Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 March 2009

Bangladeshi garment workers strike

Azam Knitting workers barricaded the busy Alankar crossing in Chittagong for an hour on March 9 in a dispute over unpaid wages. Protestors told the media that payment of their wages for the previous nine days was uncertain because management of the company was being transferred to new owners on March 15. The protest ended after an assurance from the police and Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) representatives that workers' wages would be paid.

Two hours later, at Jurain in Dhaka, several hundred Gem Garments sweater factory employees walked off the job and demonstrated outside Habibullah Plaza. Workers alleged that they are paid only 325 taka ($US4.76) for every dozen sweaters they produce and described their wages as "very poor and incompatible with current prices of essentials". They ended their protest after local lawmaker Sanzida Khatun said the issue would be resolved "with the help of police high officials" by the end of the week.

The BGMEA wants the Bangladeshi government to introduce an "economic package" to protect the country's main export earner which now faces a rapid decline in orders as a result of the global financial crisis.

Lockout ends at Indian tyre factory

Around 2,700 Apollo Tyres factory employees in Kalamassery, Kochi began returning to work on March 6, three months after they were locked out in December last year. Apollo Tyres is owned by PTL Enterprises.

The lockout began after employees took industrial action over a previous wage settlement and the transfer of equipment to other PTL units. It ended after the PT Workers' Union promised to increase production and allow some work to be transferred to other company factories. PTL Enterprises has agreed to upgrade facilities at the factory over the next two years.

Andhra Pradesh municipal workers on hunger strike

Seven members of the Andhra Pradesh Municipal, Panchayat and Sanitary Workers Union, including City Congress president B. Ayyanna, began an indefinite hunger strike outside the Kadapa Municipal Corporation on March 9 to demand that all sanitary work contracts be allotted to scheduled-caste ("untouchable") contractors as per Government Order 30. The government law was supposed to increase representation of scheduled-caste members in the Indian legislature, universities and the public sector.

Pakistan teachers protest against forced transfers

Hundreds of Punjab Teachers Union (PTU) members rallied outside the Rawalpindi district education office and at Murree Road on March 4 against the forced transfers of 500 teachers. PTU president Sagheer Alam told the press that since 2007, 550 teachers had been forced to transfer long distances from their homes.

The union has threatened to organise further protests and take legal action if the state government does not cancel all transfer orders.

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Japanese workers rally for pay rise

Thousands of workers rallied at a central Tokyo park on March 7 and then marched in defence of jobs and for salary increases. The protest was addressed by Japan Trade Union Confederation president Tsuyoshi Takagi.

Japanese unions are currently negotiating with employers over salary scales for the fiscal year starting on April 1. As well as seniority-based annual pay rises, the unions want salaries increased in accordance with consumer price rises.

Metal-coating workers continue strike action

Some 100 Akzo Nobel workers in Sunshine, Victoria have been on strike since March 3 over the company's refusal to negotiate a new workplace agreement. The metal-coating workers, who are members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union and are picketing the plant, have not had a pay increase since August 2007. They want a 5 percent pay rise.

Worker Ainsley Cleur told the local press: "Before we took action they [Akzo Nobel] said to us that if we didn't take industrial action they wouldn't make any of us redundant for 12 months," he said. "That's without a pay increase though. It's blackmail. We are being treated like peasants."

New South Wales teachers begin industrial action

NSW Teachers Federation members who missed out on the 4.4 percent pay increase granted to TAFE and state school teachers in January held two-hour stop work meetings on March 13. The teachers are employed at eight different state-owned institutions under nine different awards and have not been able to negotiate satisfactory work agreements to replace awards that expired last year.

Those affected include teachers at Saturday Schools, Adult Migrant Education Service, Office of the Board of Studies, National Art School, TAFE Children's Centres, Bradfield College, Australian Music Examination Board, and Corrective Services. Many of these departments have not made any pay offer; some have offered 2.5 percent but for one year only.

New Zealand call centre workers strike

Around a dozen teenage employees of Oceania Customer Interaction Services (OCIS) walked out of a telephone briefing at the Auckland North Shore call centre on March 5 in protest over their low $12.50 ($US6.30) an hour pay rate. They want $15 an hour to bring them into line with other workers in the industry.

Union delegates Kyran Stoltenkamp and Paul Bell-Butler, who led the strike, were threatened by managers who said they would call the police after strikers occupied the lunchroom. The call-centre workers have not had a pay rise for two years and have threatened to continue strike action and protests until they are awarded an increase.

OCIS undertakes research for large government departments and city councils. Previously owned by AC Nielson, the call centre was outsourced a year ago to OCIS, a trans-national corporation, which operates call centres in Australia, New Zealand and Fiji. A Unite Union spokesman said market researchers at Australian call centres earn $22 an hour.

Solomon Islands cleaners in pay protest

Four Solomon Islands cleaners blocked the Gold Ridge mine road at Bubulake last week over work payments. The cleaners stopped all company vehicles during the blockade. The women, who undertook cleaning duties for Gold Ridge Mining Limited for three weeks, were initially promised $SI2,000 ($US250). The company, however, only gave them a $1,000 cheque, which then bounced at the bank.

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