

Over 400,000 West Bengal tea plantation workers strike; Alcoa workers walkout in Western Australia

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 August 2018

**India: Over 400,000 West Bengal tea plantation workers strike for pay rise**

More than 400,000 tea plantation workers began a three-day strike on August 7 in West Bengal's Darjeeling district to demand a pay rise from the government and the plantation owners.

The mainly women workers want a combined 20 percent or 39 paise (about 50 US cents) increase in their minimum daily pay rates. The current minimum daily wage for Darjeeling tea plantation workers is 169 rupees (\$2.46). The 20 percent raise would increase it to 203 rupees.

The tea plantation workers are covered by various union bodies, including the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions and Congress-affiliated Indian Trade Union Congress, which have formed a Joint Forum organisation.

The Joint Forum, which began negotiations early last month, threatened to strike between July 23 and 25. It called off the planned action after being told it could meet with West Bengal Labour Minister Moloy Ghatak on July 30 to discuss the wage claim. This meeting did not occur and future negotiations collapsed after employers only offered 17 paise.

The current minimum daily wage for tea plantation workers in nearby Assam state is 351 rupees, double that in Darjeeling.

**Andhra Pradesh midday meal workers arrested**

Hundreds of midday meal workers, who prepare lunches at government funded schools, were arrested by police on August 6 after they attempted to hold a protest in Vijayawada, the state's capital region.

About 3,000 midday meal workers travelled to the city to demand the government pay outstanding monthly salaries and cancel plans to privatise midday meal services throughout the state.

Dozens of police vans were used to transport the arrested women to police cells in Unguturu, Gannavaram, Ibrahimpatnam, Vuyyur, Thotlavallur and other police stations in the densely populated city.

The workers are members of the Mid-Day Meals Scheme Workers Union, which is affiliated to the Centre for Indian Trade Unions. Workers have warned that over 80,000 jobs will be destroyed if the privatisation plans are adopted.

**Pakistan: Hyderabad health workers demand dues**

Lady Health Workers program employees demonstrated on August 1 in Hyderabad, in Pakistan's Sindh province, to demand outstanding dues. The government has failed to pay monthly wages, arrears from previous wage increases, bonuses and payments for election duties in last month's general elections.

The workers blocked a major city road for more than two hours before the All Sindh Lady Health Workers and Employees Union (ASLHWEU) called off the demonstration when authorities promised to resolve the issue. The ASLHWEU later demanded the government grant workers' demands within 15 day or face an indefinite protest campaign.

A statement issued by the union said that 24,000 employees of the program did not have a service structure, which prevented them receiving regular salaries or other benefits awarded to government employees.

**Hong Kong cleaners strike**

Over 300 cleaners walked out on strike on Monday in protest against harsh working conditions and the sacking of elderly employees.

The strikers are employed by Lapco, a private cleaning contractor used by the government. The strike began with 100 workers from the Shui Wo Market in Kwun Tong. They were joined by other cleaners who struck at eight other waste handling sites. Workers said they were denied meal breaks by the government's Food and Environmental Hygiene Department and struggled to stay hydrated in stifling conditions.

**Hong Kong maids demand better conditions**

Around 30 workers protested outside Hong Kong's Labour Department offices on Tuesday for wage increases. During an annual meeting with authorities, maids' organisations called for the doubling of their food allowance and a 24.7 percent increase in their monthly wage to HK\$5,500.

Hong Kong employers with maids living in their residences are required by law to give them either a separate food allowance, or some form of provisions. One worker complained that she was being provided with five-

day old food from her employer's fridge.

### **Thailand vendors protest eviction from popular tourist venues**

Scores of street vendors in Bangkok have participated in protests over the past week against government attempts to remove them from tourist hotspots. A ban was recently placed on vendors on the sidewalks of Khao San Road, which has substantial tourist traffic.

Government officials are strictly enforcing the new regulations. Authorities are also removing shanties along the Chao Phraya River to build a promenade, and earlier this year forced out a community of more than 300 people near an historic fort. The vendors, overwhelmingly poor and with no land rights, have no official channels for recourse.

### **Myanmar workers protest over unpaid benefits**

Workers from May Kaung wood factory in Pyi Gyi Tagon township in Myanmar's Mandalay city demonstrated last week to demand unpaid incentives and benefits. The main gate of the factory was blocked by the protest.

Workers said they were owed payments for regular attendance, along with incremental and competency-based wage benefits and workplace healthcare allowances. Workers said their calls for the government to intervene had been ignored or rebuffed.

### **South Korean delivery drivers protest dress code**

McDelivery motorcycle riders demonstrated outside the company's national headquarters in Jongno, Seoul on Monday. They were protesting a company dress code, which requires them to wear jeans, including in sweltering summer heat. They also called for wage increases.

Protesters held banners reading "The Coke is delivered cold but the delivery man melts on the way." They called for an extra 100 won for each successful delivery. Currently workers are given an additional 400 won for each delivery. Workers have been agitating for their demands since late last month.

### **Alcoa workers strike to defend conditions in Western Australia**

Around 1,500 workers at aluminium company Alcoa began indefinite strike action in Western Australia on Wednesday in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise agreement. Negotiations began in December 2016.

While the company told the media this week that it had contingency plans to ensure production continues, the walkout is impacting on operations at the company's refineries in Kwinana and Wagerup and at its Huntly and Willowdale bauxite mines.

The industrial action followed an application by Alcoa for the federal government's Fair Work industrial tribunal to allow it to terminate the current work agreement. If this is granted, workers could be forced on to

the base award with far inferior pay and working conditions.

The Australian Workers Union (AWU) says there has been no agreement on job security. Union officials have admitted that they have offered "concessions" to the company.

### **Cairns airport security workers protest job losses**

Security workers employed by Danish-based contractor ISS protested at Cairns airport in Queensland last Tuesday, after being told they will lose their jobs at the end of this month. The company has lost the contract to provide security at Cairns and Mackay airports.

ISS told the 100 workers, who are members of United Voice Union, that they can apply for employment with the new contractor. Even if successful, they will be regarded as new employees and placed on probation. Accrued entitlements would not be transferable.

ISS is a global company operating in more than 70 countries, employing around half a million people worldwide. In 2017 the revenue value of its global operations stood at almost \$AUS17 billion.

### **New Zealand: Secondary school teachers union begins negotiations for new contract**

On Tuesday the Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) began talks with the Ministry of Education for a new contract for secondary school teachers that expires on October 27. Meetings with union members were held during May and June earlier this year.

Secondary teachers want a 15 percent pay rise over one year, more non-contact time, allowances for teachers who live in cities with expensive accommodation costs, and new roles to liaise with Māori and Pacific Island communities.

The government has already ruled out the demands of the teachers. Minister of Education Chris Hipkins described the demands as "unreasonable." PPTA president Jack Boyle told the media that secondary teachers are willing to strike but said that the union hopes negotiations will prevent a walkout.

### **New Zealand education support specialists vote on strike**

Learning support specialists voted this week on whether or not to strike on August 21. The vote closes on Monday at 6 p.m. Specialists include psychologists, speech therapists and early intervention teachers.

The New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI) says their members' workloads are "overwhelming." Union members have rejected a current government offer of a 2 percent increase on the day of ratification and a further 2 percent next September. Primary school teachers, also represented by the NZEI, voted to strike in July and recently voted to extend their strike from 3 to 24 hours.

### **New Zealand quarry workers locked out**

Fourteen workers at Atlas Quarry in Northland were locked out from August 6 to August 12 after striking on August 2. The quarry employees are only paid \$20 an hour, around \$4 less than the industry standard wage. The company's drivers work up to 88 hours a week.

First Union, which has negotiated with management for 10 months, says it has only presented a slight variation on a previous wage offer.

### **Māori TV workers strike for 24 hours**

Workers at New Zealand's state-owned Māori TV station went on strike for higher pay on Wednesday. The channel primarily broadcasts in the Māori language. According to Joe Gallagher from the E tū union, around 35 five people, which included workers and supporters, picketed the studio.

E tū has been negotiating a new pay deal with Maori TV for months. Workers rejected a management offer made last week and have criticised management for awarding non-union members a pay rise and a Christmas bonus last year.



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