

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 October 2006

Asia

Police attack Bangladeshi apparel workers

Police and company thugs have violently attacked a series of demonstrations by Bangladeshi apparel workers over the past week. The workers, who are amongst the lowest paid in the world, were demanding a minimum wage increase, overtime payments for working on the Durga religious holiday and to oppose ongoing labour abuses by employers.

The protests followed a National Wage Commission offer to increase the minimum monthly wage from 600 to 1,604 taka (\$US23 dollars). The minimum wage has not changed since 1994 and the unions want a rise of between 2,000 and 3,000 taka.

On September 26, several hundred workers blocked the road in front of factories in Dhaka's Shewrapara district demanding the reopening of TS Sweater and Perfect Garments that had been closed four days earlier.

At least 200 garment workers and seven journalists were injured when police attacked a demonstration in Uttara on September 29. The protest was over the forcible removal of workers from Syntax Garments by hired goons. A photojournalist and at least ten workers were critically injured. The next day police fired tear gas and rubber bullets at thousands of textile workers demonstrating in Dhaka, injuring at least 50.

On October 1, at least 100 workers were injured and five factories and 20 vehicles damaged when armed police and security guards clashed with thousands of garment workers in Uttara. The protest began when workers were locked out and two were beaten up by security guards.

On October 2, Opex Group employees and supporters demonstrated in Mirpur. Fifteen workers were injured when they were attacked by company goons. Police and Rapid Action Battalion were also deployed against the workers. On the same day, 200 Garry Stone Sweater factory employees walked out over cuts to piece rates. Another 1,000 garment workers joined the protest.

There are around 4,200 garment factories in Bangladesh employing about two million workers, 85 percent of them women. Production has boomed since the end of global textile quotas last year with Bangladeshi garment exports increasing 24 percent last financial year.

Pakistani sanitary workers fight for back wages

Saddar Town sanitary workers demonstrated at the Karachi Press Club on September 30 over the non-payment of wages for the last two months. The protestors chanted slogans denouncing the Saddar Town administration, which they allege demanded bribes for payment of salary arrears. When workers refused to pay, management threatened to cut five to six days' wages.

The workers also allege that the administration had promised

additional payment for working overtime and on scheduled days off during the monsoon season but then reneged on the pledge.

Indian power workers demand bonuses

Tamilnadu Electricity Board workers demonstrated in Tuticorin on September 27 in support of a log of claims. Their demands include a 25 percent bonus for all employees and the merger of a daily allowance with the basic pay. They are also seeking a fixed pay scale for contingency workers and permanency for all contract workers.

Philippines police attack picketers in free-trade-zone

Municipal and free-trade-zone police along with private security guards attacked strikers picketing the Korean-owned Chong Won Fashion garment factory on September 27, injuring 35 workers, two seriously. The police were escorting newly recruited replacement workers through the picket. The factory is located in the Cavite Export Processing Zone (CEPZ), about 15 kilometres south of Manila.

United Workers at Chang Won (NMCW-Ind) union members went on strike on August 30, after the company imposed an "indefinite vacation" (lock out) on a number of employees in a dispute for a new work contract. Workers have been involved in a series of lengthy disputes over the status of the union, unfair labor practices, the company's refusal to bargain and discrimination against union officers and members, including arbitrary suspensions and sacking.

Philippines Economic Zone police have set up a blockade around the picket to stop supporters bringing food to the strikers. Eight workers from a neighbouring warehouse attempting to get through the police cordon were arrested. Others have had their workers' zone passes and company IDs confiscated to prevent them entering the CEPZ.

The union has filed a notice of strike with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board (NCMB-DOLE) and is demanding the company begin negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement.

South Korean government closes union offices

The South Korean government is proceeding with its forced closure of hundreds of Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU) offices, claiming that the organisation is illegal.

The KGEU, which has more than 140,000 members, was deemed illegal by the government after it refused to register as an official union. Under South Korean law government workers are banned from striking.

The government has deployed hundreds of armed riot police across the country with orders to smash up offices and arrest union officials. Union members have barricaded themselves in offices and are resisting the closures.

The most recent attack occurred in Gangwon-do province when more than 350 armed riot police stormed an office arresting three KGEU members. On October 3 offices in Chuncheon and Samcheok

were taken over by riot police armed with fire extinguishers, hammers steel pipes and a fire truck. Two union officials were arrested with one hospitalised after being struck by water cannons.

Chinese hotel workers protest for back wages

On September 28, Grand View Hotel employees in Shenzhen began a series of protests outside the hotel demanding back wages. About 345 of the five-star hotel's 397 staff are collectively owed around 2.45 million yuan (\$US306,250) in back wages from three to eleven months.

It is a common practice for employers in China to withhold a portion of workers wages to prevent them leaving for better jobs before their contract expires. Many companies, however, just refuse to pay the back wages and sack those who complain.

Indonesian insurance workers protest management corruption

On September 29, over 40 workers at the Banten branch of the state-owned workers' insurance company PT Jamsosok demonstrated at the firm's main office in Jakarta. They want management to withdraw recent unfair demotions and transfers, and dismiss the company director Iwan Pontjowinoto.

Jamsosok workers filed a motion with the government in July seeking replacement of the company's board following reports of "unwise investment and corruption in the company". Jamsosok manages more than 30 trillion (about \$US3.3 billion) of workers' money. The government dismissed the motion, fearing that if successful it would encourage employees at other state-owned companies to take similar action.

Earlier in the week, two union members were transferred to "out-of-the-way" branches and 12 senior staff members were demoted or removed from their posts for supporting the no-confidence motion.

Australia and the Pacific

Maritime workers strike over contract labour

About 50 maintenance workers, members of the Maritime Union of Australia in Hobart, Bell Bay, Burnie and Devonport in Tasmania, went on strike for one day on October 4.

The workers were protesting against the port authority TasPort using contract labour in Hobart to perform work previously done by permanent staff. Earlier this year, the Tasmanian State Labor government amalgamated the four separate port authorities into a single entity making 20 permanent workers redundant. The current dispute is now before the Tasmanian Industrial Relations Commission.

New Zealand hospital workers picket over pay

Hospital cleaners, kitchen and food workers, orderlies, home aids and other service workers held a series of pickets around New Zealand on October 4 to support claims for a living wage and one national collective agreement. Over 90 workers participated in the capital city Wellington. The protests were organised by the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU).

The SFWU is negotiating with 21 District Health Boards (DGBS) and contractors Spotless Services, Compass Group and OCS for one multi-employer collective agreement (MECA) to cover workers in hospitals.

The union, which currently negotiates over 40 separate collective employment agreements covering some 2,800 workers, claims a national MECA is the only way workers can get consistent pay rates across the country. It alleges that reluctance by DHBs to negotiate on the issue breaches their legal obligations.

Overtime ban at NZ jet engine centre

About 270 workers at the Christchurch Engine Centre (CEC), a joint

venture between Air NZ and US-based Pratt & Whitney servicing aircraft engines, will impose overtime bans on October 9. CEC is trying to cut holiday entitlements. Employees are fighting to retain a clause in their work agreement allowing them an extra week of holidays after six years service. The engine centre began in 2001 and many workers are now approaching the six-year service requirement.

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union and the Aviation and Marine Engineers Association have been negotiating with CEC plus using mediation to get an agreement on new working conditions. The unions are also seeking a 5 percent pay increase. The company has offered 3.4 percent.

According to a union spokesman, there was an "overwhelming decision" to impose the overtime ban. One worker said morale at the plant was at rock bottom with a lot of overseas workers recruited to the centre becoming disillusioned over pay and working conditions. "They get here to find that the wages are abysmal. A lot are being paid less than garage mechanics although they are doing highly skilled jobs with a lot of responsibility," he said.

New Zealand workers picket over youth rates

Young workers picketed New Zealand Prime Minister Helen Clark's electorate office in Auckland on September 26 demanding that the Labour Party support a Greens-sponsored bill abolishing youth rates of pay.

A spokesperson for the protestors said that the picket was in response to Labour's failure to take a stand for young workers. Labour had previously pledged to raise the minimum wage to \$12 an hour but not for 16- and 17-year-old workers.

Currently the minimum youth pay rate applies to workers aged 16 to 17 years and is set below the adult rate. The Labour government authorised a minor adjustment in wages last March taking the adult rate from \$9.50 to \$10.25 an hour and the youth rate to \$8.20 an hour. The Green Party bill removes pay discrimination on the grounds of age but does not call for an increase the basic minimum, which remains at poverty levels.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact