

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 September 2018

Asia

India: Odisha waterfront workers demand better pay

A mass sit-down by hundreds of Odisha Stevedores Limited (OSL) workers at Paradip port intensified on September 1 when protesters began a hunger strike. The waterfront workers are demanding a wage rise, promotions and payment of outstanding Employee Provident Fund (EPF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI) benefits.

The workers are members of the Paradip Karmachari Milita Manch (PKMM) union and employed by a range of different stevedoring agencies and equipment suppliers. During the hunger strike one of the workers had to be hospitalised after his condition deteriorated.

The action began on August 23 and 24 when port helpers staged a demonstration and stalled cargo operations at the busy port. OSL administration responded by banning the action and Odisha state police arrested a PKMM official. Following his arrest, operators, supervisors and mechanics from other stevedoring agencies joined the protest.

India: Chandigarh electrical workers protest against unsafe conditions

Hundreds of electrical workers in Chandigarh, the joint capital of Haryana and Punjab states, demonstrated on September 1 to demand proper safety conditions and an end to the company's hire-and-fire policy. The protest was called by the Electrical Workmen's Union who chanted slogans and burnt effigies of the Chandigarh city management.

Workers denounced the management's lax attitude towards workers' safety, staff shortages, inadequate equipment and management failure to pay a 7 percent pay increase due to outsourced employees since in April this year.

Bangladesh garment employees demand reinstatement

Up to 5,000 garment workers in Dhaka protested on August 30 to demand reinstatement of sacked fellow employees. The workers, who were from garment factories from across the city, blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway in Uttara, a Dhaka suburb.

Top Jeans Factory employees began protesting outside their factory in Uttar Khan and were later joined by other garment workers.

Demonstrators called off their action after representatives from the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association claimed they would reinstate the sacked workers by September 1.

On September 3, another group of garment workers demonstrated in the Bangladesh capital for their minimum monthly wage to be increased to 16,000 (\$US190).

The protest, which was organised by Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati, a 12-member coalition, was held outside the National Press Club.

The Bangladesh Garment Sramik Sanghati presented a report to the minimum wage board, which pointed out garment employees worked 28 hours more a month than is legally allowed under Bangladesh's labour laws. The current minimum monthly wage of a garment worker is \$64.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian industrial tribunal suspends crane workers' strike

Last week, the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) called off a strike by crane workers at Boom logistics after the Fair Work Commission (FWC) ordered a return to work within hours of the action beginning.

Workers at Boom's Carrington, Singleton and Port Kembla yards in New South Wales had voted for industrial action in a

dispute over a new enterprise work agreement. Boom successfully applied to the FWC for interim orders suspending the industrial action on the grounds that the union was pattern bargaining, i.e., negotiating for similar claims across a number of different employers.

Pattern bargaining is illegal under the Fair Work industrial legislation, which was introduced under the former federal Labor government with the support of the unions. It restricts bargaining to specific workers within a single enterprise.

The company is offering a 15 percent pay increase over three years for Carrington workers and 13 percent at Singleton and Port Kembla. It is demanding a reduction in hard-won working conditions, including changes to shift times. Boom workers have not had a pay increase in five years and currently work a 56-hour, 6-day week. The CFMMEU has indicated it would not consider resuming industrial action unless the FWC lifted its interim order.

Racing New South Wales threatens lock out

Racing New South Wales has threatened to lock out its forensic laboratory technicians if they proceed with industrial action that could impact on lucrative Spring Carnival horse racing events.

The 12 technicians at the Australian Racing Forensic Laboratory have applied to the Fair Work Commission for a ballot on industrial action in a dispute for a new work agreement. The company has locked out its employees for weeks during previous disputes.

The last agreement expired in 2016 with the technicians' wages effectively frozen since. Racing New South Wales is only offering a total 5.5 percent pay increase over three years. The wage rise, which is below the current 2.1 percent inflation rate, is conditional on workers accepting a reduction in redundancy benefits. Last year, Racing New South Wales reported a profit of \$6.2 million.

CHEP workers continue strike action in New Zealand

After striking on August 27, around 50 workers at Christchurch's CHEP pallet plant walked out from 2 p.m. August 30 until the morning of September 1. The workers then voted unanimously to strike again from 2 p.m. last Tuesday until September 9.

CHEP workers' starting rate is \$16.56, six cents above the minimum wage. Most of the workers only earn between \$17 and \$18 an hour.

First Union claims that the workers wanted an increase of at least \$1.50. The union noted that even with this increase, Christchurch workers would still be working for less than their colleagues doing the same job in the company's Auckland branch. First Union has urged CHEP to accept this low pay increase, declaring that it assists the company and only amounts to about three days of one month's profit for the company.

New Zealand ministry of justice workers to vote on strike action

Almost 2,000 workers at the ministry of justice are currently voting on whether to strike on September 19 after pay negotiations stalled. The ministry offered a pay increase of 5 percent over two years. The Public Services Association, which covers the workers, has called for 13 percent over two years.

PSA national secretary Erin Polaczuk told Radio New Zealand on September 5 that the ministry of justice workers had "the third-lowest average salary in the public sector" last year and that female staff at the ministry earn 15 percent less than male staff. The average pay gap in the public sector is 12 percent.

The PSA have limited the scope of the dispute to closing the pay gap rather than lifting overall wages. The strike, if it goes ahead, will be for two hours. The action is similar to limited walk-outs by thousands of Inland Revenue and Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment workers earlier this year. Those disputes have still not been resolved.

New Zealand: South Auckland bus drivers' strike

Over 30 Ritchies bus drivers working in the impoverished working-class suburbs of South Auckland walked out on August 30, their third strike this year. The drivers are demanding a pay increase, an end to split shifts, and continuous shifts of up to 14 hours.

First Union has dragged out negotiations with the company for over two years, providing the company with a de facto wage freeze. Auckland Transport noted that the 74 cancelled bust trips amounted to less than 1 percent of the trips run throughout the city.



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