pay with men on similar qualifications.

Qualified educators are being paid as little as \$20 an hour (\$39,776 a year) and those with a diploma are paid a maximum of \$23.20 an hour (\$46,000 a year). United Voice union claimed that over 95 percent of the workforce in long-day care centres is female and that Australia currently has a 16.2 percent gender pay gap.

ABC workers to decide on strike action

Hundreds of staff at the state-funded Australian Broadcasting Corporation will begin voting on whether to begin industrial action in a dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. If endorsed, the campaign will involve 24-hour strikes and bans on the ABC website work and the booking of on-air guests.

The Community and Public Sector Union, which covers most ABC employees, says the strike action could begin within weeks. ABC journalists are members of the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance and on Wednesday that union applied to the Fair Work Commission for a ballot on a similar industrial campaign.

The CPSU has accused ABC management of attempting to axe basic rights and working conditions in exchange for a 6 percent pay rise over three years, a two-week increase in maternity leave and other issues in a proposed new agreement. The ABC wants the minimum call-out time for casual workers reduced from four to two hours.

ABC workers last walked out on strike over wages and conditions in 2006. Management, with the active support of both unions, have axed hundreds of jobs at the network over the past decade.

South Australian Catholic school teachers strike

Around 500 teachers at Catholic schools in South Australia stopped work for the afternoon on Thursday in a dispute over a proposed work agreement. The action, by members of the Independent Education Union, followed an industrial campaign that began with wearing of t-shirts and short stoppages at primary and high schools.

The teachers have accepted a new pay offer of a 2.5 percent annual increase over the next three years but want a cut in student contact time of 1.5 hours each week to bring them into line with public sector teachers. Catholic Education management claim that the teachers' demand is unaffordable.

New Zealand university workers vote on strike action

After three months of failed negotiations, Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members at the University of Auckland were voting this week on whether to strike in their dispute with the university over a proposed new work agreement. The strike ballot opened on Monday and closed on Friday.

The union claims that the university is using delaying tactics by refusing to negotiate on pay until after their budget is set in October. The TEU wants the university to discontinue its performance-based pay scheme—a system they claim only sees around nine percent of workers progress through the pay structure.



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