Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 June 2017

India: Kerala private hospital nurses on strike

Nurses in over 40 private hospitals in Thrissur district, Kerala walked out on an indefinite strike on Monday to demand a pay increase. A United Nurses Association (UNA) spokesperson warned that the strike would expand to include other districts in the state if planned talks with the government on June 27 fail. Emergency services are currently not affected.

Private hospital nurses are demanding equal wages with government hospital nurses. They complained that private hospital nurses with general nursing and midwifery qualifications get an average of 8,750 rupees ($US137) a month and graduate nurses 9,250 rupees, whereas government nurses are paid between 32,000 and 34,000 rupees at entry level. Some nurses said hospitals keep them as trainees indefinitely with a stipend of 6,500 rupees.

The UNA also demanded that the minimum wage for nurses be raised from the current level of 10,000 rupees a month to 20,000 rupees. Nurses rejected the Kerala Hospitals' Association offer to raise the minimum wage to 14,000 rupees a month.

Uber and Ola taxi drivers in Delhi strike

Around 70,000 apps-based taxi drivers of Uber and Ola in the Indian capital held a one-day strike on Monday to demand higher incentives and better working conditions. Delhi police stopped their protest march before it reached the rally point at Jantar Mantar in the city.

The strike was called by the Sarvodaya Drivers Association of Delhi (SDAD), which has more than 20,000 members and the 50,000-strong Delhi Taxi Tourist Transporters' Association (DTTTA). The unions have submitted a memo to the Indian prime minister, the transport minister and Delhi's chief minister. Monday's strike followed walkouts by these drivers in February and April.

Drivers want fares regulated by the government and increased from 6 to 20 rupees per kilometre and that they be paid the 25 percent commission that the cab companies collect for every booking. Their strike in February was called off after the government and apps-based operators falsely promised to resolve their grievances.

Kerala municipal waste management workers end walkout

Strike action by Kudumbasree workers who manage solid waste for the Kozhikode Municipal Corporation (KMC) ended on Tuesday after the corporation agreed to meet eight of their nine demands. Kudumbasree is a women's community organisation in Kerala. The workers were demanding safety equipment for working during the rainy season, resumption of their insurance scheme and to be made KMC employees.

A spokesman from the Kozhikode Jilla Kharamalinya Thozhilali Union said the corporation rejected the workers' demand to be recruited into the cleaning wing of the KMC but made a commitment to discuss the issue with state government.

Mumbai bus drivers strike

About 42,000 workers from BEST, Mumbai's metropolitan bus company, struck on June 22 over unpaid wages. BEST was forced to pay overdue wages in March after workers threatened to strike for their pay.

The latest walkout was because the company refused to fully implement a court order directing it to pay overdue wages by June 20. According to the drivers' union, BEST only paid 50 percent of the wages. A company spokesman told the media that it had no funds to pay the wages.

Andhra Pradesh municipal sanitation workers protest

A large group of workers, representing over 3,400 fellow contract employees of the Greater Visakhapatnam Municipal Corporation (GVMC), demonstrated outside the corporation's headquarters on June 13 against management plans to hand over sanitation services to a private operator. Sanitation, water supply, lighting and park workers, drivers and contract workers were involved in the demonstration.

The GVMC Contract Workers' Union claimed that the corporation had reduced the sanitation workforce from 4,000 to 3,400 while the city population had grown to 2 million. The union has threatened that if the corporation does not withdraw its privatisation plan there would be indefinite strike action.

Pakistan: Punjab brick-kiln workers fight for minimum wage

Brick-kiln workers in Toba Tek Singh, Punjab province, demonstrated outside the district labour office on June 15 to demand payment of the mandated minimum wage of 1,036 rupees for 1,000 bricks ($US9.88). According to the Pakistan Bhatta Mazdoor Union, kiln owners refuse to abide by the law and pay as little as 600 rupees per 1,000 bricks. The

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union said it would maintain the campaign if the government failed to enforce the minimum wage.

The politically influential and wealthy kiln owners, who often use bonded and child labour, regularly mobilise thugs to attack protests by the poorly-paid workers.

Gujranwala library employees walk out

Employees of government-run Jinnah and Sheikh Din Muhammad libraries in Gujranwala, Punjab locked down the facilities on Tuesday after several days of protests demanding overdue wages. The workers have not been paid for six months.

The unpaid wages are the result of ongoing budget cuts by the Pakistan government to state and local authorities in response to International Monetary Fund austerity demands.

Punjab teachers reject new conditions for pay rise

Teachers at the government-run District Public School in Kasur, Punjab rallied at the school and marched to the Kasur deputy commissioner's office on Monday in protest against the imposition of conditions placed on teachers to receive a pay increase.

School authorities are demanding that teachers sit for a written test before they receive a pay increase. The individual test results would then be used to determine the percentage pay increase a teacher was entitled to. Teachers allege that the test, which includes questions outside of the subjects they teach, is designed to fail many of them. They want the test withdrawn and said they will continue protesting until their demand for a 20 percent pay increase was accepted.

Burmese factory workers strike

Over 1,000 workers from the Chinese-owned Worldwide Value Backpack factory in Shwe Linn Ban Industrial Zone in Yangon walked off the job on Monday and demonstrated outside the factory over wages and conditions. Their action followed two days of failed negotiations in which workers had 13 demands that included double pay on Sunday, shorter hours on Saturday and days off as per the labour law.

Employees have to work from 8 a.m. to 7:30 p.m., Monday to Friday, and until 6:30pm Saturdays. They told the media that they work on Sundays because they are being sacked if they don't. The strikers also want an increase in the basic wage, the use of proper time sheets, provision of a factory cleaner and air conditioning.

Nepalese temporary teachers protest

Five leaders of the United Temporary Teachers Central Struggle Committee began a hunger strike in Nepal's capital Kathmandu on June 16 to demand permanency for temporary teachers. Teachers objected to the recent vacancy announcement by the Teachers Service Commission, which did not offer postings to all temporary teachers.

The hunger strikers said that over 30,000 teachers across Nepal were hired on a temporary basis, some of whom have worked in their positions for 25 years.

Victoria: Unions at CHH plywood mill close down dispute

Unions covering over 200 locked out employees at the Carter Holt Harvey plywood factory at Myrtleford in Victoria's northeast have recommended that the workers accept the company's inferior enterprise agreement.

Members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Electrical Trades Union of Australia (ETU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU), were locked out on April 19 after planning to begin rolling stoppages and overtime bans.

While the unions, who had been in 12 months of negotiations with the company, denounced the lockout they isolated the workers and directed union members at CHH's plants in Tumut and Morwell to keep working.

The unions had sought a 3 percent pay rise annually over three years, one week's annual leave allowable in the Christmas holiday period, and better access to income protection insurance. The company wanted one nationwide agreement for all its sites and had imposed a 2 percent pay increase at its Tumut and Morwell mills.

One day after another round of failed negotiations in the Fair Work Commission, the unions announced on Thursday that they would call off industrial action and recommend workers return to work for Friday's morning shift. The unions said they were prepared to accept the company's 2 percent pay increase offer and reduce back-pay claims with workers voting yesterday and today on the previously rejected work agreement.

Construction workers hold mass rallies in Australian capital cities

Tens of thousands of construction workers rallied in Australia's six state capitals on Tuesday to protest against the Turnbull government's revival of the anti-democratic Australian Building and Construction Commission and associated repressive building industry laws. The "National Day of Action" rallies were called by the CFMEU and other building unions, representing about 20,000 workers in Melbourne, 6,000 in Sydney, 4,000 in Brisbane and hundreds in other state capitals.

The rallies are part of an ongoing campaign by Australian unions aimed at blaming the Liberal-National Turnbull government for falling living standards, cuts in penalty pay rates and increasing social inequality, whilst covering the opposition Labor Party's involvement in this assault and calling for the election of Labor governments.

Queensland power station workers threaten industrial action

The CFMEU threatened to begin a campaign of industrial action yesterday at the state-owned Kogan Creek Power Station, in south-west Queensland. The union, which covers over 100 workers at the power station, is in dispute with its operator, CS Energy. Negotiations have been ongoing since January.

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CS Energy has offered 3 percent annual pay increases over three years, along with slight improvements in entitlements, such as travel allowance, bonuses and leave. The CFMEU says that under the proposed agreement employees will only be paid “time worked” rather than the full overtime rate.

The union has made clear that proposed industrial action would be limited to back-of-house stoppages which will not interrupt power supplies from the plant.

Victorian oil workers protest over new contracts

Oil production workers at Esso’s onshore facilities in Victoria and offshore platforms in Bass Strait have set up a protest camp outside Exxon-Mobil’s Longford gas plant in Victoria to oppose changes to maintenance contracts. The new contracts could reduce wages by 30 percent and see the loss of long established working conditions.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers’ Union (AWU) organised the picket.

Esso recently awarded a five-year maintenance contract to UGL, but according to the union workers were told that they had to sign up with MTCT Services, a UGL subsidiary, at significantly lower wages or risk losing their jobs.

The unions claim that 200 workers face redundancy and were being offered reemployment with MTCT with pay cuts between 15 and 30 percent. The new contract also allows MTCT to introduce two-week fly-in, fly-out rosters as opposed to the current seven-day rosters.

Australian defence department workers accept inferior pay deal

Federal government employees at the 17,000-strong Department of Defence voted this week to accept a new enterprise agreement. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) claimed the agreement was a minor improvement on the three previous proposals rejected by the workers.

Professionals Australia, another union representing the civilian defence department, declared that the new deal was “a bad agreement from a deeply flawed process” which “reduces workplace rights and does not provide fair wage adjustments.”

Over 4,000 federal public servants at the Department of Agriculture accepted a similar offer last week. It included a 6 percent pay rise over three years in return for productivity gains and stricter control over sick-leave.

The majority of the 160,000 federal public servants have been in dispute with the Liberal-National government for more than three years over proposed new work agreements. Federal public sector workers at the Australian Taxation Office and the Prime Minister’s Department were voting on work agreements in ballots that ended Friday.

Prior to this week, nearly 75 percent had rejected the government’s multiple offers. They have not had a pay increase since the last agreement expired three years ago. The government has demanded all annual wage increases for federal public sector workers be capped at 2 percent and that these be combined with cuts in benefits or working conditions and without any back-pay from the previous agreement.

New Zealand power transformer workers strike

Some 180 workers at Etel Ltd, a power transformer manufacturing company in Auckland, struck work on June 16 and 17 in a dispute over a pay rise. Their union, the E tu, and the company have been in negotiations for over six months. The workers, who are paid between $17 and $18.80 an hour, want the official Living Wage of $20.20 and a skills-based pay scale.

Etel has offered a $0.40 an hour increase which workers have rejected, pointing out that Etel’s parent company Unison recently agreed to pay its workers a 5 percent increase over two years. The company and E tu resumed negotiations this week.

American Samoa hospital workers apply bans

Medical staff at the LBJ Hospital in American Samoa, a US territory in the South Pacific Ocean, have stopped all after-hours and weekend radiology services until the hospital ends mandatory cuts to staff working hours.

A spokesman from the imaging department said the ban will remain in place until management resumes the payment of all staff for their full 80-hour pay period and for overtime. Earlier this year, the government cut public servants’ fortnightly work schedule by 10 hours.

US President Donald Trump’s proposed budget cuts to the Office of Insular Affairs announced in May will reduce aid funding to American Samoa by $1.2 million or five percent per year. Much of this assistance goes towards education and health.

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