Half a million Indian coal workers strike; New South Wales coal miners fight for higher pay; Fenner Dunlop strike continues in Australia

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

28 September 2019

Half a million Indian coal workers walk out over privatisation

Up to half a million coal miners and related workers from the government-owned Coal India (CIL) and Singareni Collieries held a one-day strike on September 24 to oppose the Modi government's move to fully privatise these companies and allow 100 percent foreign ownership.

Media reports said the strike brought production at CIL, which accounts for nearly 80 percent of the country's total coal output, to a halt at nearly 600 sites in over 82 mining areas across the country.

At least 270,000 permanent and 200,000 contract workers participated in the 24-hour protest action, which was called by the Indian National Mineworkers' Federation (INTUC), Hind Khadan Mazdoor Federation, Centre of Indian Trade Unions, All India Coal Workers' Federation (AICWF) and the All India Trade Union Congress to dissipate the growing anger of coal workers whose jobs are threatened by the government's plans.

Indian railway workers demonstrate in Hubballi

Railway workers marched in Hubballi, Karnataka on September 19 in protest against the Modi government's planned privatisation of the national rail services. The demonstration was organised by South Western Railway Mazdoor Union in response to the All India Railwaymen's Federation's "Warning Week" from September 16 to 19.

Marchers called for improved bonuses, working conditions and demanded the government end all moves towards privatisation and corporatisation of the Indian Railways.

Tamil Nadu construction workers hold sit-down demonstration

Tamil Nadu All India Trade Union Congress Construction Labourers Association members staged a sit down protest on September 24 against the Indian government's attacks on social welfare.

The Indian government wants to eliminate welfare and other benefits won by workers from the unorganised sector of the construction industry. A similar demonstration was held on the same day by the members of All India Trade Union Congress outside the Labour Welfare Office in Erode, Tamil Nadu.

Uttar Pradesh ambulance drivers strike over wages and staff shortages

Drivers from the 102 and 108 ambulance services in Bareilly and Pilibhit in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh went on strike on September 23 against staff shortages and for improved pay. Around 88 government ambulances in Bareilly and 50 in Pilibhit were grounded by the strike.

The strike ended after GVK EMRE, the private firm operating the ambulance service, accepted most of the drivers' demands, including revival of their payroll system with a 12 percent annual increase in their salary.

ESI hospital workers protest in Telangana

ESI hospital employees protested outside Nacharam ESI hospital on September 24 to demand payment of outstanding wages. The workers said hospital officials were ignoring their demands. Outsourced employees, including sanitation and security workers, as well as technicians and nursing staff joined the demonstration.

Accredited Social Health Activist workers demonstrate in Bhupalpally

Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers protested outside the state Collectorate in Bhupalpally, Telangana on September 24 over unpaid wages and the government's failure to increase pay rates.

The state government, which promised during the elections to pay them 7,500 rupees ($US106) per month, was still paying between them 4,000 and 6,000 rupees. Protestors have pointed out that ASHA workers in

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Andhra Pradesh received 10,000 rupees per month. They threatened to strike if the government continues to ignore their demands.

Pakistani health workers oppose hospital restructuring

Medical staff and workers from the government-run Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences marched from the facility to the National Press Club in Islamabad on Monday in protest against the government's PIMS Reforms Act, 2019 which aims to place the institute under a board of governors.

The All Employees PIMS Restorations Movement, which called the demonstration, is demanding the government immediately withdraw the Act. It claims that the government, which is under pressure from the International Monetary Fund, plans to privatise the institute.

Earlier protests in March were ended by the All Employees PIMS Restorations Movement after the Pakistani government promised to review its proposal for a board of governors.

Islamabad sanitary workers strike over unpaid salaries

Sanitary workers returned to work on September 19, after a five-day strike which brought garbage collections to a halt in Islamabad. The workers were demanding five months' unpaid salaries. The industrial action ended after authorities promised to release two months' salaries within days.

Islamabad garbage collection has been outsourced to the Capital Development Authority (CDA) and the Metropolitan Corporation of Islamabad (MCI). Under this regime, workers are employed on a daily-wage basis and paid as little as 12,500 rupees ($US79.95) per month.

The salaries had not been paid for because the Pakistani government had failed to release funds to the contracting companies during this time.

Vietnamese garment workers down tools over canteen food

Around 6,000 workers from the Panko Group garment factory in the Tam Thang Industrial Zone of South Central Vietnam downed tools on September 17 and demonstrated outside the factory's main office after finding maggots in food served at the canteen. The strike followed a similar incident on September 7. Workers demanded that the food supplier be changed.

Strikers did not resume work until the next day after local authorities met with management who agreed to clean up the canteen and provide better quality meals.

Victoria: Strike at Fenner Dunlop enters third week

Fifty workers from the conveyor system manufacturer Fenner Dunlop in Melbourne remain on strike after walking out indefinitely on September 16. National Union of Workers (NUW) members are striking for a new enterprise agreement and have established a picket line at the company's factory in Footscray.

The NUW members complained that their wages are so low that they have to work a 60-hour week to get a decent wage. According to the NUW, Fenner Dunlop offered a pay increase in return for cuts to conditions and a loss of roster flexibility. The company is owned by multinational Michelin Group.

OI Glass workers continue sixth months of industrial action

Industrial action by 100 maintenance workers at the Brisbane and Melbourne factories of multinational glass manufacturer OI Glass has entered its sixth month. Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members imposed an indefinite ban on overtime, communication with contractors and 24 hours on-24 hours off stoppages in April, which they maintained for three months.

Workers are maintaining bans and holding a picket every Friday outside the factories. Management has responded by docking workers' pay by up to 55 percent and threatening to lock them out and terminate their agreement, forcing them onto the inferior industry award.

According to the unions, workers have not had a real pay increase for seven years. The existing agreement expired in February. Workers want the new three-year agreement to retain existing conditions, with a 3 percent annual pay increase and minor technical amendments to the old agreement.

OI Glass has 90 percent of Australia's market share with a revenue of $2.62 billion between 2013–17. According to the AMWU, the company's CEO receives an annual $11 million compensation package.

Sydney asbestos removal workers' strike enters ninth week

Fourteen workers from the Sydney-based asbestos and toxic materials management company GBAR walked off the job indefinitely on July 29 in a dispute over low wages and a lack of entitlements. They are holding daily pickets outside business premises in Sydney owned by GBAR's company director and multi-millionaire Barend Jacobus Stoltz.

GBAR's workforce includes casual and permanent employees covered under an industry award agreement. Workers complained that they are on individual contracts and that hourly wage rates vary between workers. They claim that industry award entitlements are not paid, and that they do not receive annual holiday leave loading or a travel allowance.

The strikers rejected management's proposed enterprise agreement, which they said was below award pay rates. In desperation, the workers sought support from the Construction Forestry Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU) to try and resolve the dispute. The union, however, has kept the strike isolated while the company has threatened to sack the workers if they continue to reject its proposed deal.

New South Wales coal miners strike over pay and conditions

Over 300 members of the CFMMEU from the Boggabri Coal open-cut mine in north west New South Wales struck for 48 hours on Tuesday demanding pay and conditions in line with coal miners in other regions. At a mass meeting called by the union, they unanimously voted to extend industrial action to include 48-hour rolling stoppages.

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Boggabri Coal workers are attempting to win back conditions that were lost when their employment moved from contractor Downer to mine owner Idemitsu two years ago.

A CFMMEU spokesman said the workers are being paid $40,000 a year less than Idemitsu's coal mines in Muswellbrook in the Hunter Valley and Ensham in Queensland. He said that workers' redundancy entitlements are worth half that of other Idemitsu miners and the company has no commitment to training and skills development.

Melbourne restaurant workers demonstrate over wage theft

About 20 members of the newly-formed Hospo Voice group, which is backed by the United Voice union, marched in St Kilda to the Tolarno Eating House on September 19. They carried a banner saying "Take Wage Theft off the Menu" and demonstrated outside the restaurant.

Restaurant management is defying a court order to pay tens of thousands of dollars in outstanding wages. One worker told the media that he had been short paid by almost $13,000 over two years. He said Tolarno had failed to follow a court order to pay him the lost wages by September 2.

Meanwhile, the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO) has started legal action against operators of the Barry café in Melbourne's inner city alleging wage theft. Acting on complaints from workers, the FWO alleges Barry café underpaid 73 employees a total of $180,660 over a 12-month period. Workers were paid a flat rate up to $6 an hour below the Restaurant Industry Award and no penalty rates for overtime, public holidays and weekends.

New Zealand casino workers strike

Auckland's SkyCity Casino employees briefly stopped work on the night of September 21, during the Rugby World Cup match between the All Blacks and South Africa. According to the SEA-Unite trade union, 97 percent of its members at the casino voted in favour of the strike to demand higher wages for unsociable hours. The action was followed by a stoppage for part of September 27 to join the nationwide student-led climate change strike.

The casino employs 900 staff, most of whom are members of SEA-Unite. SkyCity workers have held a number of strikes and pickets in recent weeks against low wages. Many receive little more than the minimum hourly wage. They are demanding penalty rates for weekend and late night shifts to bring workers into line with those at SkyCity's casino in Adelaide. SkyCity made a $144 million profit last year.

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