

# 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.

## Bangladesh police attack garment workers

An estimated 85 garment workers were injured in brutal police attacks in Bangladesh this week.

At least 25 workers were injured when police fired tear gas and gunshots at demonstrating apparel workers in Dhaka's Tejgaon Industrial Area on June 15. Police were mobilised after the factory workers joined a rally by several hundred Samahar Garments employees who were locked out five days earlier for protesting the sacking of 27 colleagues.

A day earlier, 40 workers were injured when police used tear gas and batons against a demonstration of about 8,000 employees from several garment factories in the Envoy Group in Ashulia. Workers had blocked the Dhaka-Tangail Highway to demand a minimum monthly wage of 5,000 taka (\$US72). The next day over 20 were injured by police when workers from the Ocean and Design, Green Life and Euroj Apex factories continued to demonstrate.

Scores of Bangladesh garment workers were also hospitalised in May, after police fired tear gas shells and rubber bullets at demonstrations in Kachpur and Ashulia.

## India: Police arrest picketing steel workers

On June 11, Punjab police attempted to break up a picket at Amargarh-based Didar steel mills in Sangrur, arresting 25 workers and charging 40 on trumped up charges of criminal trespass and obstruction. Pickets claimed that factory management was not paying adequate wages in violation of the Factories Act. The protesting workers have vowed to maintain their protest until charges are dropped and all arrested colleagues released.

## Karnataka police attack striking non-clinical workers

The Karnataka police used canes to disperse striking non-clinical workers from the Mandya Institute of Medical Sciences on June 15. Around 50 employees were arrested when they attempted to picket the deputy commissioner's house to demand reinstatement of dismissed workers. Arrested workers were refused bail and placed in custody.

## Punjab elementary training teachers protest

Several Elementary Teachers Training (ETT) teachers in Rupnagar rallied on the Sutlej River bridge on June 14 affecting traffic on the Chandigarh-Jalandhar state highway. The teachers said they would maintain their protest until Chief Minister Parkash Singh Badal spoke to them personally about regular employment.

Hundreds of ETT teachers have been protesting throughout Punjab this year demanding regular employment. In February, a 27-year-old unemployed teacher died after she self-immolated in Kapurthala during a protest.

At that time Chief Minister Badal called on teachers to end their protests and promised that his government would "initiate measures to fill up vacant posts". No changes have been made and last month several ETT teachers from Sultanpur Lodhi threatened to immolate themselves if their demands were not met.

## Cambodian garment workers strike

On June 14 around 3,000 Ocean Garment Factory employees in Dangkor district walked off the job to demand reinstatement of seven suspended union representatives. Some employees returned to work the next day but over 2,000 continued striking. The Free Trade Union representatives were suspended after protesting the introduction of forced overtime.

## South Australian construction workers on strike

Up to 90 on-site construction workers for the Samaras Group began industrial action on June 11 after negotiations for a new work agreement stalled. Their action includes rolling stoppages and overtime bans. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union wants a wage increase of up to 25 percent over the next three years and compensation for the past 12 months since their enterprise agreement expired.

The Samaras Group, which has the largest crane fleet in the state, is involved in the Adelaide Oval redevelopment, the new state Aquatic Centre and the Adelaide Aqua desalination plant, among other projects. Construction work at all sites has been affected by the industrial action.

## Western Australian public school workers granted pay rise

The Western Australian Industrial Relations Commission last Friday granted 10,000 non-teaching employees in the state's public school system a minimal pay rise for the next three years. Education assistants will get an 11 percent pay increase while cleaners and gardeners will receive 8.75 percent.

The rise, which is less than the rate of inflation, falls far short of the 20 percent demanded by Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members. Many of these workers earn less than \$35,000 per year. The average wage of Australian workers in 2009 was over \$62,000.

Throughout the dispute, which began last August, the LHMU leadership limited industrial action to minor work bans, even after the Barnett state Liberal government docked a full day's pay for some workers who refused to carry out minor duties such as raking sandpits. The LHMU urged workers to lobby Liberal state members of parliament in marginal seats. Under no real pressure, the government forced the dispute into arbitration where it knew a decision would be closer to its offer of an 8 percent increase over three years.

### **Victorian cemetery workers accept pay offer**

Workers at the Springvale Botanical Cemetery, Melbourne have ended two weeks of industrial action after accepting a 13.25 percent pay rise over three years. Eighty workers, including grave diggers, gardeners and other staff, walked off the job for two days on May 27, followed by rolling stoppages, to demand a 17 percent pay rise to bring them on par with their counterparts at Fawkner Cemetery. Despite the offer being well below what they wanted the Australian Workers Union has claimed it represents a victory.

### **Victorian metal workers walk out**

CMI Industries workers in Horsham struck for four hours on June 10, following failed negotiations for a new enterprise agreement and an ongoing dispute over superannuation payments. Australian Workers Union members have not had a pay rise for two years and want pay parity with CMI workers in sister plants.

The company, which has five plants in Victoria and two in New Zealand, specialises in manufacturing forged iron and aluminium auto parts.

### **Victorian fabric workers on strike**

Forty workers employed at the United Bonded Fabrics factory in Coburg have been on strike since June 11 and are manning a factory gate picket following failed negotiations for a new enterprise bargaining deal.

The National Union of Workers wants improved wages and conditions but the company insists that workers must give up existing conditions, including redundancy pay, wash time and rostered days off. Management also wants to employ all new recruits on lower conditions. United Bonded Fabrics makes pillows, quilts and building products.

### **New Zealand: Hotel workers protest low pay**

Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members at the Rendezvous Hotel in Auckland rallied outside the hotel on June 16 to protest attacks on wages and conditions. Workers rejected a company offer which included a pay increase of just 1.5 percent over two years. SFWU Northern Regional secretary Jill Ovens said the company also wanted to "take away sick leave, affordable parking and subsidised health care".

SFWU members have not had a pay increase for two years and the union has not announced a new claim. Rendezvous Hotels is a multi-national chain which operates in Australia, New Zealand, China and Singapore, and employs over 2,500 people.

### **Steel engineers strike**

Eleven engineers at StelTech, a subsidiary of New Zealand Steel, voted to strike on June 14 and immediately set up a picket outside the company's premises in Takanini, Auckland. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union organiser Steve Westoby said StelTech had refused to increase pay and last year scrapped a bonus scheme which he claimed reduced workers' annual pay by \$10,000. Westoby said the strike would continue until the company made "a reasonable offer".

### **French Polynesia: Unions end general strike**

The Collective for Peace, a group of 11 French Polynesian unions, signed a deal with Gaston Tong Sang, the territory's president, on June 15 which ended a five-day general strike in protest against the government's austerity programs. None of the essential issues facing workers are resolved.

Tong Sang reportedly agreed to ask the International Labour Organisation to investigate the feasibility of an unemployment fund and to visit Paris with union leaders to discuss civil servant pensions. These gestures fall well short of the Collective's initial demand for fewer redundancies, secure pensions and unemployment insurance, and for France to compensate victims of radiation exposure during nuclear weapons tests.

Hundreds of workers participated in the walkout, including port workers, teachers, hospital workers, civil servants and Tahiti airport firefighters. Papeete port was paralysed and international flights to and from Tahiti halted during the strike.



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