

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 June 2008

Bangladeshi police attack protesting apparel workers

A demonstration by thousands of Bangladeshi apparel workers near the port city of Chittagong on June 1 was attacked by police. The workers were protesting the increasing price of food and other commodities and were demanding increased pay and overtime rates. Most Bangladeshi households spend nearly 70 percent of their income on food but the cost of rice, a main staple, has doubled in the past year.

Many workers were injured and two hospitalised with bullet wounds when police attacked demonstrators barricading a highway in the Kalurghat industrial area. Around 20 factories were closed in the industrial zone during the protest.

Workers say they are not being paid the minimum monthly wage of 1,600 taka (\$US24), which was agreed last year by factory owners, unions and the government. Apparel exports are worth about \$US9 billion per year and are the country's biggest export earner. There are about 4,000 apparel factories in Bangladesh, employing near 2.2 million workers, mostly women.

The increasing labour unrest in the textile industry is in defiance of the army-backed interim government which took over in January last year and imposed a state of emergency banning all protests. More than 50 workers were injured in April when police attacked a protest of around 20,000 garment workers near the capital Dhaka.

Indian mine workers strike for conditions

About 13,000 contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC), 197 kilometres south of Chennai, Tamil Nadu, began an indefinite strike on June 2. They want regular employment, the provision of housing, medical and transport allowances, a bonus and other demands.

The NLC is a central government-owned public company and also operates three large mines, a fertiliser factory and a carbonising plant. A large percentage of Tamil Nadu's thermal electricity is generated by the power plants in Neyveli.

The contract workers walked out on March 29 over the same issues but the action was called off after 12 days when Tamil Nadu's power minister Arcot Veeraswamy falsely promised that their demands would be met.

Indian municipal workers demand outstanding salaries

Kadapa Municipal Council (KMC) employees picketed the council office on June 3 to demand the payment of salaries outstanding for the last four months. The workers also submitted a memorandum to the Kadapa Municipal Commissioner. Non-payment of wages to local government workers is a regular occurrence in India.

Sri Lankan medical practitioners work to rule

Assistant and registered medical practitioners in Sri Lankan hospitals began a work-to-rule campaign on June 1 to demand a living expenses allowance of 5,000 rupees (\$US46.45). Most provincial hospitals and state-owned dispensaries will be affected by the campaign.

In a separate dispute, attendants from the Colombo National Hospital picketed the Health Ministry on May 30 to demand the filling of 290 job vacancies at the hospital.

More wages strikes in Vietnam

About 1,000 workers at Panasonic Communications Vietnam Company Limited in Hanoi struck on May 31, demanding higher pay to keep pace with the rising cost of living. The Panasonic workers are paid a monthly salary of 1.05 million dong (\$US66), just 50,000 dong higher than the minimum wage. Workers across the country claim the official minimum is far too low.

On the same day, Bach Tuyet Cotton Joint Stock Company employees in Ho Chi Minh City refused to return to work after negotiations for a wage increase broke down. The workers went on strike on May 26 for 13 claims, including a guaranteed minimum monthly salary of 1.8 million dong (\$US113) or a salary supplement to cover accelerating consumer price rises. The company agreed to 11 of the demands but refused to grant a wage increase.

Wages have not kept pace with increases in the cost of living over the past 12 months. The price of rice rose 68 percent while the cost of other food and beverages increased by 42 percent. Overall consumer prices surged by more than over 25 percent in May compared to the same month last year.

Vietnamese factories were hit by 295 salary-related strikes in the first three months of 2008. Nearly all were organised independently of the government-sanctioned trade unions and were declared illegal by the authorities.

Korean unions threaten general strike

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) head Lee Seok-haeng told a press conference on June 2 that truck drivers, cargo workers and construction workers will lead a move for a general strike on June 16 against rising fuel prices and the government's decision to resume beef imports. Lee said he will call on district union leaders across Korea to mobilise support for the strike.

Meanwhile, more than 100 truckers belonging to the Gwangju branch of the Korean Transport Workers Union and Cargo Solidarity are maintaining a sit-down protest outside a Samsung electronics factory in Gwangju. They have threatened to strike unless the company increases drivers' transport fees. The drivers are also calling on the government to better regulate oil refiners, strengthen public transport routes and implement controls on transport fares as previously promised.

Strike by language teachers in Japan enters sixth month

Over 55 language teachers at the Berlitz franchise language schools in the Kanto province in Japan have been on strike since December 2007. Other teachers have begun joining the strike since the Berlitz General Union Tokyo began organising pickets at most of the 46 Berlitz schools in the Kanto.

The industrial action is part of the union's shunto (annual spring labour offensive) which is focusing on demands for a 4.6 percent across-the-board pay increase and a one-month bonus. A union spokesman said that while most language-school labour disputes aimed to maintain or protect working conditions or employment, the current strike was "aggressive rather than defensive" because it was "fighting for a raise".

Indonesian drivers strike for higher wages

Public transport minivan drivers across the country went on strike this week to demand fare increases to compensate for increased fuel prices. On May 24 Indonesia's central government reduced fuel subsidies, effectively increasing the cost of fuel by 30 percent.

In Jakarta, several hundred drivers struck, demanding the government declare a 100 percent fare rise. One driver said his earnings had halved from 50,000 rupiah a day (\$US5.50) since the fuel hikes.

Public transport came to a complete halt in Kupang, East Nusa Tenggara, after bus drivers rallied outside the governor's office, demanding that the government increase fares and revoke fuel rises. The municipal administration had raised fares by 25 percent but the drivers said this was not enough and want a 50 percent increase.

In Surabaya, East Java, riot police were called in when hundreds of public transport drivers marched on the provincial legislator.

Bangladesh factory workers in Malaysia protest

Seventy Bangladeshi factory workers from Johor fled their jobs on May 28 to join other immigrant workers protesting outside the Bangladesh High Commission in Kuala Lumpur over unpaid wages and employer abuse. Over 200 Bangladeshi plantation workers from various Malaysian rural districts have been maintaining the protest since December 2007.

The Johor workers said they had not been paid for three months and were beaten when they asked for the outstanding money. One worker said they were "treated like animals".

There are about 350,000 Bangladeshi workers in Malaysia, mainly employed in the plantation and manufacturing sectors. Last year the Malaysian government imposed an indefinite ban on the hiring of Bangladeshi workers but has not taken any action against employers and labour-hire agencies.

Teachers to strike over wages

State school teachers in South Australia (SA) are threatening further strike action as negotiations in a protracted pay dispute remain deadlocked. The teachers are demanding a 21 percent salary increase over three years but the SA state Labor government has offered only 9.75 percent over the same period.

A meeting of Australian Education Union delegates voted at their council meeting this week to hold a 24-hour strike on June 17 and a union spokesperson said this would be followed by rolling work stoppages if the dispute remained unresolved. The industrial action will affect TAFE colleges, preschool, primary and secondary schools across the state.

School principals vote for industrial campaign

State school principals in Victoria struck for four hours on June 4 in a dispute over a 30 percent pay rise over three years. More than 300 members of the Australian Principals Federation (APF) attended a stop-work meeting and unanimously passed a resolution condemning state Labor premier John Brumby, Education Minister Bronwyn Pyke and the Department of Education. They also endorsed a campaign of rolling strikes and other industrial action to secure their demands.

Premier Brumby claimed that the government had already negotiated a wages agreement covering public school principals and was incorporated in the enterprise agreement brokered by the Australian Education Union earlier this month. He ruled out any further negotiations with the principals unless AEU members voted down the agreement.

APF president Fred Wubbeling told the meeting that the AEU's enterprise agreement "disadvantaged principals".

Power workers ban overtime

Electrical Trades Union members at the state-owned power corporation Ergon Energy in Queensland imposed overtime bans this week in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise work agreement.

The move was provoked when the company made a surprise proposal on June 2 in an Australian Arbitration Commission hearing that workers accept one-man crews for electricity call-outs. A union spokesman said the crews were always two-man for safety reasons.

Ergon, Powerlink and Energex employees across the state have been involved in rolling strikes and work bans in a campaign for a new work agreement, including a 4.5 percent wage rise and a \$1.20 an hour increase in the attraction and retention allowance. The company is offering only 3.75 percent. A proposal for a 24-hour strike on June 11 is still under consideration.

New Zealand finance workers to vote on strike action

Workers at New Zealand's Public Service Investment Society (PSIS), a union-established savings co-operative, could strike after rejecting for a second time a settlement proposed by the company. The workers are angry that PSIS will not recognise that their jobs are comparable with those in other banks and refuses to establish pay parity.

A spokesperson for the workers said: "For an organisation that was originally set up by unions, PSIS has taken a very un-union position on how much it values its staff." The financial sector union Finsec has called on PSIS to return to the bargaining table and threatened that if pay issues are not addressed union members would be called to vote on strike action.

NZ Post workers reject company pay offer

Negotiations at NZ Post resumed this week following a series of union report-back meetings around the country where postal workers discussed and voted on the company's 3.75 percent pay offer. The offer is expected to be rejected overwhelmingly as it falls well short of the workers' claim for an immediate 8 percent increase, plus a further 8 percent over two years.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union has returned to the "next stage" of negotiations, admitting that workers had been "very vocal" at the meetings. NZ Post has just posted \$52 million profit.

Papua New Guinea bank workers strike for pay

ANZ Bank employees in Papua New Guinea remained on strike this week despite management claims that their action is illegal. The workers want a 50 percent wage increase, 60 percent housing allowance and 100 percent severance pay.

ANZ declared that the claims were "unreasonable" because they were based on ANZ staff conditions in other countries. Management has proposed salary increases of up to 10 percent for certain staff but workers condemned the offer as discriminatory and rejected it.

New Caledonia police break up demonstrations

Police attacked members and supporters of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) on May 29 at a protest against the use of government security forces during industrial disputes. Last month, a New Caledonian court sentenced 23 USTKE members to jail terms of up to a year over clashes with riot police during a bus drivers' picket in January this year.

USTKE called for a general strike last week to coincide with an official visit to New Caledonia by Yves Jégo, the new junior French minister in charge of overseas territories. The French high commissioner responded with a ban on demonstrations near the French mission in downtown Nouméa.

The latest clashes occurred after police used tear gas against a group of workers attempting to march to the French High Commission. Demonstrators then split into several smaller groups around Nouméa's Coconut Square. A third police charge repelled the demonstrators.



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