Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 October 2006

Bangladeshi garment workers attacked by police

Police used batons, tear gas and fired rubber bullets to break up protests against low pay by hundreds of garment workers in various parts of Dhaka on October 10. Clashes between workers and a large contingent of police, who were reinforced by members of the special Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), continued for five hours. Two hundred people were injured and 20 detained.

On the same day, garment workers in Uttara, Abdullahpur, Tongi, Mirpur, Pallabi and Savar areas went on strike and barricaded the busy Dhaka-Mymensingh road. As they marched from Rokeya Sarani to Mirpur, they were joined by hundreds of other workers.

Garment workers are demanding a minimum salary of at least 3,000 taka ($US45), as opposed to a government-formed board proposal of only 1,662 taka ($US25). The minimum monthly wage, which was set in 1994, is only 950 taka.

The garment industry is Bangladesh's biggest export earner, returning around $7 billion in the fiscal year to June 2006. It is also the country's second biggest employer after agriculture, with about 4,200 factories employing about two million workers, mostly women.

Arbitrary transfers spark national strike in India

Over 40,000 employees of four public sector general insurance companies in India went on a one-day nationwide strike on October 5 to protest against arbitrary transfers under the government's Transfer and Mobility Policy. The four public sector companies announced over 4,000 transfers across the country on September 29.

According to its organisers, the strike prevented business transactions from being carried out, even in the few places where offices were kept open. In some cities, such as Kochi in the state of Kerala, the striking workers held sit down protests in front of regional offices.

Cooperative bank workers demand improved conditions

Thousands of cooperative bank workers in Tamilnadu demonstrated in several cities on October 6. About 3,500 bank workers from Dindigul, Theni and Madurai districts protested in Madurai while workers from Tiruchi, Karur, Pudukottai and Perambalur districts demonstrated in Tiruchi.

High on the list of their demands was the payment of outstanding wages and government financial assistance to more than 32,000 workers who have not been fully paid for a number of years. Many cooperative banks are in dire financial straits since the government waived the repayment of loans they had extended.

Workers are demanding they be made government employees to guarantee the payment of salaries. The workers also demanded that 50 percent of all vacancies in district and central cooperative banks be filled with primary cooperative bank employees. Other demands include a new voluntary retirement scheme with increased benefits and a retirement plan, modelled on the scheme at the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board employees.

Power workers protest privatisation and staff shortages

On October 4, workers from the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) blocked traffic in the city of Patiala and sealed off the main office of the PSEB. They were protesting over staff shortages and management moves towards further privatisation. Workers claim that some 20,000 PSEB positions are vacant and service provision is being undermined. The protest brought traffic to a halt for three hours.

Sri Lankan acting school principals demand job confirmation

A large contingent of acting school principals protested in front of the main Fort Railway Station in central Colombo on October 4 to demand the official confirmation of their posts. After the protest they handed a petition to the office of President Mahinda Rajapakse. Prior to last year's presidential election, Rajapakse promised to fulfil the acting principles' demand within three months of his gaining office but has not done so. Currently there are vacancies for principals in 2,514 government schools.

Public health workers demand improved conditions in the Philippines

On October 10, public health workers from all over Mindanao gathered in Davao City to protest over low wages and demand the full implementation of the 1992 "Magna Carta for Public Health Workers".

The legislation provided for additional benefits to public health workers, the majority of whom are women, such as security of tenure, regulations concerning the normal hours of work and overtime, work during rest days and night-shift, and leave benefits. It also outlawed discrimination against public health workers, particularly in regard to gender, and contained

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measures to permit married couples who are both public health workers to be employed in the same municipality. Many provisions of the act, however, have not yet been implemented despite the passing of 14 years.

A spokesman for the Public Services International said recent studies show that the mass exodus of Filipino health workers to more developed countries is mainly due to the failure of the government to provide a decent wages and benefits.

Malaysian call centre workers picket Telecom Malaysia

On October 10, about 1,400 call centre workers employed by Telecom Malaysia Regional Customer Contact Centres (TMRCC) began picketing Telecom Malaysia offices in Kuala Lumpa, Sarawak, Sabah and Malacca. The workers, mostly members of the National Union of Telecommunications Employees (NUTE), are demanding Malaysia Telecom re-negotiate employment terms and conditions with them before an October 20, when all of the company's call centre operations will be transferred to its subsidiary, VADS Limited.

NUTE and two other unions have instructed their members not to sign "option forms" accepting transfers until the terms and conditions under which they will be employed are clarified.

Locked out technicians return to work

Technicians at Radio Rentals in Adelaide, South Australia, returned to work on October 6 after the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union struck an agreement with the company. The company imposed a month-long lockout on September 8 when workers went on strike for just fours hours as part of a dispute over a new collective work agreement. Radio Rentals had originally demanded the workers sign over to individual contracts.

The agreement provides for a 4 percent wage rise and the technicians' redundancy provisions will be brought into line with other company employees. The pay increase, however, is tied to productivity increases. Director of Radio Rentals Gavin Hancock heralded the deal as "a good outcome". Despite the company's treatment of the workers, a union spokesman went out his way to urge people "to go back to shop at the Radio Rentals stores".

Union ends strike at Heinemann Electric

Members of the Electrical Trade Union (ETU) at switchboard manufacturer Heinemann Electric in Mulgrave, Victoria ended a protracted strike after the union reached an agreement in discussions with the company on October 10.

The workers walked off the job and began picketing the plant on August 24 after Heinemann docked them a full week's pay for imposing a ban on overtime in a dispute over a collective work agreement.

The company has agreed to reimburse the withheld wages and a pay increase. The details of the agreement are not yet public but it is known that the company was insisting on greater flexibility in working hours. An ETU spokesman said union members will formally vote on the agreement next week.

During the dispute, numbers of picketers were struck by staff and management cars. Two picketers were hit by an in-house delivery truck and a female supporter was struck and picked up on the bonnet of a senior manager's car when he drove through the picket.

New Zealand carpet workers strike after company takeover

Workers at New Zealand carpet maker Feltex have started wildcat strikes in a bid to get the new owner to make up a shortfall in redundancy payments. Over 100 Christchurch-based workers, some of whom could end up $40,000 out of pocket, stopped work on October 11 and held a six-hour sit-in at the plant's cafeteria. The receiver is offering redundant workers up to $15,000, well below the $50,000 some expected.

Australian carpet company Godfrey Hirst, which is buying Feltex out, announced this week it would close the Christchurch factory with the loss of 134 jobs. The receiver had previously said there would be 70 redundancies. Another 55 staff at Feltex's factory near Marton have already lost their jobs but the new owner is offering to keep on workers at four other plants in Lower Hutt, Foxton, Feilding and Dannevirke. The workers face the threat of reduced terms and conditions under a new collective agreement.

Maori performers walk out over pay and conditions

On October 6, a group of New Zealand Maori performers at a Rotorua tourist attraction walked out during a performance in a dispute over employment conditions. The performance group, Mauri, which welcomes and entertains visitors to Te Puia, formerly the New Zealand Maori Arts and Craft Institute, left the centre's managers to apologise to 40 tourists who had paid up to $85 each for an evening's entertainment and meal.

The walkout was followed by a *haka*, a traditional Maori challenge, outside the administration office, with family and supporters later repeating the *haka* outside the centre. The entertainers subsequently learned they will be out of work when their contract expired the following week. The 15-strong group has welcomed visitors to the centre for more than 5 years.

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