Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Bangladesh: River-vessel workers resume strike action

On May 7, over 150,000 river-vessel workers in Bangladesh struck for the second time this year to demand better wages and the removal of anomalies in the wage structure. At least 23 ships remain stranded off Chittagong port unable to unload their cargoes. Most of the 700 inland and coastal vessels operating on inland river routes and Chittagong and Mongla ports are affected by the strike. Flights out of Dhaka airport have been delayed due to jet fuel shortages.

Ferry commuter services are also affected. Over 20,000 major ferries ply Bangladesh's 250 rivers, transporting over 100,000 passengers per day. Shipping Minister Shahjahan Khan claimed the strike was illogical, unlawful and politically motivated. Authorities have forced several launches to operate under police cordon, according to striking workers.

The Bangladesh River Vessel Workers' Federation, representing six trade unions, called the strike after the government set vessel workers minimum monthly salary at 2,850 taka ($US41). Although this represented a 100 percent increase for many, it fell far short of their original demand of a 5,000 taka ($US71) monthly minimum salary. The workers have not had a pay increase since 2004.

Eleven federation leaders have been arrested and accused of ransacking the Sadarghat office, the ruling-party backed union, during the strike. Federation vice president Baharul Islam Bahar said that the workers would not end the strike unless their demands were met and the arrested federation leaders were set free.

River vessel workers struck for four days in March over a 22-point log of claims that included establishment of a minimum wage and a proper salary structure. They returned to work after the government agreed to form a committee to fix up the wage structure and set a minimum wage.

Bangladeshi non-government teachers demonstrate

On May 10, thousands of teachers from over 19,000 non-government primary schools rallied in Dhaka demanding nationalisation of their schools and salary increases. Their huge procession caused hours of traffic disruption on several city streets.

Bangladesh Non-government Primary Teachers' Association officials told the rally that they wanted the government to take immediate action to nationalise the country's 19,773 registered non-government primary schools, as promised in the election manifesto of the Awami League in 2008, and increase salaries and allowances on par with government teachers.

Police blocked the teachers from reaching the prime minister's office and only allowed a small delegation of association officials to submit the teachers' demands. The association has given the government until May 20 to reply to their demands.

Bangladeshi apparel workers demand wages

Nearly 4,000 employees of Antim Knitting, Dyeing and Antim Composite in Rupganj struck and held a demonstration at the Rupganj bus stop on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway on May 10. Traffic was interrupted for several hours during the demonstration. The walkout erupted after management told workers that wage arrears would not be paid until May 25.

The strike ended after assurances from the factory owners that workers' wages would be paid by May 15. Workers also wanted the company to resume paying wages by the 10th of every month.

India: Tamil Nadu power-loom workers on strike

Around 5,000 power-loom operators manufacturing surgical and bandage cloth in Rajapalayam and Chathirapatti began indefinite strike action on May 6 to demand a minimum 100-rupee ($US2.20) daily wage. The Unorganised Sector Workers' Union district secretary said that workers were only able to earn a maximum of 80 rupees on the present wage rates.

The power-loom operators said they would maintain their strike while talks with Department of Labour officials and management continued.

Indian university workers on strike

Non-teaching workers at SKM University in Dumka, Jharkhand are maintaining strike action begun on March 16 at the university's 13 constituent colleges. They are demanding Fifth Pay Commission salary scales and the payment of arrears. Academic activities at all state universities have also reportedly come to a halt after non-teaching employees walked out in support of their counterparts at SKMU.

The SKMU workers rallied at the university on May 10 and presented a memorandum requesting the deputy commissioner recommend that the

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governor and state government fulfil the long-outstanding claim.

Tamil Nadu marketing corporation employees continue protests

Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (*TASMAC*) liquor outlet workers protested outside the Collectorate in Nagapattinam on May 6 over pay and conditions. TASMAC employees in Coimbatore walked off the job for 24 hours over similar issues in March. According to the TASMAC Employees Union, the liquor outlet workers have worked 12-hour days for the last seven years on monthly salaries ranging from 2,100 to 4,000 rupees ($US46 and $88).

The workers want job regularisation, time-scale pay, promotions, an 8-hour day, one day off a week, compensation for extra working hours and for all TASMAC supervisors, bar attendants and salesmen to be given permanent payroll positions.

TASMAC employees demonstrated outside the marketing corporation's office in Egmore over the same issues last November.

Journalists at South Korean public broadcaster end strike

Journalists and presenters at MBC, South Korea's second largest television and radio broadcaster, ended a 39-day strike on May 13 with no resolution to their demands. The journalists walked off the job on April 6 to demand that the broadcaster's newly appointed president, Kim Jae-chul, step down. Union members allege that Kim was a "political parachute appointment" and want the public broadcaster kept free of political influence.

Journalists won the support of the broadcaster's 500 program directors and technicians during the strike. The vote to end the long-running strike was close with 320 voting to return to work out of 639 who voted. Unionised workers said they will form a new leadership group and map out how to fight what they called pro-government management.

Vietnamese electronics workers walk out

On May 5, some 800 workers at the Japanese-owned Katolec Vietnam Corporation in Hanoi walked off the job and rallied outside the factory after the company refused to increase salaries and improve working conditions. Workers began approaching management in April after it refused to grant the usual annual pay increase. Katolec Vietnam argued it had already raised salaries in January to comply with new government minimum wage laws.

Ford maintenance workers strike

Around 150 Ford maintenance workers at Geelong and Broadmeadows in Victoria struck for 24 hours on May 11 to demand an improved Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA). Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union want the company to employ more apprentices, guarantee security of employment and increase the current 1.3 percent wage rise being offered. Ford is using contract labour at lower rates.

At least 80 percent of workers have voted against the company's last offer and in support of the first strike at the Ford plants in 12 years. The maintenance workers, who have been working on an expired EBA for nine months, have threatened to hold a 48-hour stoppage on May 18.

Apollo workers maintain picket

Metal workers previously employed by Apollo Engineering in Melbourne are maintaining 24-hour pickets at the company's two metal workshops in Altona and Heidelberg in an attempt to force the company to pay superannuation, wages and entitlements lost when they were sacked on April 24.

One hundred Apollo employees were sacked when the company suddenly went into receivership. The AMWU has not mobilised any of its 130,000 members to take industrial action to support the Apollo employees.

The union claims workers can pressure the Rudd Labor government to increase public compensation for unpaid redundancy entitlements through the General Employee Entitlement and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS) and give workers priority claim ahead of the banks in the event of corporate collapses.

One worker who has been at Apollo for 22 years told the media, "I just want to know why in 2010 we've gone back 200 years? Workers have no say," he said.

Victorian refinery workers protest

Around 20 petrol tanker drivers at the Shell oil refinery in Newport blocked access to the plant's loading terminal for five hours on May 7 to oppose low redundancy payouts. Some 32 workers will be affected if Shell has all its petrol deliveries performed by outside contractors.

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members said that their redundancy payouts are to be capped at 26 weeks' pay regardless of the length of service, rather than the 120 weeks' maximum that is the Victorian oil industry standard. The AWU has entered conciliation talks with Shell at Fair Work Australia.

Melbourne cemetery workers strike

At least 80 AWU members at the Springvale Botanical Cemetery in Melbourne downed tools for four hours on May 7 after six months of negotiations for a pay rise reached deadlock. The workers, which include grave diggers, crematorium staff and gardeners, want a 17 percent wage rise over three years which they claim will give them pay parity with other cemetery workers around Melbourne.

AWU Victorian secretary Cesar Melhem said the next step was a full cemetery shutdown. A Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust spokesman said they will continue talks with the union.

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Western Australian power station workers defy return to work order

Some 200 workers at the state-owned Collie Muja power station, south of Perth, continue to defy a return to work order by Fair Work Australia (FWA). They walked out over asbestos concerns. Verve Energy, which runs the plant, has claimed that air monitoring it conducted revealed the power station is safe. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) claimed that it was an occupational health and safety issue which had nothing to do with FWA. The union has demanded that Verve fund an independent monitor to conduct swab tests to examine the areas of concern.

The workers were hired by the United Group to carry out a multi-million dollar overhaul of one of the ageing coal-fired power station's units. The union claims that Verve had failed to adhere to its own policies by not swabbing allegedly asbestos contaminated areas.

Peel Health workers in Western Australia continue pay fight

Around 50 health workers, covering three shifts at the Peel Health Campus in Mandurah south of Perth, attended one-hour stop-work meetings on May 12 to rally for a pay rise. The action by Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members included enrolled nurses, patient care assistants, orderlies and cleaners.

The 181-bed hospital, with a staff of over 300, is owned by Health Solutions WA Ltd and part of a private/public partnership. The hospital is run privately as part of the public hospital system for the Western Australian government.

The workers, who have not had a pay rise for 17 months, have rejected management's "final offer" of a 1.7 percent annual pay increase for the next three years. The current consumer price index (CPI) annual inflation rate for the state is 3.4 percent and projected to be over 4 percent for the next 12-month period. LHMU spokesman Roger Cook told the meetings that Peel Health Campus nurses receive up to $3.50 less per hour than their counterparts at public hospitals. The union wants a 5 percent pay rise and a 13 percent increase in superannuation entitlements.

JB Hi-Fi workers hold pickets in New Zealand and Australia

Unite union members at JB Hi-Fi's Auckland store in New Zealand picketed the store on May 8 to oppose a zero percent pay rise. On the same day, members of the Australian Unite union at JB Hi-Fi's Bourke Street store in Melbourne set up a picket in solidarity, distributing leaflets supporting their New Zealand colleagues.

There has been on-going industrial action at JB Hi-Fi stores in New Zealand since early April. Half-day stoppages were held on April 9, April 16, and May 1. Both Unite unions have indicated that there will be protests at more stores on May 15, unless workers are given "decent" wages.

JB Hi-Fi has nine retail outlets in New Zealand and, according to Unite, the Australian-owned company is expected to make over $A150 million profit this year. New Zealand Unite union members are paid just 75 cents above the minimum wage of $12.75 ($US9.00) an hour.

New Zealand: Intellectual disability support workers accept union deal

After six months of a bitter struggle that included strikes, work-to rule and street protests, frustrated employees of IHC, the government-funded intellectual disability service provider, on May 11 ratified a union negotiated agreement. Service & Food Workers Union member Heather Woolstencroft said the strike had not "been worth it for our pockets. It is going to be a long time before we have recovered what we have lost [during industrial action]".

The agreement will deliver a miserable 1 percent pay rise, backdated to November 2009 and a further 1.5 percent from November of this year. This means an increase of less than $6 ($US4.30) a week for some workers. New Zealand's consumer price index (CPI) inflation rate is currently above 2 percent. The agreement falls short of the union's original demand that a 2 percent government funding increase to IHC be passed on to its employees.

In April, the SFWU applauded the acceptance of its request that the Employment Relations Authority (ERA) intervene in the dispute, which established the union as the chief negotiator. The union, in return, called off all industrial action and tied the workers to an outcome dictated by the government and employer.

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