

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 May 2011

India: Murderous attack on garment workers in Uttar Pradesh

On May 2, armed thugs hired by owners of the Ankur Udyog garment factory in Gorakhpur attacked hundreds of company employees after they attended a May Day rally in Delhi.

Witnesses claim that the goons first beat the workers and then started firing. Over 20 employees were injured and 18 hospitalised, including one who has a bullet in his spine and is in a critical condition. According to a media report, police were called after the shootings but “escorted the attackers outside the factory premises and let them escape.”

Over 2,000 employees from factories in Gorakhpur had joined thousands of other garment workers in the May Day rally in Delhi to present a log of claims to the government.

GM-India strike ends without resolution

A 51-day strike by almost 900 of the 1,500 workers at General Motors India’s Halol plant in Gujarat ended on May 4 after their union, the Gujarat Kamdar Mandal (GKM), accepted a deal from the Gujarat Labour Department, which will mediate the dispute via a joint union-management committee. While GMI has agreed to reinstate those sacked during the dispute, the company has opposed workers’ outstanding demands.

The autoworkers walked out on March 16—the second time in four months—against increased productivity demands and brutal working conditions. They accused GMI of imposing extended working hours that have resulted in numerous spinal injuries and acute back pain. The strikers also accused the company of medical negligence for ignoring repeated complaints about the intense workload.

Their demands included cancellation of all transfers, which the company used to victimise workers who complained about conditions, scrapping of the 20 percent speed-up implemented in December, and elimination of wage discrepancies. Legal issues regarding transfers, increased workload, inhuman treatment and a new wage agreement will not be discussed by the union-management committee. GMI has rejected all these demands and is not willing to negotiate.

GKM, which is affiliated with the Indian National Trade Union Congress, called off two months of industrial action in December after making a deal with GMI that imposed increased production quotas in exchange for modest wage improvements.

Air India pilots end strike without resolving issues

On May 6, the Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA), representing 800 striking pilots of India’s flagship airline Air India (AI), called off a 10-day walkout following a deal with AI management and the government. The settlement fails to resolve any of the pilots’ grievances, and contempt of court charges against nine union delegates will remain. The case is due to be heard on May 25.

AI management has agreed to reinstate 15 pilots sacked during the dispute, re-recognise the union, and participate in a three-member committee formed by the government to investigate the pilots’ demands. The government has given no commitment on when the committee will make any recommendations.

The pilots walked off the job on April 26, after a breakdown in pay talks with the airline and the government. ICPA members—formerly Indian Airline pilots now employed by AI after the amalgamation of both airlines in 2007—want pay parity and similar working conditions to their AI colleagues who are members of the Indian Pilots Guild (IPG).

Pharmaceutical workers in Hyderabad on strike

About 120 full-time and 30 part-time employees of Zenotech Laboratories in Hyderabad launched an indefinite strike on May 4 to demand unpaid salaries from last month. The strikers, who have stopped all production and laboratory work, are also concerned about job security, accusing the new owner Daiichi Sankyo of dropping a commitment by the previous owner, Ranbaxy Laboratories, to continue manufacturing Zenotech products.

Bangladeshi garment workers locked out

Alfa Patten and Alfa Fashion garment workers in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone in Ashulia were locked out for four days on Tuesday after they refused to commence work when management said their wages would not be paid on the due day. According to DEPZ rules, workers have to be paid before the 10th of each month.

The garment workers were told to return on Saturday and that their wages would be paid on Sunday. According to workers, the company has been late paying wages on numerous occasions.

Sri Lankan university teachers strike

Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA) members held a one-day national stoppage on May 8 to demand a 200 percent pay rise to lift their monthly salaries to 168,000 rupees (\$US1,531). An FUTA official said that university teachers want separation from the Central Bank of Sri Lanka's salary structure and a special professional category created. The union also wants the government to spend 6 percent (\$US830 million) of the nation's Gross Domestic Product on education.

According to the FUTA, Prime Minister Mahinda Rajapakse agreed to increase the teachers' salaries at a previous meeting but would not approve a 200 percent rise.

Cambodian police attack protesting garment workers

Phnom Penh police attacked a rally of 1,000 former employees of June Textile who had assembled on May 8 to hear a report back from union officials on an improved termination compensation package. Eight workers were seriously injured and two union representatives arrested. A witness said police used electric batons to hit demonstrators' heads, hands and legs.

At least 4,000 workers were laid off over a month ago when the factory burnt down. They have accepted a redundancy deal of \$US36 for each employee but rejected an offer of an additional \$20 for every year of employment. Workers want this increased to \$150 for each year of service.

Following the clash with police, City Hall authorities called on the union and factory owners to meet with them this week to resolve the issue. A June Textile spokesman said the company would not improve its offer.

Strikes continue at Patrick Stevedores docks

For the second time in a week, 100 Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members at Patrick Stevedores loading dock in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, walked off the job for 48 hours on May 7 as part of a national campaign for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The action followed 24-hour stoppages two weeks ago at Patrick's terminals in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne and Fremantle in Western Australia. Patrick has taken the matter to Fair Work Australia (FWA) in a bid to impose a cooling-off period and force an end to industrial action. While the FWA ruled against the company, Patrick and the MUA resumed talks this week.

Negotiations for a new work agreement have been ongoing for nine months with the company refusing to make an offer until last month. The MUA wants annual pay increases of 6 percent over three years, a sign-on bonus of \$5,000 and reduced casual employment. The company has offered annual pay rises of between 4 and 4.5 percent over three years with productivity offsets.

At least 60 percent of Patrick workers are casual and the union has called for long-term casual employees to be offered permanent positions. Another issue is improved safety—three port workers were killed in accidents during 2010.

Qantas engineers call off strike

The Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA),

representing 1,600 aircraft engineers at Qantas, called off a one-hour strike planned for yesterday along with industrial action scheduled for May 16 and 17. ALAEA federal secretary Steve Purvinas claimed the industrial action was cancelled because of "concerns about the growing number of technical faults" on Qantas aircraft in the previous 48 hours.

In mid-April, 80 percent of ALAEA members voted for industrial action, including overtime bans, work-to-rule campaigns and full stoppages, in a dispute for a new work agreement. The union told the media yesterday that there would be no industrial action for at least the next month.

Engineers are demanding 3 percent annual pay increases over three years and job security clauses in their new enterprise agreement. Qantas is opposed to any clause that restricts outsourcing and claims that the wage increase, along with new classification increments and travel, could cost an additional 28.6 percent over three years. Conciliation between the ALAEA and Qantas will continue in Fair Work Australia on Monday.

South Australian soda-ash workers on strike

Twenty-four maintenance workers at Penrice Soda Products in Adelaide walked out on May 6 and 9 and implemented bans on overtime and after-hours call-outs in response to stalled talks for a new enterprise agreement. The company is offering 3 percent pay rises from July this year.

An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) official said the company offer fails to keep pace with the current cost of living increases, which are 3.6 percent. He claimed the company has refused to backdate any wage increase and wants to increase restrictions on sick leave.

The AMWU wants a 4 percent pay rise back-dated to when the previous agreement expired in February. Negotiations for a new agreement began in December. Company management and the union resumed negotiations this week.

Western Australian port workers suspend strike

The MUA, which represents 80 port workers in Esperance, on the far south coast of Western Australia, called off a 24-hour stoppage planned for May 11 after reaching agreement with the Esperance Port Authority to take their enterprise bargaining agreement dispute to Fair Work Australia (FWA). MUA members held two 24-hour stoppages in April over the issue.

The MUA has been negotiating with the port authority for seven months for a 6 to 7 percent annual pay increase over three years, along with an improved career path. The port authority has offered 4.5 percent annual pay increases and wants to wind back key conditions such as redundancy and leave entitlements. FWA talks will begin next week.

Auto accessory manufacture workers in Victoria on strike

Tension at the Cequent Australia auto accessories manufacturing plant in Dandenong, Victoria came to a head on May 5 when 80 employees walked off the job to protest the sacking of Tyron Cross, a local union delegate. Cross, who has worked for the company for 15 years, refused to transfer from his maintenance position to his previous welding job at the

factory. Cross stopped welding two years ago after suffering ill-health from the fumes. At least two workers have resigned over the dispute. An AMWU official said the company has refused to re-employ Cross or meet with union delegates and a mediator, and is threatening workers with legal action.



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