

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 July 2010

## Bangladeshi garment workers injured in police attack

Police used clubs, tear gas and water cannon against 15,000 striking garment workers in Mirpur and Sheorapara, Kafrul on June 30, injuring at least 25 workers. The protests began at four factories owned by the Outright Group and spread to dozens of other plants along a five-kilometre stretch of road in the Kafrul and Mirpur areas. Strikers' demands included back-pay, an immediate wage rise and improved working conditions.

Over 50,000 garment workers are facing police charges and dozens were injured, following mass walkouts at industrial centres in Dhaka during the past two weeks. The workers' main demand is a minimum wage increase from its current 1,660 taka per month to 5,000 taka (\$US70).

Bangladesh has around 4,500 garment factories which produce for companies such as Wal-Mart, H & M, Carrefour and Levi Strauss. Garments accounted for nearly 80 percent of Bangladesh's \$15.56 billion of exports last year and the industry employs around three million workers, 40 percent of the national industrial workforce.

## India: Punjab railway employees on hunger strike

Railway workers in Ludhiana began a week-long hunger strike on June 28 in protest against "unbearable work loads". The Northern Railway Men's Union wants staffing levels increased from 390 to 660, proper basic amenities, such as cloak rooms for women, uniforms, sewerage problems fixed and relocation of the training centre from Ghaziabad to Ludhiana to save many employees having to travel over 300 kilometres to attend classes.

## Punjab teachers protest sackings

On June 28, 300 computer teachers demonstrated in Mohali to demand reinstatement after being sacked in May. The protest affected traffic on the busy Chandigarh-Manali national highway. Teachers ended the protest after seven hours, following an assurance by the state's chief minister that he would meet them the following day.

## Rajasthan marble stone workers strike

Kishangarh marble market workers in Rajasthan struck for two days on June 25 to demand a wage rise following a series of failed talks with management. Baton-wielding police were called in by management in an attempt to force an end to the strike. Employers have agreed to resume talks this week with the district administration mediating.

Around 4,000 people are directly employed in the Kishangarh marble industry with another 15,000 engaged in downstream activities. The marble market claims to have lost 40 million rupees (\$US860,000) during the first two days of the walkout.

## Xstrata miners in New South Wales strike

At least 240 mine workers at the Tahmoor colliery in NSW's southern highlands walked off the job for 24 hours on June 25 to attend a union meeting over pay and entitlements. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) district vice president Bob Timms said the mine workers wanted to retain current conditions but Xstrata was attempting to impose a new Enterprise Agreement with reduced conditions. Timms claimed the company had indicated it has no intention of engaging in further discussions.

Negotiations have been ongoing for 18 months but Xstrata has consistently rejected CFMEU demands for improved annual leave and an agreement to protect jobs and existing safety standards. In February, the company used the Fair Work Act to lock out Tahmoor employees after they rejected an average 25 percent base salary rise, but included cuts to basic entitlements.

Workers said they would continue their industrial action with short-duration stoppages of two hours every day for the next week.

## University of New South Wales staff impose work bans

On June 30, academic and administration staff at the University of New South Wales banned marking students' final exam results. The action by National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members follows a 24-hour walkout on March 18 and is part of a long-running campaign for a new enterprise agreement. The NTEU wants a 20 percent pay rise over three years, the right of staff to choose when to take leave, a cap on working hours, and a reduction of staff on short contracts. The union claims that over 50 percent of teaching is now performed by casual staff on contract.

The university has threatened to not pay NTEU members imposing the bans even if entering exam results only represents part of their work duties.

NTEU members at 30 universities across NSW began industrial action

in September last year to restore conditions lost under the former Howard government's WorkChoices legislation. In 2005, individual agreements were imposed on all university employees, limits removed on the number of casuals, and union access to members restricted. Restoration of lost conditions has become the main sticking point in negotiations.

### **Western Australian crane operators forced back to work**

On June 30, Fair Work Australia (FWA), the national workplace tribunal, imposed a three-month suspension of strike action by twelve CFMEU members at Woodside Petroleum's \$13 billion Pluto offshore liquefied natural gas project in Western Australia. The FWA gave no reasons for its decision.

The 12 crane drivers and telescopic forklift operators employed by contract company Mammoet Australia began a four-week strike last week as part of a long running campaign for a 7 percent pay increase.

Mammoet workers ended a four-week strike in May without resolution after losing an estimated \$40,000 in pay due to their action. The FWA has ordered both parties to enter "good faith" negotiations during the suspension period.

### **New Zealand government workers take industrial action**

Public Service Association (PSA) members at the state-run Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) walked off the job across the nation on June 25 to protest a government-imposed wage freeze. PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said talks for a new collective agreement began one year ago and that ACC workers are being paid 4 percent less than the market rate.

A striking worker told WSWS that ACC had "engineered a performance pay system that promises improved remuneration for meeting [or] exceeding targets, but has no contractual obligations to honour that". He said ACC workers lacked confidence in the union and that not many were members.

Declining union membership reflects the fact that the PSA is widely regarded as useless by ACC workers. Since the onset of the global economic crisis, the union has actively assisted the government in imposing hundreds of public sector redundancies and other cutbacks.

### **Housing workers start industrial action**

On June 30, PSA members at Housing New Zealand began a work-to-rule campaign after ten months of pay bargaining became deadlocked. The union wants a 2 percent annual pay increase over two years and more clearly defined pay scales. The PSA claimed that members are forced to work unpaid overtime in an attempt to manage over 600 properties each. This compares with 250 in the private sector.

### **Primary school principals to boycott national standards**

On June 25, the Auckland Primary Principals' Association (APPA) called on its 401 members to boycott training sessions for the government's planned introduction of National Standards for primary school students. Education academics claim the National Standards could harm children's learning and damage New Zealand's education system.

Principals and teachers are strongly opposed to National Standards but the main primary teachers union, the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI), has backed the scheme while calling on the government to "trial" it before it is fully implemented.

Similar standardised testing regimes have been implemented in the United States and Australia, where they are used to rank schools and teachers against each other based on "performance" criteria. The main purpose of National Standards is to punish individual teachers and schools for problems created by decades of government under-funding and neglect.

### **Lockout at Rendezvous Hotel ends**

Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members at the Rendezvous Hotel in Auckland returned to work on June 30 after the company lifted its 13-day lockout. SFWU members were locked out after rejecting a company offer, which included a 1.5 percent pay rise over two years with cuts to conditions, such as sick leave, affordable parking and subsidised health care.

The union says the housekeeping workers, who have not had a pay increase for two years and receive a starting rate of just \$12.75 (\$US9.07) an hour, have ratified an agreement mediated by the government's Employment Relations Authority that includes a pay increase of up to two percent for a one-year term. The agreement constitutes an effective pay cut with inflation at 2.0 percent for the year to March and expected to rise to 5.9 percent by next year, largely due to an increase in the goods and services tax (GST) from 12.5 percent to 15 percent.

The SFWU claimed the new agreement will preserve current sick leave entitlements, but has not confirmed if other conditions under threat were saved. Rendezvous Hotels is a multi-national chain employing over 2,500 people in Australia, New Zealand, China and Singapore.

### **Steel engineers end strike**

Eleven engineers at StelTech, a subsidiary of New Zealand Steel, ended a two-week strike on June 25 after accepting a three percent pay rise. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members had walked off the job after the company refused to grant a pay increase and last year scrapped a bonus scheme that the union claimed reduced workers' annual pay by \$10,000.

As well as a pay rise, the deal included two lump-sum retention payments totalling \$3,500, and a guarantee of redundancy packages if the company is sold in the next year.

### **Wellington taxi drivers protest**

Around 100 taxi drivers from Wellington's smaller companies began a week of protest at parliament on June 28. Drivers claimed that a new deal

with Wellington Combined Taxis, the city's major operator, gives the company a preferential pick-up zone at the city airport. Protesters claimed the income of 300 drivers will be reduced and some are considering applying for unemployment benefits.

According to a taxi drivers' spokesman, police attempted to end the protest by fining taxi drivers \$150 for sounding their horns during the action and threatened to cancel their taxi drivers' licences. The New Zealand taxi industry was deregulated in 1989. Since then Wellington's taxi numbers have nearly tripled, from 454 to 1,237.



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