

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 July 2006

Asia

Police assault striking Bangladesh teachers

Police attacked a demonstration of striking teachers on July 15 at Muktangon in Dhaka injuring six teachers. The indefinite strike by 500,000 teachers from 30,000 private high schools, colleges and madrassas had entered its thirteenth day.

The teachers are fighting for a 17-point log of demands, including a 100 percent basic salary rise. They also want an increase in house rent allowances, full medical and festival allowances and other benefits, in line with UNESCO and International Labor Organisation (ILO) recommendations.

The next day police beat up three strikers from non-government schools as teachers and school employees were preparing to march towards the Central Shaheed Minar. Police erected barbed wire barricades across the road and attacked the demonstration.

On July 17 police also attacked and injured demonstrating teachers from non-government schools and technical colleges in the capital Rokeya Sarani. The Teachers-Employees United Front (TEUF) wants equal benefits for private school employees, in line with their government counterparts.

Bangladeshi apparel workers strike

About 2,000 apparel workers from Paddocks Jeans Ltd in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone began an indefinite strike on July 17 over an 8-point log of demands, including higher wages, withdrawal of termination notices for 38 workers, regularisation of jobs, conveyance, attendance bonus, medical facilities, and the provision of lunches.

The strikers remained inside the premises, confining company officials in their rooms, but police stormed the factory injuring 13 workers in a vicious assault. A large contingent of police, Bangladesh Rifles and Rapid Action Battalion personnel have been deployed around the factory.

Company officials have been trying to intimidate the workers since June, warning that they would be subjected to police harassment and dismissal if they protested.

In another dispute several hundred workers protested outside Waqfi Knit Fabrics at Konabari, inside the BSCIC Industrial Area, on July 18. In response to earlier unrest, factory management had announced that there would be a pay increase but when workers collected their monthly salary on July 17 it had been slashed by a 15 percent reduction in overtime rates.

In response to the protest, management closed the factory and Rapid Action Battalion personnel and Armed Police units were deployed to the area.

Indian teachers injured in brutal police assault

On July 14, police brutally attacked a demonstration of public school teachers in Patna, Bihar state, demanding regularisation of their

jobs and a 4,000 rupee pay rise. Several teachers were seriously injured.

Village councils appointed the teachers in September 2003 on a monthly stipend of 1,000 (\$US23.35) rupees. With temporary tenure likely to end in September, the teachers are demanding regular appointments.

Police used water cannon and teargas to disperse the teachers and, according to government sources, 68 were arrested. Arvind Yadav from Bhagalpur said, "I was hit by a rubber bullet and the police lobbed 100 rounds of teargas shells." He said that police also attacked female protesters and videotaped the demonstrators. The tapes will be given to the Education Department and used to discipline teachers or deny them future employment.

Indian midday meal scheme workers protest

Workers, mainly women, employed as cooks and assistants in the government midday meal program marched to the Deputy Commissioner's office in Gulbarga in Karnataka on July 17. The demonstrators submitted a memorandum to Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy demanding regularisation of employment and improved pay.

The memo pointed out that the workers had been employed as casuals for the past five years without a basic pay rate or dearness allowance. It called on the government to introduce a pay scale for midday meal workers and benefits equal to that of permanent employees. The workers also want a fairer recruitment scheme and female supervisors.

Government bans Indian jute mill strike

Workers at East Coast, Aruna and Bobbili jute mills in Vizianagaram, Andhra Pradesh, demonstrated on July 17 against a government order banning strike action at the three mills.

The workers, who are members of the Indian Federation of Trade Unions, have been on strike for the past five months to demand better wages. The strike ban was issued after negotiations between mills management and the union failed to resolve the dispute.

Indian power workers strike for pay

Technical and engineering staff at the Electricity Department in the south Indian state of Pondicherry began indefinite strike action on July 18 for a pay-scale revision for junior and assistant engineers. The strikers demonstrated at the department's main office in Uppalam.

Most Electricity Department offices were deserted, accounts were not issued counters and repair calls went unanswered. A workers' action committee spokesman said that defunct transformers were not being replaced in many areas and power supply to most consumers had been affected because maintenance work had ceased.

Sri Lankan petroleum workers picket

Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) employees picketed the

Kollonnawa storage facility in suburban Colombo on July 14. They were protesting sale of the government-owned corporation to the Indian Oil Corporation (IOC). Workers have threatened to strike if the government persists with the privatisation.

In a separate dispute, nurses picketed the Health Ministry in Colombo on July 19 to demand a 35 percent salary increase, recruitment of male nurses and the reinstatement of degree courses for nurses at Peradeniya and Ruhunu Universities. They also want reestablishment of overtime and holiday payments.

Chinese bank employees protest sackings

A sit-down protest by 200 sacked employees from a Beijing branch of the state-owned Industrial and Commercial Bank of China entered its third day on July 18. The workers are protesting outside the All China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU). Around 100 police were sent to stop bystanders talking to the protesters. Police assaults and beatings resulted in one worker being hospitalised with severe internal bleeding.

Police cordoned off the area preventing hundreds of other redundant bank employees who arrived by train from other parts of the country from joining the protest. One worker said that he had worked for the bank for 14 years but was only receiving 2,500 yuan (\$US313) a year as a redundancy settlement. He has no pension or medical coverage.

The protesters have also complained about union corruption and the ACFTU's collaboration with the government. Another worker said they have been lobbying the government and the union over the sackings and lack of compensation for four years without results.

NEC workers stop work over dangerous chemicals

On July 17, around 1,000 female workers at the NEC Tokin Electronics (Xiamen) Corporation in China refused to attend work, demanding a monthly medical allowance and improvements in working conditions.

The workers took action after receiving information about health dangers from chemicals used in the factory. Several employees are experiencing eye, skin and respiratory system problems. The company claims there are no problems with chemicals and that it is working with the local government to improve working conditions.

Indonesian taxi drivers strike over rental fees

At least 60 drivers from the largest taxi company in Palu, the Central Sulawesi capital, walked off the job on July 13 to demand the company cut rental fees and vehicle repair charges. The drivers rallied outside the company depot. One taxi driver, M. Junaidi, told the media that although drivers worked long shifts they were still unable to pay the high fees.

Australia and the Pacific

Cleaners protest attacks on working conditions

Cleaners demonstrated outside the Melbourne stock exchange on July 20 over the axing of working conditions. Forty cleaners, employed by Domain Cleaning, have had their shifts cut from 3.5 hours to 3.0 hours, resulting in speed-up and increased workloads.

Domain has also sub-contracted about half of its work to a non-award contractor who cut the wages of 20 cleaners it employed by \$2 an hour. Domain is a wholly owned subsidiary of contract cleaning firm Cleanevent. The protest is part of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union's "Clean Start" national campaign for large firms who hire contract companies to clean their buildings to provide fair pay and conditions.

Fairfax New Zealand staff impose work-to-rule

Newspaper workers at the Fairfax New Zealand-owned Southland Times are continuing a work-to-rule over the company's refusal to

provide standard industry working conditions. Sixty editorial, production, circulation and advertising staff are involved in the action which began on July 7.

A spokesman for the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union said the workers were frustrated that long negotiations and mediation had failed to guarantee the same working conditions as staff at other Fairfax newspapers, including items such as a service allowance.

The workers want the newspaper's readers to lodge protests with the company and threaten to cancel subscriptions.

Technicians' strike stalls NZ broadband installations

A strike by New Zealand telecommunications technicians is holding up broadband installations in many areas across the country. About 320 technicians employed by Transfield are refusing to hook up new DSL broadband connections in Auckland, Waikato, Nelson, Marlborough, Kaikoura and Christchurch in a bid to secure a 5 percent pay raise and overtime compensation.

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union has been attempting to negotiate a new collective agreement since July last year. The highly skilled technicians claim they have been underpaid for years. They once had parity with electricians but over the past 15 years their rates have fallen well behind and are currently paid around \$17 an hour.

Union orders PNG teachers to end six-day strike

Most of the 23,000 teachers on strike in Papua New Guinea began returning to work on July 17 ending a six-day strike over pay discrepancies and back-pay. The PNG Teachers Association (PNGTA) ordered their members back to work after reaching a deal in the National Court with the Teaching Services Commission (TSC).

The parties agreed to discuss pay discrepancies and work on a timetable for the provision of back-pay. The TSC agreed that if teachers returned to work it would withdraw disciplinary action against union delegates suspended during the strike and not bring charges against other teachers who joined the strike.

About 300 teachers who attended the court refused to return to work, drawing condemnation from Ugwalubu Mowan, Southern Regional secretary of the PNGTA. He told teachers that, "common sense must prevail" and warned they must adhere to the agreement. On July 20, the National Court will begin proceedings to determine if the PNGTA national executive had initiated an illegal strike.



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