

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 July 2010

## China: Strike at Omron ends

A strike by 500 factory workers at the Japanese automotive electronics manufacturer Omron in Guangzhou, southern China ended last weekend after Omron agreed to pay a 24 percent wage rise, significantly lower than the 40 percent workers were asking for. Their new monthly wage will be 1,574 yuan (\$US231). A one-week strike at Atsumitec Auto Parts, a Honda parts factory in Guangdong, ended several days earlier when workers secured a 45 percent pay rise.

Strikes have erupted at more than a dozen foreign-run factories in southern China since May and local authorities are increasingly alarmed that the spontaneous walkouts are in defiance of the government-controlled unions. According to one media report, local government laws in Guangdong are being drafted to force official unions to organise wage negotiations between workers' elected representatives and the employer when more than 20 percent of the workforce wants a pay rise.

## Cambodian garment workers injured in police attack

At least nine female garment workers were injured on July 27 when Cambodian riot police attempted to end a week-long strike over the sacking of a local union official. More than 100 police tried to force an estimated 3,000 female workers back into their factory, pushing several to the ground and stunning them with batons.

The factory, which is on the outskirts of the capital, Phnom Penh, is owned by a Malaysian firm and produces garments for Gap, Benetton, Adidas, Puma and other global brands. Workers ended their street protest but remained on strike. The factory owner threatened legal action if they did not return to work by Thursday.

## Cambodian garment workers protest minimum wage

On July 25, more than 4,000 garment workers protested outside the National Assembly over a recent small increase in the industry's minimum wage. Last week the Free Trade Union of Workers, a major Cambodian union representing over 130,000 garment employees, dropped previous demands for a 53 percent minimum wage rise and accepted \$US5 monthly increase offered by the Labour Advisory Committee, a body made up of government officials and industry representatives. The rise means the minimum monthly wage will be \$61, far below the \$93 workers were demanding.

The Cambodian Labour Confederation organised the rally and said it

planned to mobilise garment workers next month in a week-long strike if the government and employers did not agree to new negotiations for a better offer. An estimated 300,000 of Cambodia's 13.4 million people are employed in the garment manufacturing sector.

## Bangladeshi garment unions accept new minimum wage

On July 28, unions representing over two million workers in 4,500 Bangladesh garment factories accepted a government and employer offer to increase the minimum monthly wage for garment workers to 3,000 taka (\$US43). This is far below 5,000 taka demanded by workers.

Tens of thousands of garment workers have taken strike action and protested during the past months for a 5,000 taka minimum monthly wage. The new rate, at less than \$1.60 for a 13-hour day, is still one of the lowest salaries in the global garment industry. 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.

## India: Foxconn workers protest over toxic gas exposure

At least 500 workers at Foxconn's electronics factory in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu protested on July 25 when workers began vomiting blood after exposure to a suspected toxic gas. The affected workers were taken to hospital with complaints of giddiness, nausea and breathlessness. Ten were admitted to the intensive care unit.

Protesters, who were joined by workers from neighboring factories, alleged that the company was unwilling to arrange for ambulances.

## Indian tea plantation workers strike

At least 1,700 workers from the Doloo Tea Estate in the Barak Valley, Assam are continuing strike action that began on July 20 over allegations that management has failed to deposit 40 million rupee (\$US900,000) of their entitlements into the provident fund. Workers are refusing to end the walkout until the money is deposited.

According to a Barak Valley Cha Shramik Union spokesman, most of the 104 tea gardens in the Barak Valley are "provident fund faulters".

## **Indonesian: Garuda employees threaten to walk out**

Serikat Pekerja Garuda (Sekarga), the union representing 5,200 Garuda airline workers, has threatened strike action for a new work agreement. Sekarga spokesman Tomy Tampatty said that the airline had agreed during February negotiations to an across-the-board 50 percent pay rise for all workers and to lower the retirement age for pilots from 60 to 56. He claimed Garuda reneged on the agreement when it was put to the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration.

Workers are also opposed to performance-based pay, which the company claims has transformed the airline into a profit making concern. This year management gave company executives a 100 percent pay rise.

Sekarga spokesman Tomy Tampatty said the union would meet this week to determine a date for the strike and prepare a case to present to the State Enterprises Ministry and President Yudhoyono.

## **BlueScope steel workers strike in Victoria**

BlueScope Steel workers in Westall began indefinite strike action this week over a “substandard” pay offer. Over 80 National Union of Workers members at the steel processing and distribution centre in Melbourne’s south-eastern suburbs walked out after negotiations for a new enterprise agreement with the company broke down.

Westall workers are currently paid \$888 per week and want a 4 percent rise to increase their pay to \$915. The company has offered 3 percent. NUW members want to maintain pay parity between steel distributors BlueScope and OneSteel. The BlueScope offer, according to NUW spokesman, was “well below rates offered by other companies in the sector.”

## **Western Australian hospital workers stop work**

Hundreds of hospital workers, including cleaners, kitchen staff, orderlies and patient care assistants, attended half-hour stop-work meetings at two major hospitals in Perth, this week to vote on possible industrial action for a \$50 a week pay rise. Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) want an 18 percent pay increase over three years.

The state Liberal government has offered just 8.25 percent over three years and wants significant trade-offs, including flexible rosters and part-time contracts for new employees.

Workers at the Sir Charles Gairdner and Royal Perth hospitals voted to take industrial action if the state government refuses to increase its offer. Negotiations are continuing between the government and the LHMU. No industrial action has been announced as yet.

## **University of New South Wales staff end industrial action**

Seventy academics at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) resumed duties this week after being stood down without pay on July 2 when they implemented work bans over a new collective agreement. National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members voted to lift their exam result bans after management agreed to lift the suspensions.

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. A key sticking point is Vice Chancellor Fred Hilmer’s insistence that he has the right to determine the levels of casual, part-time and permanent staff.

While negotiations are continuing, the union has agreed to impose a moratorium on all industrial action until September.

## **Xstrata miners resume industrial action**

The 19-month pay dispute at Xstrata’s Tahmoor colliery in NSW’s Southern Highlands is no closer to resolution with Construction Mining Energy Union (CMFEU) members resuming industrial action on July 26. Workers are holding four-hour stoppages on each eight-hour shift in an attempt to force Xstrata to negotiate in the Fair Work Australia industrial tribunal.

The union wants the rollover of the old agreement. This includes pay parity with other mines in the southern coal fields, improved annual leave and an agreement to protect full-time jobs and maintaining manning levels to comply with long-established safety standards. Xstrata is demanding workers agree to a series of regressive changes, such as lifting limitations on the use of contractors, an end to the last-on, first-off rule on hiring and the allocation of shifts by seniority together with a reduction of restrictions on work hours and minimum manning requirements.

Xstrata is standing by its pay rise offer of 25 percent on base salary over four years but workers claim that this figure includes existing allowances which when excluded take the offer to just 5.5 percent over four years, in other words, a substantial real wage cut.

## **Queensland sugar workers stripped of right to strike**

Workers at Sucrogen, Australia’s biggest sugar milling company, have been ordered by Fair Work Australia not to strike for at least a month and to continue negotiations over a new work agreement. The order came after cane-growers complained that six weeks of industrial action was “doing harm to the regional economy”. Fair Work Australia can force an end to approved industrial action if it thinks the action is harming the employer’s business or a third party.

Members of the Australian Workers Union, Australian Metal Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union at Sucrogen’s seven mills in North Queensland have walked off the job three times in the past six weeks in their six-month battle for a “roll-over” enterprise agreement with a 10 percent annual pay increase. They planned to strike this week. Sucrogen has refused to lift its offer of a 3.75 percent annual pay rise for two years and wants more control over the timing of rostered days off.

## **Victorian car component workers on strike**

Up to 250 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at the Friction Material Pacific (FMP) brake pads factory in Ballarat struck for 24 hours on July 26 after six months of negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. After returning to work, AMWU members imposed a daily one-hour stoppage and said they would escalate

their action to include a four-hour stoppage each Friday if the company refuses to negotiate.

The company is demanding that all wage rises be coupled with trade-offs, such as rostered days off, penalty rates on personal leave, the use of contract labour and a heat agreement for staff working in temperatures up to 45 degrees centigrade.



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