

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 August 2006

Asia

Police attack Bangladesh apparel workers

On July 29, Bangladesh police attacked a demonstration of around 6,000 apparel workers from eight garment factories owned by the Hachong Corporation. Despite the police assault, workers continued their march from Azampur until stopped by a police cordon near the Bismillah Shopping Complex.

The workers were demanding that Hachong reopen a factory it suddenly closed on July 18, reinstate the sacked workers and end its repressive measures against employees. They also condemned a police baton-charge on a demonstration in Uttara, Dhaka on July 28 which killed a pregnant worker. Around 50 protestors were injured during the assault and 20 workers arrested.

On July 31, workers from more than a dozen garments factories in Rokeya Sarani went on strike to demand a 3,000-taka minimum monthly wage (\$US43.38) and other benefits. Traffic stopped for two hours as workers marched from Shewrapara to Mirpur in Dhaka chanting slogans.

Indian childcare workers protest

Contract childcare (Anganwadi) workers from India's Karnataka state demonstrated in Bangalore on July 31 for a retirement fund. The fund would provide 1,200 rupees (\$US26) and 600 rupees per month to retired teachers and helpers, respectively. The workers also want permanency and equal pay with their counterparts in government schools.

The Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers' Federation organised the protest and presented workers demands to Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy.

Indian telecom workers protest share sale

On July 27, workers from Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) held a national demonstration to demand the government drop moves to sell BSNL shares and end further disinvestment of BSNL or Mahanagar Telephone Nigam Ltd, its merger partner. They also called for a bar on private communication providers accessing BSNL infrastructure. Demonstrations and rallies were held in most centres, including Rajpura in Punjab state and Madurai in Tamil Nadu.

BSNL is one of India's largest telecommunications providers and was formed in October 2000 when the Indian government's Department of Telecom Operations was floated as a company.

Indian port workers demand improvements

Workers at the Visakhapatnam Port Trust and Visakhapatnam Dock Labour Board demonstrated on July 25 to demand a 50 percent Dearness Allowance be incorporated into the basic wage structure and for retirement to be 60 years of age. They also want recognition of a bipartite wage negotiation committee of dock and port workers and an end to the privatisation of port services.

Indian press workers protest arbitrary transfers

The transfer of three employees from the RBI Note Mudranalaya section of RBI Press in Mysore, Karnataka sparked immediate action by workers on July 31.

All 350 employees from the company's printing units and maintenance wing went on strike and demonstrated outside of the main office. The workers are members of the RBI Employees' Union and those transferred were union office-bearers. RBI Press has operated in Karnataka for last ten years.

In an unrelated dispute, Pondicherry midwives held a sit-down protest at Bharathi Park on July 31 in support of a charter of demands. They want job confirmation and all vacant posts filled. The action was organised by the Pondicherry State Auxiliary Nurse Midwife Association.

Sri Lankan health workers demand overtime payments

Health workers and minor staff at hospitals in Sri Lanka's Uva province refused to attend work July 26 and 27 as part of a sick note protest. The action crippled many of the hospitals' services. The workers, who are members of the Janaraja Saukya Seva Samiti union, want payment for overtime outstanding for the last three months.

Discussions between unions and the provincial health minister have so far failed to resolve the dispute.

Chinese riot police break up factory protest

On July 22, over 100 police, backed by riot units and company thugs, attacked a protest of over 1,000 workers at

toy manufacture Hengli in Dongguan City in China's Guangdong province. Many workers were injured and dozens arrested during the brutal assault.

The protest was over low wages, lack of public holidays and poor living conditions. *China Labor Watch* reported that Hengli employees typically worked 11 hours a day, six days a week and tally up 70 hours overtime per month. The company deducts employees' salaries if they refuse overtime.

The workers, who are only paid between 600 (\$US75) and 800 yuan a month with no base salary, are not given national holidays, vacation days or sick leave. The meals provided at the factory are poor and the company does not provide adequate medical insurance or pensions.

Owned by Hong Kong-based Merton Company, the factory produces small plastic toys for US companies such as McDonald's, Disney, Mattel, Warner and DC Comics.

Indonesian bus drivers protest over back pay

Hundreds of bus drivers from the state-owned transport company PPD went on strike on July 31. They brought traffic to a standstill on the TransJakarta bus-way when they drove hundreds of buses to the presidential palace in central Jakarta to demand a meeting with President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono.

Police at the palace entrance blocked the drivers, who have not been paid for nine months and are members of the Indonesian Transport Federation of the Prosperous Labor Union. The drivers have threatened to seize PPD assets if they are not paid before Indonesia's Independence Day on August 17. In total, they are owed 43.2 billion rupiah (\$US4.7 million).

The company, which operates 300 buses, claims to have been running at a loss since the government stopped subsidising its operations in 2002 and may have to sell buses to pay for salaries and planned redundancies.

Australia and the Pacific

Ambulance drivers lift work bans

On August 3, ambulance drivers in the Australian state of Tasmania agreed to end a weeklong campaign of bans on administrative duties. The bans were in opposition to the state Labor government's proposal to transfer accident rescue work to the State Fire Brigade.

The bans were lifted after the government outlined a new proposal in the industrial commission. The details have not yet been made public but the Health and Community Services Union is due to meet with the drivers on August 4 to discuss the new proposal.

New Zealand sawmill workers strike over pay

About 80 workers from Tachikawa sawmill in Rotorua struck for 24 hours on July 26 over pay. The workers want a 5 percent pay rise this year, 3 percent in 2007 and a

company contribution to their superannuation scheme.

The company has offered 8.5 percent spread over three years. The Distribution Workers Union has said the workers are unhappy with the offer and not prepared to accept it. Further strikes are likely.

New Zealand supermarket workers strike

Supermarket meat processors employed by Progressive Enterprises began a five-day strike and picket at Burnham, near Christchurch on July 26. The 24 workers earn 30-50 percent less than standard industry rates. The New Zealand Meat Union wants a 16-month contract with a 12 percent pay rise to increase their base rate to \$15.50 an hour. The union declared that its claim was the "first step" towards pay parity with other meat workers who earn between \$18 and \$30 an hour for similar work.

A union spokesperson said Progressive Enterprises classifies the butchers as supermarket workers to justify paying them an average of \$13.73 an hour, which includes an incentive bonus. The company took 100 days to respond to the union's claims and only agreed to discussion after workers threatened a strike ballot.

The National Distribution Union (NDU) will hold stop-work meetings over the next fortnight to decide whether supermarket workers in Progressive's 170 Countdown, Foodtown and Woolworth's stores nationwide will participate in the industrial action.

Negotiations with the company were adjourned last week. A stop-work meeting of 500 NDU delegates in Auckland on July 27 voted for rolling stoppages of up to 1 hour a day. Delegates rejected a 2.6 percent pay increase from the company. The delegates also opposed moves to cut a week's service holiday and paying young workers less than adults.

Fiji timber workers strike over log of claims

On July 31, 220 workers at Tropic Woods Industries in Fiji struck after management failed to attend a meeting at the Ministry of Labour to discuss a log of claims. Members of the Tropic Woods and Allied Workers Union brought company operations to standstill and demonstrated outside their workplace, declaring that the protest would continue until management agreed to meet them.

The workers want increases in annual holidays, sick leave, height allowances for tower operators and a 10 percent pay rise with a 5 percent cost of living adjustment. Company management agreed to meet the union soon after the walkout.



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