

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 July 2010

Pakistani ship-breaking workers injured in police attack

Police and the Anti-Terrorism Task Force attacked over 10,000 protesting ship-breaking workers and their supporters in Gadani on July 5. Government forces took up positions hours before a scheduled eight-kilometre protest march along the Gadani shoreline. Police attacked the protestors, seriously injuring dozens, and then blocked ambulances and paramedics from reaching the wounded. The General Secretary of the Gadani Ship-Breaking Democratic Workers Union (GDSBDWU) was arrested, along with several other workers.

Workers' demands include a 100 percent wage rise, registration with the Social Security and Old Age Benefits Institutes and an end to the JAMADARY contract system. They also want clean drinking water, a canteen, basic occupational health and safety measures and medical care at each ship-breaking yard.

Unions called off scheduled strike action from 16-30 June after ship-breaking owners promised to meet the workers' demands by the end of June. The union claims that owners broke that promise and made various physical threats against workers.

Ship-breaking workers are paid 200-250 rupees (\$US2.40-\$3) for a 12 to 14 hour day. They are not registered with any government social security institution and therefore have no access to medical facilities. Employers are not bound by any safety standards and do not supply basic safety equipment. As a result 17 workers lost their lives last year and dozens suffered serious injuries.

Bangladeshi garment workers continue industrial action

The long-running struggle by Bangladeshi garment workers for a 300 percent increase in the minimum wage continued this week in Ashulia, an industrial township on the outskirts of Dhaka. On July 5, workers from 50 factories demonstrated at factory gates after being locked out without pay. Closed factories included Magpie Knitwear, Pioneer Sweaters and Paramount. Over 20 workers were injured when police baton-charged the demonstrators.

Over 50,000 garment workers are facing police charges and dozens were injured, following mass walkouts at Ashulia last month. The workers' main demand is a minimum wage increase from its current 1,660 taka per month to 5,000 taka (\$US70). At less than \$1 a day Bangladeshi garment workers are the lowest paid in the world.

India: Patna university non-teaching staff strike

At least 33,000 non-teaching employees of nine universities and 250 colleges in Patna, Bihar are maintaining strike action which commenced on July 1 to demand wage rises promised by the state government in 2005. The university administration is refusing to enter talks with the strikers.

Workers' demands include implementation of Union Grants Commission pay scales, benefits under an assured career promotion scheme and representation of non-teaching staff in university senates and syndicates.

Strikers locked all gates to university and college premises prompting demonstrations by students demanding the university administration begin negotiations. Patna University authorities have directed college heads to force the gates open and make a list of all employees on strike.

The Bihar State University and College Employees' Federation said its members will not return to work until their demands are met.

Lignite workers end six-day strike

Around 14,000 workers of Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu ended a six-day strike this week after reaching agreement on a new pay deal. Workers struck on July 1, after a deadlock in negotiations over the backdating of the company's offer. The revised deal extends a 3 percent increment backdated to September 2009, a 71 percent hike in allowances and an additional increment back-dated to June 2007.

Tamil Nadu plantation workers on strike

On July 1, 900 rubber plantation workers began indefinite strike action following the failure of six rounds of talks between the Kanyakumari District Estate Worker's Union, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and private plantation managers for a 100 percent pay rise. Plantation owners want to drive up productivity by increasing the amount of rubber tapping to offset any pay increase.

Over 2,000 workers are employed in 14 rubber plantations in the district. Workers are paid a minimal daily wage of 155 rupees (\$US3.50). The CITU wants the daily wage increased to 350 rupees.

Andhra Pradesh teachers protest

Municipal school teachers in Eluru, Andhra Pradesh staged a protest at the Collectorate on July 3. The United Teachers' Federation (UTF) wants

money from the World Bank-aided Success Schools program to be directed to state-run school infrastructure upgrades and the filling of 1,000 vacant teaching positions.

Sri Lankan garment workers begin pay campaign

On July 3, 1,000 garment workers staged a one hour protest at the Biyagama Free Trade Zone area, 20 kilometres from Colombo, to demand the government honour a promise made during the presidential election to grant them a monthly wage increase of 2,500 rupees (\$US22).

According to the Free Trade Zone Apparel Union, the picket was the first of similar protests that will be carried out on a regular basis until the rise is granted.

Cambodian garment workers threaten to strike

The Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC), the Free Trade Union of Workers (FTUW) and the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union, representing over 130,000 workers have threatened to call their members out on a three-day strike in mid-July if the minimum wage for garment workers is not significantly raised. The CLC wants the minimum monthly wage increased from \$US50 to \$93. The Ministry of Labour and the Ministry of Social Affairs have offered garment workers a miniscule \$5 monthly increase.

A spokesman for the Community Legal Education Centre claimed that their research revealed that Cambodian workers could not survive on wages below \$80 a month. He said the increase was needed to cover the basic needs such as food, shelter, medicine and clothes.

New South Wales Xstrata miners continue strike action

At least 250 miners at Xstrata's Tahmoor colliery, in NSW's southern highlands, walked off the job on July 9 over a new work agreement. The action by Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members follows five weeks of rolling stoppages begun after Xstrata broke off talks with the union and applied to Australia's industrial arbitrator Fair Work Australia to cancel the existing agreement and force workers onto an award with inferior conditions.

The striking miners are maintaining a 24-hour picket and no date has been set for ending the strike. The mine, which is capable of producing 60,000 tonnes of coal per day, has not been in production for five weeks due to industrial action.

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.

Duty free retail workers at Melbourne and Brisbane airports strike

National Union of Workers (NUW) members employed by Nuance Group at its FIST Duty Free shops at Brisbane and Melbourne airports began strike action for a new pay agreement on July 9. Brisbane staff struck for 24 hours from 7 a.m., Melbourne staff struck for four hours and will walk out again on Saturday for four hours. NUW members at the company's storage facilities have banned stock shipments to the shops.

The strike action follows seven months of negotiations. The union wants a \$26 per week pay increase but the company has only offered \$13 a week. NUW Victorian state secretary Tim Kennedy said members were also protesting management intimidation. He said staff who stood up for their rights are put on night shift and moved from the better paying weekend shifts.

The union claims the Nuance Group has approached a hire company to supply strike breakers during the dispute. NUW has over 150 members employed by the company.

Victorian food factory protest sacking

Twenty-seven maintenance workers at National Foods in Morwell, Victoria are picketing the plant after being sacked and their jobs outsourced. The sackings occurred without warning after the management ordered the workers to attend a meeting outside the factory gates on June 29 to discuss the company's future. Workers were told that all permanent maintenance workers were being sacked as part of a \$55 million plant investment.

A spokesperson for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union claimed that the company had breached a union collective agreement, while Peter Mooney from the Electrical Trades Union says it will take its fight to Fair Work Australia.

The Morwell sackings are part of a wider restructuring of National Foods factories in which another 280 workers will lose their jobs as plants at Cobden, Victoria and Wetherill Park in New South Wales are progressively wound down by March 2012.

New South Wales IBM staff vote for industrial action

Australian Services Union (ASU) members employed at IBM's "Flight Deck" facility in Baulkham Hills, Sydney have voted for industrial action over the company's stalling tactics in collective agreement negotiations for its 80 staff. Fifty workers indicated in the ballot that they approved industrial action ranging from an unlimited ban on overtime, four-hour rolling work stoppages and indefinite walkouts.

ASU members in 2008 suspended a 4-hour stoppage just hours before it was due to commence after IBM dropped its long held position not to negotiate a collective agreement with the union. IBM's Baulkham Hills Flight Deck staff maintain software for Westpac, Qantas, MLC and the federal government.

New Zealand: Gold miners strike

Fifty-five miners employed by contractor HWE Mining at Newmont Waihi Gold's Favona Decline struck on July 2 rejecting a new three-year collective contract. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union

has condemned management's plan to pass on any union negotiated increases to the 20 non-union workers at the mine. The union wants the contract to include additional annual bonus payments that will only apply to union members.

Papua New Guinea mine workers strike

Workers at mining giant Xstrata's Frieda copper project went on strike on July 1 over a range of grievances. In a petition presented to the site supervisor the strikers said that the company was not complying with its own regulations governing the use of protective safety gear. The workers are also angry about rubbish on the site, the company's use of contractors, as well as the verbal abuse and unfair dismissal of two workers by the camp services coordinator.



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