

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Bangladeshi garment workers sacked and charged after mass strike

Over 50,000 garment workers face police charges and hundreds have been sacked as workers returned to work on June 23 following a mass strike that forced the closure of 700 factories in Ashulia, a suburban industrial township on the outskirts of Dhaka. Many strikers were injured and factories damaged when a thousand riot police used water cannons and rubber bullets against an estimated 50,000 demonstrating workers in the estate.

Workers began walking off the job on June 19 to demand a 300 percent increase in the minimum wage. Garment workers want their current minimum monthly wage raised from its 2006 level of 1,662 taka (\$US25) to 5,000 taka.

Their action follows the Minimum Wage Board's failure this month to set a garment sector minimum wage. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association has refused to increase its offer above 1,989 taka while workers' representatives want 6,200 taka a month. The wage board reconvened on June 21.

The Bangladesh Garment Workers Unity Council, which claims to represent all garment workers, including over 800,000 in 1,000 factories in Ashulia, has issued a memorandum of understanding to the Labour and Employment Ministry demanding 5,000 taka minimum monthly pay, union rights in garment factories and government plans to establish an industrial police force scrapped.

At less than \$1 per day, Bangladeshi garment workers are the lowest paid in the world. An entry-level monthly salary in Vietnam is \$90 and \$135 in India. Garments accounted for nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh's \$15.5 billion export income last year. Bangladeshi garment factories employ around 40 percent of the industrial workforce, which is around 4 million workers.

Bangladeshi bidi workers demonstrate

At least 10,000 bidi workers rallied at the deputy commissioner's office in Rangpur on June 20 to protest the government's decision to impose a new tax on tobacco products. Speakers told protesters that only 105 bidi factories continue operating out of the 218 ten years ago and that the new tax threatens the jobs of the remaining 2.4 million bidi workers. Protesters also demanded the price of bidis (cheap handmade cigarettes) be fixed at 20 taka (34 US cents) for a pack of ten.

India: Power workers hospitalised after police arrests

Seventy three Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB) contract workers were hospitalised on June 19 after being evicted from the Vazhuthur power plant while holding a sit-in hunger strike. The workers, who began their strike the day before, were demanding the Electricity Minister N. Veerasamy honour a promise he made in 2008 that the contractors would be made permanent. In May and April last year, TNEB workers protested for a pay rise, provident fund, bonus facilities for contract workers and other demands.

Mumbai domestic workers protest

On June 19, domestic workers demonstrated in Mumbai to demand implementation of proposals from the International Labor Conference held the previous day. Their demands included four days off per month, a pension scheme and government sponsored accommodation.

A spokesperson for the Maharashtra Domestic Workers Association said union members had no medical cover and if they took a day off their pay was cut. The workers want the government to provide medical benefits and bonus pay for work during festivals.

Hyderabad sewerage workers on strike

Over 500 sewerage workers in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh struck on June 21 to demand regularisation of casual workers. The Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board Staff and Workers Union said the strike would continue until their demands were met.

The Water Board responded to the walkout by implementing the draconian Essential Service Act, which means a "no work, no pay" policy and that striking workers will face disciplinary action plus fines. The Board is refusing to talk to the union, claiming it is not officially recognised.

Rajasthan bank employees walk out

Employees at over 460 branches of the state-owned Bank of Rajasthan (BoR) held a three-day strike this week to oppose the bank's merger with

the leading private sector ICICI Bank. Bank transactions totalling 25 billion rupees were affected following a walkout in support of the BoR workers by 2,500 employees from private sector and nationalised banks.

South Korean workers strike

Thousands of Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) members struck on June 23 to demand an end to repressive actions by the Lee government against teachers and public servants. Over 5,000 KCTU members marched through Seoul to the presidential office to deliver a petition with their demands. These included an increase in the minimum wage and opposition to government changes to the law on assembly and demonstrations.

Since Lee Myung-bak came to power 1,600 teachers have been sacked and 3,000 government employees have been disciplined for attempting to form unions. Around 17,000 unionised teachers were disciplined last year for signing a petition criticising the Lee government's education policies and its attacks on civil liberties. South Korean law bans teachers and public servants from any involvement in political activities.

Filipino aviation workers protest

More than 500 members of the Philippine Airlines Employees' Association (PALEA) protested at the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in Paranaque City, Metro Manila on June 22 against cost-cutting by Philippine Airlines Limited (PAL). Up to 3,000 of the airline's 7,500 employees will be laid off under the plan. Protesters want Acting Labor Secretary Romeo Lagman to reverse an earlier decision in which he declared that PAL's job destruction plan was legal.

The lay-offs were originally planned for May 31 but suspended after DOLE intervened and ordered the union and the company to enter negotiations. PAL wants to outsource airport services (ground, cargo and ramp handling), in-flight catering and call centre reservations.

PALEA claims that the plan is illegal and current employees would be rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union. PAL, PALEA and DOLE are continuing with mediation talks.

Malaysian workers protest law change

On June 20, 500 workers protested in Shah Alam near Kuala Lumpur against a Human Resources Ministry proposal to amend the Trade Union Act, Industrial Relations Act and the Employment Act. Workers claimed that the amendments were in order to meet the ministry's Key Performance Index.

The Malaysian Trades Union Congress told the media that one of its major concerns was that under the changes the maximum compensation any worker could receive in a successful unfair dismissal case would be 24 months' pay.

Cambodian garment workers remain on strike

Over 2,000 striking employees at the Ocean Garment Factory in Dangkor district, Cambodia rallied outside the factory for several hours on June 21 before being dispersed by police. They walked off the job on June 14 to demand reinstatement of seven Free Trade Union representatives who were suspended after protesting the introduction of forced overtime.

New South Wales ship-building workers strike

Over 350 employees from the Forgacs Group, a Newcastle-based ship-building and repair company, struck for 48 hours on June 22 over a pay dispute. The strike stopped work at the company's four Newcastle sites and its Caincross shipping dock in Brisbane.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members want a 20 percent pay increase over three years. The company has refused to resume negotiations with the union since talks reached a deadlock in April. It has offered a 14 percent pay rise over three years.

AMWU organiser Melissa Pond said the ship repair workers have also voted for an indefinite overtime ban and would consider a second 48-hour strike if the first one did not achieve its aims.

Crane operators at Western Australian gas project on strike

Twelve crane operators employed by the Mammoet contracting company at Woodside's offshore Pluto LNG project at Karratha, northwest Pilbara began a four-week strike this week. The walkout is part of a long-running campaign for a 7 percent pay rise. It follows a four-week strike, which began in late April.

According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), the operators have already lost up to \$40,000 in wages during the dispute. The CFMEU has not called out any of its other members to support the operators.

Western Australian train ticket inspectors to vote on industrial action

MSS Revenue Protection Officers who check tickets and issue fines on the trains in Perth, the Western Australian capital, have been granted permission by Fair Work Australia (FWA) to vote on industrial action over a pay dispute.

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union members have not had a pay rise for over two years and want a 12 percent pay rise over two years with 18 months' pack pay. Other demands include additional training and the removal of penalty rate anomalies. MSS has offered the minimum FWA wage increase of \$26 per week, which they are entitled to anyway, and a 1.4 percent rise for the first year and a 3 percent annual increase for the next two years.

The ballot will be held next week and industrial action, if endorsed, will include bans on checking tickets and issuing fines.

Canberra bus drivers locked out

What was meant to be a one-hour stop work meeting at 7 a.m. on June 25 by 600 Canberra bus drivers has turned into a 24-hour lockout after ACTION Bus management pulled its entire fleet off the road. The government-owned bus operator suspended Transport Workers Union (TWU) members, including drivers and transport officers, without pay.

ACTION and the Transport Workers Union are in dispute over a new workplace agreement. The bus operator wants to remove the current 40 percent cap on part-time workers. TWU official Klaus Pinkas claimed ACTION is planning to replace full-time workers with part-time workers.

Last month a proposed free fare day, as part of the TWU campaign, was called off because ACTION management was going to dock 70 percent of any bus driver's pay who refused to collect fares from passengers.

Queensland Health payroll staff protest

Queensland Health (QH) payroll staff in Brisbane held a lunchtime meeting on June 22 to protest the transfer of three experienced colleagues to a Brisbane hospital to work at a pay-dispute kiosk. The Australian Services Union (ASU) claimed the transfers would mean extra workloads for staff already doing between 20 to 25 hours' overtime a week trying to fix pay mistakes caused by the introduction of a new system. ASU members want other employees trained for the kiosk jobs.

Thousands of QH employees across the state, including doctors and nurses, have been incorrectly paid or not paid at all since the new payroll system was introduced in May. Some workers have been forced to seek assistance from charities because of pay shortfalls.

New Zealand: Hotel workers locked out

Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members at the Rendezvous Hotel in Auckland have been locked out after striking on June 17. The workers rejected a company offer, which included a pay increase of just 1.5 percent over two years and cuts to conditions, such as sick leave, affordable parking and subsidised health care. SFWU members have not had a pay rise for two years and only receive a \$12.75 (\$US9.07) hourly starting rate, the legal minimum wage.

The Employment Court has rejected the SFWU's injunction to end the lockout, which the union claimed had been imposed illegally. The union has asked the government's Employment Relations Authority to facilitate negotiations with the hotel management, but has not made a counter claim.

Rendezvous Hotels is a multi-national chain employing over 2,500 people in Australia, New Zealand, China and Singapore.



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