

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 July 2017

Asia

Hong Kong newspaper journalists protest

Journalists from the Hong Kong-based tabloid *Apple Daily*, published by Next Media, demonstrated outside the company's Tseung Kwan O headquarters on July 5 over management cost cutting plans. The action followed the sacking of two long-serving staff members in the finance section without notice on June 29.

Apple Daily told workers it planned to dismiss editorial employees and rehire them as freelancers and contractors. Several employees from the newspaper were asked to leave the company by the end of last month and become contractors or freelancers under contracts lasting from six to 12 months. Some departments and teams were also encouraged to form their own companies to work for Next Media under a sub-contracting system.

The Hong Kong Journalists Association, in anticipation of making a deal with management, urged members not to accept the outsourcing arrangement, "at this stage."

Taiwan railway workers demonstrate

About 20 members of the Taiwan Railway Union protested outside the ministry of labour in Taipei on June 30 to demand the minister stop railway workers from being disciplined for taking what they claimed was a legal holiday over the Lunar New Year. Over 330 workers are affected.

A union spokesman said they were being wrongly disciplined by the Taiwan Railway Authority for not complying with a shift schedule which the union considered illegal. "If we do not have any right to reject overtime, we are slaves, not workers," he said.

India: Kerala government hospital nurses on strike

Nurses from state government hospitals in Thiruvananthapuram, Thrissur, Ernakulam, Malappuram and Kozhikode have been on strike since June 28 for a wage rise. The monthly minimum wage for nurses was set in 2013 at 9,500 rupees (\$US148). Nurses claimed that most hospitals are paying below the minimum wage, which they want increased to 20,000 rupees.

The Indian Nurses Association (INA) and United Nurses Association (UNA) said a state-wide one-day strike is planned for July 11 involving 80,000 nurses, who will march to the government secretariat with their demands. Some nurses from the INA are already on a hunger strike. A UNA spokesperson said private hospital nurses would soon join the strike.

UNA members from 40 private hospitals in Thrissur district walked out on June 19 demanding minimum pay on par with government hospital nurses. They complained that some hospitals keep them as trainees indefinitely with a stipend of 6,500 rupees a month.

A striking nurse told the media "We have no option now. Even if we starve to death we have decided that we will fight this to the end because we cannot survive on this meagre salary in today's world." The Kerala industrial relations committee is to decide on the nurses' demands on July 20.

Tamil Nadu auto parts factory workers protest

A group of Pricol auto-parts manufacturing workers in Chennai demonstrated at the company's Chepauk plant on June 30 to oppose disciplinary action imposed on 840 employees. Pricol withheld eight days' pay from each worker for participating in a one-day strike in April in support of demands by local farmers.

Twenty-two workers began a hunger strike on June 25 over the issue with six still continuing the protest. The June 30 demonstration was supported by several workers' and farmers' organisations. A protest outside the state secretariat in Chennai was moved to Chepauk after police intervened and began arresting demonstrators.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa health workers protest

Lady Health Workers (LHW) in Karak, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province demonstrated outside the district health office on Monday to demand a conveyance allowance and distribution of unpaid salaries. The LHW program provides essential health services throughout rural Pakistan and poorer areas of cities where proper health facilities are not available.

Workers said their job required a lot of travel for which they received no compensation. They also complained that their monthly salary was just 7,000 rupees (\$US64.75) and demanded the payment of arrears outstanding since their jobs were made permanent following a court order in 2012.

The protest was called off after the district health officer agreed to take their demands to the provincial government.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa salt mine workers strike again

Salt and gypsum mine workers in Karak district walked off the job on Monday to demand compensation for the death of a co-worker and another who was seriously injured in a mining accident. Workers said frequent accidents have cost many lives and serious injuries. They complained that while the mine owners and government avoid paying compensation they repeatedly ignore workers' demands for adequate safety equipment.

Their action followed a 24-hour strike in May over the same issues. They also called for marriage and death grants for workers' sons and daughters, accurate identity records of workers on duty in the mines, frequent mine inspections and age benefit cards. Workers also struck in December over the same issues.

A long-standing complaint was that there were no ambulance facilities at the Karak mines and that access roads were in disrepair, causing delays in getting injured workers to hospital.

Punjab hospital workers protest

Medical staff, including doctors, nurses, paramedics and others at the DHQ Teaching Hospital in Sahiwal, Punjab province demonstrated at the hospital for several days this week over the suspension of 72 staff for taking leave during Eid holidays. The suspension order impacted eight doctors, 14 nurses and 50 other workers. Workers also protested against late night inspections of the female doctors' hostel and advanced other long-pending demands.

Hospital authorities have frequently used administrative measures to intimidate health workers who have been constantly demanding a service structure, allowances and permanent jobs. The protest was organised by a joint action committee comprising the Young Doctors Association (YDA), Young Nurses Association, Pakistan Paramedical Staff Association and Sahiwal Paramedical Staff Association.

A YDA spokesman said the protesters were also demanding a better teaching environment, proper facilities in the emergency, pathology, pharmacy and radiology departments, additional staff to cope with increasing numbers of patients, an end to oppressive behaviour by management, especially against female doctors, and improvement in security.

Bangladeshi garment workers demonstrated

Several hundred workers from SHB Garments in Khilgaon Chowdhury Para, Dhaka protested outside the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association's office on Monday over the sudden closure of their factory. Workers said they returned from Eid vacation to find their factory shuttered and a management notice on the gate saying the plant was closed for renovations.

Workers demanded their legal termination entitlements and back pay or that the factory be reopened. Some workers had been at the factory for ten years. A recent media report claimed that over 2,800 workers in Bangladesh's readymade garments sector were terminated in the first three months of 2017.

Australia and the Pacific

Victoria: Locked out CHH plywood mill workers forced onto inferior pay deal

The ten-week company lockout of workers at the Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) plywood mill at Myrtleford was lifted on July 2 after a majority of the company's 200 workforce accepted a management enterprise agreement. A previous vote in early June rejected the same wage deal, 97 to 86. Last Saturday's ballot voted 111 "yes" to 70 "no" on the same offer.

The workers, consisting of Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Electrical Trades Union of Australia (ETU) and Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union (AMWU) members and 56 non-union employees, accepted 2 percent annual pay increases over three years back-dated to April last year.

The workers were locked out on April 19 after planning to take limited industrial action, including rolling stoppages and overtime bans. The unions' original claim was for 3 percent annual pay increases, one week's annual leave allowable in the Christmas holiday period and better access to income protection insurance.

The locked out workers who were maintaining a picket outside the Myrtleford plant were isolated by the unions, whose members at CHH mills at Tumut and Morwell remained working. Last week the unions told the company that they would drop their claim for a 3 percent annual pay increase over three years and accept the company's 2 percent offer, and reduce back-pay claims.

Western Australian university workers protest

Over 100 Murdoch University employees demonstrated outside the Fair Work Commission (FWC) in Perth on Tuesday over an application by the university to tear up its existing enterprise agreement covering over 3,500 academic and administration staff. The FWC began hearing the university's case on Tuesday.

If successful the university could legally justify cuts to superannuation, annual leave, redundancy agreements and employer-provided parental leave, and future salaries with some wages slashed by up to 39 percent.

Murdoch University's existing agreement expired on 30 June 2016. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and university have been in negotiations over a new agreement since April last year.

The university made an application to the FWC in December for termination of the existing agreement and force workers onto the inferior industry award.

The NTEU responded with a half-day walkout and rally and a so-called Murdoch Fighting Fund. No further industrial action has been organised. Instead, the NTEU has called on the university to resume negotiations and indicated its willingness to do a deal. A union representative has said that the union has agreed to 12 of the claims demanded by university management and is willing to negotiate on 13 others.

Victorian grain-handlers vote on industrial action

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members in Victoria have begun

voting on what form of industrial action they will take in their dispute over a proposed enterprise agreement with GrainCorp. The ballot asks workers to agree to a series of stoppages of varying duration and some bans on overtime, the spread of hours worked and staggered lunch breaks.

An AWU spokesman alleged that GrainCorp management, after demanding a pay freeze, is now offering increases of 1.8 percent a year combined with removal of a provision banning forced redundancies and wants to pay casuals and labour hire workers less than the permanent workforce.

The grain-handlers are employed at sites in the Western District, Central Victoria, the North East, the Southern Mallee and the Wimmera.

Spanish diplomatic staff in Sydney on strike

Eight workers at the Spanish consulate-general in Sydney walked off the job last month after the Spanish government refused to pass on a 3.3 percent pay increase ordered by the Fair Work Commission as an increase to Australia's minimum wage. Workers said their wages have been frozen for nine years.

The workers, who are permanent residents in Australia, met with the director of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Sydney during the week seeking assistance. Most services at the consulate-general have been halted as a result of the strike.

Similar strikes are occurring at Spain's embassy in Argentina and at embassies, consulates and trade commissions in North America and Europe.

New Caledonian nickel smelter workers end strike

Seventy union members at the SLN smelting plant in New Caledonia's capital Noumea, ended a week-long strike on Monday. They walked out on June 26 demanding transparency in the company's performance plans and reinstatement of six fellow workers sacked allegedly for "serious misbehaviour." Details of the agreement to end the dispute have not been released.



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