

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 May 2008

Bangladesh apparel workers strike over food prices

At least 15,000 apparel workers in the Bangladesh capital of Dhaka went on strike on May 13 demanding higher wages to compensate for soaring food prices.

The basic minimum monthly salary of garment workers is just \$US25, which was set in 2006. Since then, the price of rice and other food items has doubled or tripled. Jamal Uddin, a sweater machine operator, said: "With our poor salary, it is now impossible to buy three meals a day. Some of us are even going hungry some days." She earns \$30 a month.

Last month, the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association, fearing food price hikes could lead to widespread unrest that would disrupt industry, urged the government to distribute subsidised rice to 2.5 million workers.

The latest strike follows on the heels of demonstrations over high food prices on April 12 involving 20,000 apparel workers from more than a dozen factories in Fatullah, 20 kilometres south of Dhaka. Police fired tear gas and used batons to break up the protests.

Indian government workers protest

Around 500 central government workers in the state of Tamilnadu held a day-long sit-down protest near Khadi Kraft Junction in Tiruchi on May 16. The workers are employed in the railways, postal services as well as in the income tax, customs and excise departments, Indian airports authority and in various government factories in Tiruchi.

Members of the Confederation of Central Government Employees organisation want the removal of anomalies in the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and have condemned moves to privatise central government institutions. They have also called for the provision of regular jobs for contract workers, an end to outsourcing, and removal of a freeze on recruitment.

Strike hits Indian universities

University employees in Patna University in the state of Bihar launched a three-day strike on May 16 for various demands, including a 50 percent raise in the Dearness Allowance. The strikers locked up the most important offices and marched in order to make the public aware that university employees are inadequately paid.

Bihar State University Employees Association members warned that the government must meet their demands in order

to prevent further disruption of education in Bihar.

Indian power workers oppose corporatisation

Power workers picketed the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram, capital of the southern state of Kerala, and demonstrated in other district centres across the state on May 14.

They were protesting against state government moves to corporatise the Kerala Electricity Board. The Kerala Electricity Workers Federation members also demanded payment of benefits under the Gratuity Act and the filling of all vacancies.

Indian medical science teachers oppose return to old pay scale

Karnataka Institute of Medical Sciences (KIMS) teachers demonstrated in Hubli, on May 14 over moves by the authorities to revert to an old, less beneficial, pay scale.

The teachers claim that the old scale is 50 percent less than a revised one introduced in March this year. They submitted a memorandum to the KIMS director outlining their objections.

Sri Lankan teachers campaign against salary anomalies

Sri Lankan government school-teachers will hold a sick-day campaign on June 11 and 12 and stay away from work. They are protesting over the government's failure to remove anomalies in salary scales.

At union spokesman told the media on May 21 that President Mahinda Rajapakse met with the union on February 29 and agreed that teachers' were unfairly treated and that their salary structure should be amended. The spokesman claimed that the president had instructed the ministries of finance and education to resolve the issue but the necessary action has not been taken.

Next month's industrial action will involve members of the All Ceylon Teacher Services Union, the Educational Professionals Union and the All Ceylon United Teachers' Union.

Immigrant union leaders deported

On May 15, the South Korean Ministry of Justice and Immigration Authority deported Migrant Trade Union (MTU) president Torna Limbu and vice president Abdus Sabur.

The MTU is an affiliate of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the country's second largest peak union body, and has been involved in ongoing campaigns and protests over the conditions of immigrant workers.

The decision to deport the two officials was made as

industrial action and protests were taking place in Seoul, Cheongju, Daegu and Busan over the arrest of two other MTU officials just 13 days earlier.

Torna and Sabur were seized at the Cheongju Foreigners' Detention Centre by immigration department officers and forced to board a plane at Incheon Airport a few hours later.

Teachers strike over staffing changes

About 20,000 public school teachers across the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW) went on strike on May 22 in protest over state Labor government moves to abolish the state-wide system of staffing schools. Among other things, the changes will give school principals the power to hire and fire staff.

The NSW Teachers Federation called the stoppage to placate growing anger amongst its members, but it is working to accommodate the government's demands. At a union council meeting called on May 12 in the lead up to the strike, officials made clear they were willing to open the door further to the local hiring of teachers by school principals.

A resolution passed by the council meeting offered to help "achieve a different mix of staffing procedures than previously applied". It also suggested that increased appointments of casual teachers to fill permanent jobs created "a vacancy-driven opportunity to achieve a different mix of staff appointments".

TAFE teachers also joined the walkout in protest against government plans to lower teaching qualifications and increase student fees for some courses, including imposition of a \$50 fee for unemployed attending literacy and numeracy courses.

A TAFE Teachers' Association spokesperson said that changes to TAFE teachers' minimum teaching qualifications, to a Certificate Four in Workplace Training and Assessment, instead of a university degree in adult education, would lower teaching standards in TAFE colleges.

Boeing workers strike for pay increase

About 30 engineers and IT workers at the Hawker de Havilland Boeing plant in western Sydney went on strike for 24 hours in a dispute over a new collective agreement.

The workers want a 20 percent wage increase to bring their pay in line with that of their colleagues at the Boeing factory at Fishermans Bend in Victoria.

New Zealand public servants to strike over pay

Staff at the New Zealand Department of Labour will strike for an improved pay offer and to protest the current performance management system used for setting pay. They claim the system is confusing, inconsistent and unfair.

More than 750 workers voted to take industrial action at a series of meetings last week by the Public Service Association (PSA), after rejecting a department offer of a 3 percent pay rise. They want a 4 percent increase.

The PSA has served the department with a notice of industrial action, including a series of two-hour strikes spread over a two-week period beginning June 2.

Bans on overtime, doing unpaid work and attending

department conferences and training are due to begin on May 26. Workers involved in the dispute include border security staff, health and safety inspectors, industrial relations mediators and immigration officers.

Air NZ engineers reject union-brokered pay deal

Air New Zealand engineers are set to intensify industrial action after voting down a pay deal negotiated last week in mediation by the unions and the company. The engineers, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and the Aviation and Marine Engineers Association, have already imposed an overtime ban.

The workers, who want a 5.8 per cent pay rise, voted down a 3.92 percent offer from the company.

Pay negotiations have been on-going since March this year with about 1,500 workers beginning low-level industrial action on May 9. Last week unions called off the campaign to return to mediated talks.

The engineers are now refusing to tow aircraft in and out of hangars and to perform engine testing. If there is no agreement they will also refuse to work on any aircraft with the Air NZ logo.

NZ Telecom technicians protest company pay offer

Telecom broadband technicians protested outside the company's main offices in Auckland and Christchurch on May 14 over a company pay offer which they say does not cover the rate of inflation. The technicians are employed by Australian company Downer EDI, which is Telecom's largest contractor.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union blamed Telecom for its "refusal to properly resource its contractors". According to the EPMU, Telecom's dominant position allowed it to push down costs by playing its contractors off against each other to the point where broadband workers are refused a fair pay rate.

The EPMU claims the workers could earn 50 percent more in Australia. Negotiations have currently reached an "impasse" but the EPMU and Downer EDI are due to begin mediated talks at the beginning of June.



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