

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## Bangladesh: Garment workers killed during mass protests

Two workers were killed and over 200 injured when police and Ansars (a civilian volunteer defense group) opened fire during protests by 50,000 garment workers this week near Dhaka, the Bangladeshi capital. Around 50 factories were damaged during the clashes and the Ashulia industrial zone was evacuated after it was over-run by angry workers seeking revenge for the shootings.

The confrontation erupted on June 27 when police attacked a demonstration at an Ashulia factory over wage cuts, unpaid salaries and the sacking of 1,000 workers. One worker was killed and 25 wounded. The next day another employee was killed and 100 wounded when police opened fired on 2,000 workers protesting over the June 27 police attack.

By June 29, more than 50,000 workers had joined the protests with 3,000 additional government forces, including the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). While the demonstrators dispersed at the end of the day, protest leaders have demanded that the government investigate and charge those responsible for the killings and that compensation be paid to the families of the dead workers. Ruhul Amin, general secretary of Garment Sramik Trade Union Kendra, has called on factory owners to legally recognise the union and increase workers' wages.

Bangladesh has some 4,500 garment factories, employing more than 2.5 million workers. The industry accounts for 80 percent of Bangladesh's export trade and around 40 percent of its total industrial workforce. Many Bangladesh garment factories have slashed wages by 20 to 30 percent since the global financial crisis.

A recent government survey found that between January and May this year 15 percent of local factories failed to pay wages on time, pay overtime or paid less than 1,662.50 taka (\$US24) per month, the official minimum wage.

## Indian mine contract workers strike

About 13,000 contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Cuddalore District, Tamil Nadu began indefinite strike action on June 28 for job regularisation, wage parity with permanent employees and medical benefits.

Jeeva Oppantha Thozhilalar Sangham members have also accused the company of not honouring an agreement made after a 15-day strike in June 2008. Management agreed to recognise the union and enrol 5,000 contract workers into the Industrial Cooperative Society, the first step to gaining permanency. Power cuts are expected if the strike continues.

## West Bengal port workers strike for pay

Haldia Dock Complex cargo handlers in Kolkata began indefinite strike action on June 29 to demand a 3,100-rupee pay rise. The workers claim to have been exploited for years and that their union, which is affiliated to Confederation of Indian Trade Unions, has done nothing about their disputes with agents.

The regional labour commissioner convened a meeting on the dispute early this week but nothing was resolved. Cargo movements at the dock have ceased and ships are being diverted to other port facilities.

## Indian private school teachers strike

Over 70 teachers from Sunrise English Medium School in Belur, West Bengal struck on June 29, to demand a pay rise recommended by the Fifth Pay Commission. The teachers also claim that they have not received their salaries for June and are paid only 20 percent of their Dearness Allowance.

Bishwanath Banerjee, an unofficial spokesperson for the teachers, told the local media: "The school authorities sent notices to the students' parents on April 17 and 29 stating that fees would be hiked because of the Fifth Pay Commission's recommendations. The teachers were not consulted before the notices were sent nor have our salaries been revised after the fee hike."

Sunrise English Medium School is affiliated to the Central Board of Secondary Education, with around 2,200 students.

### **Tamil Nadu sanitation workers demonstrate**

Sanitation workers and overhead water-tank operators from over 270 village councils in the Tripur district demonstrated in Tripur on June 29 for wages rises in line with the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and the immediate payment of salary arrears outstanding since 1992. The workers presented a memorandum of their demands to Collector C. Samayamoorthy.

Sanitation workers are paid just 600 rupees (\$US13) per month. Many die at an early age from poverty and various job-related illnesses. Common causes of death are pneumonia, gastroenteritis, leptospirosis, rheumatic heart disease, jaundice and respiratory diseases.

### **Indian transport workers return to work**

Casual drivers and conductors from the Berhampur Division of Orissa State Road Transport Corporation (OSRTC) ended a four-day strike on June 29 after the company accepted some of their demands. The striking transport workers wanted employment regularisation, a wage rise and review of payments for losses and extra expenses.

OSRTC agreed to a 30 percent daily allowance increase for drivers, from 100 rupees to 130 rupees, and from 83 rupees to 117 rupees for conductors. Authorities also agreed to establish a committee to determine the recovery amount from drivers and conductors for losses and extra expenditure. No agreement was reached on regularisation.

### **South Korean teachers arrested over anti-government petition**

Seoul police arrested 16 members of the Korean Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU) leading a march on June 29 to the presidential office in Cheong Wa Dae (The Blue House). The teachers planned to deliver a letter denouncing the government's decision to punish 17,000 teaching colleagues who had signed a KTU petition condemning the government's education policies and its attacks on civil liberties.

The Seoul Prosecutors' Office has launched an investigation into 88 teacher unionists. Ten union executive officials face dismissal and 78 provincial leaders could be suspended. Thousands of teachers who signed the petition are also facing disciplinary sanctions.

The KTU said it will gather signatures from 400,000 teachers for a

second anti-government statement and is planning to establish alliances with other civil servant unions.

### **Philippines workers rally for striking Keppel and Paul Yu employees**

Over 300 workers from over a dozen unions and associations in Metro Cebu held a rally on June 30 in support of striking Keppel shipyard employees and workers from the lampshade maker Paul Yu.

Keppel Shipyard-National Federation of Labor members have been on strike since June 19 in opposition to labour outsourcing and redundancies. They have also accused the company of union busting. Paul Yu suspended over 300 employees on June 22 after striking in support of seven leaders sacked for instigating previous walkouts for improved wages and conditions.

A rally spokesperson said workers and their supporters would continue with the solidarity protests until the Keppel and Paul Yu disputes were resolved.

### **Victorian paramedics suspend industrial action**

Ambulance Victoria paramedics this week lifted industrial bans after the state Labor government sought further talks in the Industrial Relations Commission for a new workplace agreement. Year-long negotiations with Ambulance Employees Australia have stalled over demands for a minimum 10-hour break between shifts. Paramedics in Victoria only have eight-hour breaks.

Union state secretary Steve McGhie said the government's proposal for longer rest breaks includes wholesale roster changes that many paramedics would never accept because it would mean even less time with their families. Paramedics are also demanding wage parity with nurses. In pursuing their claim, paramedics were taking 10-hour breaks, refusing to bill patients for treatment, and banned the use of a computerised patient-record system.

McGhie told the media that, "Paramedics have given Premier Brumby one last opportunity to avoid strike action". If they walk out it will be first strike by the paramedics in 36 years.

### **NSW concrete truck drivers walk out**

An estimated 30 Boral liquid concrete truck drivers servicing building sites in Newcastle walked off the job for 24 hours on June 30 in protest against work hours. The Transport Workers Union claimed the drivers

would lose \$10,000 (\$US8,640) per year after Boral changed starting times to avoid paying overtime.

### **Queensland public school teachers rally for pay increase**

Hundreds of Queensland teachers rallied in Brisbane on July 1 to demand the state government make an improved pay offer in the long-running campaign for a new work agreement. Teachers struck for 24 hours on May 19, after refusing a pay offer of 12.5 percent over three years.

State Treasurer Andrew Fraser said this week that the structure of the pay offer is open to negotiation but not the amount. Teachers and administrative staff want pay parity with their interstate colleagues.

Queensland Teachers Union president Steve Ryan told the media that the government's 12.5 percent offer meant that union members would still be earning between \$4,000 and \$7,000 a year less than interstate teachers. Industrial action involving the state's 37,000 teachers is planned for the end of July.

### **Arts-funding workers strike again**

Around 80 Community and Public Sector Union members at the Australia Council, the federal government's arts funding body, walked off the job on June 30 and rallied outside the council's Sydney office. The strike, the second in two weeks, is in protest against Australia Council's refusal to meet salary and workload demands.

Last year the council cut its staff by 20 percent, from 150 to 122, in line with the Rudd government's 2 percent "efficiency dividend". According to the union, the cuts have forced employees to work up to 12 hours per day, plus weekends.

Australia Council workers have rejected a 2.5 percent annual wage increase over three years with trade-offs that include substantial cuts to the incremental advancement system and a reduction in flex-time entitlements. The union wants a 6 percent pay rise and improvements in working conditions and entitlements.

### **Western Australian power workers reject agreement**

About 70 percent of the 1,900 employees at Western Power rejected the company's non-union collective agreement in a ballot this week. The agreement offered a pay increase of 5 percent a year for the next five years but overtime and penalty rates would have been slashed for salaried workers.

Australian Services Union (ASU) members—about 35 percent of the state-owned energy utility's workforce—imposed worked to rule and overtime bans in the weeks leading up to the vote. Under the federal government's Fair Work Australia Act, which came into force on July 1, the utility company will have to negotiate directly with the union. ASU state secretary Wayne Wood said the union is ready to commence negotiations immediately.

### **Union leaders in New Caledonia jailed over airport occupation**

A New Caledonia court this week sentenced six Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) leaders to jail. The charges relate to a union occupation of the Noumea airport and the boarding of an AirCal flight on May 28. Union leader Gerard Jodar and another official received 12-month terms and four others between 10- and 4-month terms. Eighteen other union members received four-month suspended jail sentences.

USTKE founder and Labour Party leader Louis Kotra Uregei criticised the prison sentences, describing them as "colonial justice". The union claimed during the court hearing that the protest at Noumea's domestic airport was intended to be peaceful and that those involved boarded the AirCal plane to protect themselves against police who had fired teargas and stun grenades.

AirCal workers are involved in a long-running dispute with the airline over the dismissal of a Kanak worker and for reinstatement of wages deducted during an industrial campaign for his reinstatement. USTKE will hold a march in Noumea on July 4 to protest the rulings.

### **French Polynesia: Nuclear test site workers' compensation bids fail**

Papeete's labour court has dismissed compensation claims brought by three former workers and five widows of workers at the Moruroa atoll French nuclear test site. The former workers and widows want compensation from the French government for illnesses caused by fall-out from 30 years of nuclear tests.

France ceased its nuclear testing programme in 1996, but Moruroa and Fangataufa atolls remain heavily contaminated, with disastrous ongoing environmental and health effects. French Polynesian women have the highest rate of thyroid cancer in the world. The three workers claiming compensation have leukaemia.



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