

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 September 2007

## Asia

### Bangladeshi apparel workers defy ban on protests

Police and the military from the Rapid Action Battalion attacked thousands of apparel workers demonstrating in Dhaka on September 22 injuring at least 50. The demonstration had gone ahead in defiance of the military-backed government's ban on protests and rallies.

Around 25,000 apparel workers in Dhaka's Tejgaon Industrial Area, the country's biggest industrial zone and containing some Bangladesh's top garment factories, went on strike and rallied to demand back-pay and annual bonuses. The strike shut down most factories in the area.

"We have conducted surveys in the country's main industrial zones and found that only 20 percent of the country's some 4,000 factories have implemented the minimum wages," Moshrefa Mishu, president of Garment Workers Unity Forum, said. However, the monthly minimum wage agreed to by union leaders and employers last year was a meagre \$US25.

Apparel, Bangladesh's biggest export earner, accounted for 75 percent of the country's total export earnings last year. Bangladesh supplies apparel to global buyers including Wal-Mart in the US and Primark in the UK.

### Indian contract municipal workers demand benefits

On September 25, contract workers from the Municipal Corporation of Eluru in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh demonstrated for a provident fund and medical facilities. The demonstrators marched from the municipal corporation office to the office of the Assistant Commissioner of Labor after submitting a memorandum. The workers have been denied basic facilities despite having worked at the corporation for the last three years.

Municipal corporation authorities hired about 70 workers on a contract basis from a private agency to man headwater works and operate bore wells in the city. According to the Municipal Employees Union, the contracting agency has been deducting a portion of the workers' salaries but failed to remit it to provident fund accounts. Workers warned they would step up agitation if their demands were not addressed immediately.

### Indian power workers demand permanency

Power distribution workers employed by Southco in Berhampur in the state of Orissa held a sit-down protest in front of the company's head office on September 18 demanding regularisation of employment for around 324 casual employees. The casuals, who include technicians, data entry operators, clerical staff and peons, have worked for the company for the last three years. They are threatening to intensify the campaign, including beginning an indefinite hunger strike, if their demand is not met.

In a separate dispute, forest workers in Kozhikode, in the state of

Kerala, staged a sit-down protest (outside the Collectorate) on September 19 to press for better salaries and service conditions. The protest was organised by the Kerala Forest Protective Staff Association.

### Indian beedi workers demand pay rise

Workers involved in the manufacture of beedi (local cigarettes) demonstrated in Tirunelveli and Nagercoil in the southern state of Tamilnadu on September 18. They were demanding payment of the Dearness Allowance (DA) to around 600,000 workers in Tirunelveli, Kanyakumari and Tuticorin districts

Workers also called for statutory pay of 70 rupees (\$US1.7) for 1,000 beedis, the immediate disbursement of arrears and the extension of service card and provident funds to the beedi rollers. In addition, they want a minimum pension of 1,000 rupees for aged beedi rollers.

The District Beedi Workers' Union, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Union, organised the demonstration.

### Indian plantation workers demand uniform wages

Hundreds of plantation workers from Hassan and Sakleshpur in the state of Karnataka demonstrated on September 20 to demand uniform wages for all plantation employees throughout the country. They presented memorandums to Chief Minister H.D. Kumaraswamy and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh through the Deputy Commissioner and also called for the provision of living quarters, drinking water and medical facilities in line with stipulations in the Plantation Workers Act of 1951.

According to All India Plantation Workers' Federation officials, which organised the demonstration—there were about four million workers employed on plantations across the country. Despite the industry earning millions in foreign exchange, low pay and poor conditions condemn plantation workers to a pathetic existence.

Of the half million plantation workers in Karnataka not even 100,000 are employed as permanents. Casual workers do not receive minimum wages or have provident fund facilities.

### Tamilnadu workers demonstrate for improved pay and conditions

Workers from the Tamilnadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) protested in Munneerpallam in Palayamkottai on September 24 for a 20 percent bonus and 20 percent ex-gratia for all employees across the ranks. Earlier, they rallied outside the Collectorate.

The workers also want payment of the bonus at least 20 days prior to the Deepavali festival. Protestors said an advance of 2,000 rupees should be provided to the TASMAC employees in line with other government employees.

In a separate dispute, construction and cashew workers in Nagercoil marched from Derik junction to the Collectorate on September 24

calling for salary equality with their counterparts in Kerala.

They called for a minimum wage for cashew workers, the formation of a separate welfare board and an old-age pension for all construction workers. The demonstration was organised by the welfare association that covers construction and cashew workers.

#### **Pakistani university teachers' protest**

Teachers at the Mehran University in Hyderabad observed a two-hour token "pen-down" strike on September 19 over several demands, including the upward gradation of non-PhD professors and associate professors, the withdrawal of the Model University Ordinance (MUO) and the appointment of in-service professors as vice-chancellors instead of army generals and retired bureaucrats.

Teachers at Sindh University also held a two-hour strike on the same day over the same issues. The teachers are members of the Federation of All-Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association.

#### **Sri Lankan factory workers protest**

A sit-down protest by Coca-Cola workers outside the company's Biyagama factory on the outskirts of Colombo reached its 25th day on September 20. The workers are protesting against the sacking of 62 colleagues and oppressive working conditions in the plant. The 62 were sacked because they protested over extremely high temperatures in the plant's bottle observation unit.

On the same day, workers from the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) picketed the Provincial Service Station in Rajagiriya, a suburb of Colombo, demanding a salary increase promised one year ago. The picket was organised by the Joint Trade Union Committee of the NWSDB.

In another dispute, 45 workers from an iron recycling plant in Suduwella, Madampe, around 50 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on September 22 and occupied the factory demanding a salary increase and better facilities. Most of the workers are from India and are employed in melting scrap iron. The workers have complained that the company has reduced facilities, even though its profits have increased.

#### **Malaysian bank workers picket over wages**

Members of the National Union of Bank Employees (NUBE) on September 25 picketed outside branches of Malaysia's largest bank Maybank in support of a 30 percent wage increase. NUBE members have been holding a series of pickets over the past two weeks following a stalemate in pay negotiations with the Malaysian Commercial Banks Association. The banks want the union to agree to the discontinuation of a two-monthly contractual bonus.

The 25,000 members of NUBE have also begun a work-to-rule campaign that is being observed in all Malaysian banks. NUBE wants the 30 percent pay rise for all bank employees across the nation.

#### **Australia and the Pacific**

##### **Workers rally against Howard's IR laws**

Around 15,000 workers rallied in Melbourne on September 26 to protest the Howard government's draconian industrial relations laws, WorkChoices. The laws tear up a raft of workers' rights and allow employers to impose individual work contracts (AWAs) that strip away longstanding working conditions including penalty rates, shift allowances and leave loading.

The Australian Council of Trade Unions and its affiliated unions have worked to divert mass protests by workers behind a campaign for the election of a Labor government since Howard's laws became operative in March 2006.

Victorian Trades Hall Council secretary Brian Boyd told this week's rally that "the number one task" was to "make sure that John

Howard is not re-elected" but avoided any mention of Labor's own IR platform, which is essentially the same as WorkChoices. This month, Labor amended the platform further, ditching an earlier promise it would abolish AWAs if it won office in the federal elections due later this year.

#### **Sandvik workers accept new pay deal**

The long running industrial dispute by 100 workers at international mining equipment company Sandvik in Hexham and Tomago in the NSW Hunter region over wages and conditions ended on September 21.

The workers accepted the company's offer of a 14 percent pay rise over two years. Earlier in the dispute they had rejected an offer of an extra \$40 a week, or around \$1 an hour, that would have seen weekly wages remain \$130 below that paid at another of the company's worksites in nearby Newcastle.

During the dispute the workers held a series of stoppages and protests, including a March through the Hunter region's capital Newcastle and a demonstration earlier this month outside the Asia-Pacific Mining Exhibition at Sydney Olympic Park where the company was displaying equipment.

#### **Garbage collectors' strike in New Caledonia enters second week**

A strike by around 40 garbage collectors in New Caledonia's capital Noumea has entered its second week as rubbish piles up in the streets and the garbage tip remains closed. The local council has been forced to install several large containers for residents and business to dispose of waste.

The striking workers are employed by Calédonienne de Service Public (CSP) the company responsible for garbage collection in Noumea and its suburbs. The workers struck following the collapsed of negotiations between the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) and the company over a number of issues related to pay and conditions.

In another dispute, workers at Noumea's postal service are preparing to strike over plans to establish centralised paid mail boxes in a number of housing estates, thereby doing away with free mail deliveries to households. The postal workers have condemned the scheme as an attack on the public mail services. New mail regulations exempt the post office from any obligation to distribute mail to homes within 3 kilometres around an agency. Residents in most new housing estates in Grand Nouméa are affected.



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