

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 September 2007

Asia

Bangladesh police attack garment workers

Production was suspended for 24 hours in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ) on September 15 as hundreds of workers from Featherlite Limited clashed with police. A series of running battles erupted when baton-wielding police prevented the workers from entering the DEPZ to retrieve the body of co-worker Helal who they alleged had been killed by company security guards over the theft of a cell phone.

The workers then marched to another part of the DEPZ gathering supporters along the way. Police with clubs intervened and several protestors were injured. Later, police fire 35 tear-gas canisters into the ranks of workers demonstrating on the Nabinagar-Kaliakoir Road, injuring another 40. Clashes inside the DEPZ continued throughout the day resulting in many more injuries and damage to factories.

Striking Bangladesh jute workers attack union official

On September 16, striking workers from Platinum Jubilee Jute Mills at the Khalishpur industrial belt in south-west Bangladesh physically attacked the general secretary of their union. They accused the official of “conniving” with the mill management with the aim of undermining the strike. Two workers were arrested following assault.

The 5,000 strikers, mainly casual daily labourers, struck on September 3 demanding permanent contracts. Some had worked at the factory for up to 25 years but were recently reemployed on a casual “no work-no pay” basis. Sacked and retired workers have also begun daily demonstrations at the factory’s gate demanding pay arrears.

Despite strong world demand for jute, state-owned mills are being rundown and workers retrenched as the government seeks private investors. There have been mass redundancies across the industry over the last five years, including 40,000 in 2002 at Adamjee, once Asia’s largest jute mill. This month, the government announced that another eight state-owned jute mills would be sold off.

Striking Indian municipal workers begin hunger protest

Dhubri Municipal Council employees in the north-east Indian state of Assam defied a return to work order and began a hunger campaign on September 12 after the city administration declared their protracted strike “illegal”. The workers have been on strike since June 23 for a salary increase, provision of

central provident fund money, retirement benefits, leave encashment and gratuity.

The administration declared that strike action was “prohibited” and used loudspeakers to direct employees to report for duty after the dispute was referred to the Guwahati Labour Court.

Dhubri Municipal Employees’ Union general secretary Chandra Das said it was outside the labour and employment department’s jurisdiction to prohibit the strike. Workers declared the strike would continue until their demands were fulfilled.

Sri Lankan health sector employees’ protest

Public health inspectors in Sri Lanka’s Southern Province held a sick note campaign on September 12 and refused to report for duty. They picketed the Provincial Health Ministry in Galle and then marched to the provincial governor’s office to present a memorandum.

The inspectors want the restoration of a 1,000 rupee (\$US8.8) allowance used to maintain their offices but withdrawn by the government in 2006. They now pay for office maintenance from their meager salaries.

In a separate dispute, Health Management Assistance Service employees picketed the Ministry of Health in Colombo on September 12 over the Sri Lankan government’s decision to dissolve the service, which has been in existence for 46 years.

E.Land workers’ struggle passes 100 days

Hundreds of former employees of retail outlet E.Land in South Korea continue to picket stores and rally in Seoul in a campaign which began in June this year after the company sacked nearly 1,000 casual staff. The workers were sacked ahead of a new industrial law on July 1 requiring employers to make all casuals with two years service permanent. E.Land has replaced the sacked workers with cheaper contract labour.

Riot police brutally assaulted E.Land protesters at a rally in Seoul on September 15 arresting around 150. A week earlier, a workers’ demonstration was attacked by alleged company-hired thugs carrying iron bars.

Many workers arrested early in the campaign for participating in protests near and inside E.Land stores remain in jail and face heavy fines. Despite massive public support for the sacked workers, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions and the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions have failed to organise

any meaningful industrial campaign to support them.

Philippine tollway workers fight jobs losses

On September 14, hundreds of workers, supervisors and security guards at government-owned tollway operator Philippine Skyway Company (PSC) picketed the company's headquarters in Pranaque City.

The workers, members of three unions, fear job losses when the company is sold to the Indonesian-owned operator Citra Metro Manila Tollways Corporation (CMMTC). PSC Employees Union president Jose Apollo Ado said that there was no provision in the new contract for the transfer of workers to CMMTC. Ado said: "They told us they would just choose who they would hire and that they would be bringing in their own people." The union is preparing legal action to secure a temporary restraining order to halt the takeover.

Telephone company ignores court order over jobs

The Philippines Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) sacked 136 employees when they turned up for work on September 17. Security guards blocked them from entering PLDT premises in Cebu City. A union spokesman claimed the sackings were in violation of a status quo order issued by the Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE) on September 6 to prevent a planned strike over company moves to retrench 575 service assistance staff and maintenance workers.

The PLDT management has issued a statement claiming it has legal advice that the DOLE order did not restrict them from terminating workers. Undersecretary for Labor Relations Danilo Cruz confirmed he had "failed to convince" PLDT to recall its retrenchment notices but warned that it was illegal for the workers to strike over the sackings.

On September 18, union spokesman for the 1,000 members of Manggagawa sa Komunikasyon ng Pilipinas (MKP) in Cebu Isabelo Rosales said the union would not call a strike and had decided to file a motion of contempt before DOLE within one week. Facing the prospect of a drawn-out legal challenge nearly half of the 575 workers issued with retrenchment notices have signed acceptance forms. Since 1995 PLDT has reduced staff from 18,000 to 7,900.

Australia and the Pacific

Australian TAFE lecturers strike over sacking

On September 18, about 50 lecturers at the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Midland Campus in Perth, Western Australia walked off the job. They were protesting against the stand-down without pay of a colleague who refused to teach a metal workshop class claiming it was oversized and therefore unsafe for students and the teacher.

A State School Teachers' Union of Western Australia official said the lecturer had offered to conduct a theory class for the 17 affected students. TAFE lecturers across the state are considering meeting to vote on industrial action over the issue.

Printing workers walk out over unfair conditions

Over 100 workers at the Brisbane plant of Australia's largest printing and distribution factory PMP Print went on strike for

48 hours on September 18. Union organisers said the action in Queensland was the first in a series of planned strikes at the company's plants nationally to oppose unfair working conditions.

A spokesman for the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union said the firm was trying to force workers onto shifts that would significantly reduce take home pay and was using the Howard government's industrial laws, WorkChoices, to strip away long-standing conditions.

NZ hospital maintenance unions withdraw strike notice

Unions covering 60 maintenance workers at the Canterbury District Health Board (DHB) have postponed strike action planned for September 17 and are heading back into pay talks after the health board signaled it was open to further negotiations. Earlier this month, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), Amalgamated Workers Union and the Building Trades Union threatened to walk off the job following a deadlock in pay negotiations.

The workers earlier rejected the Board's pay offer of 4.5 percent over 18 months. An EPMU spokesman said the workers had voted to withdraw the strike notice following a last-minute plea from the DHB to resume negotiations scheduled for early next month.

New Caledonia construction workers strike

About 20 permanent workers, plus casuals, employed by the construction company ECT struck last week, forcing the company to close construction sites in Noumea and Numbo.

Several weeks ago, the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) lodged a list of claims that included reclassification measures and the provision of premium payments at the end of contracts. USTKE called the strike to protest delaying tactics by the company.



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