

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 May 2012

Bangladesh: Thousands of garment workers protest in Dhaka

On May 21, garment workers in the Narayanganj industrial zone walked out and protested on the Dhaka-Sylhet highway against the sudden closure of factories and sacking of workers. At least 30 people were injured when police intervened and one female worker was killed in a road accident as she tried to flee from police. Thousands of workers gathered at the Sinha Garments factory the following day after it declared an indefinite shut down.

On May 22, garment workers in the Gazipur industrial zone walked out and blocked the Dhaka-Tangail highway for about one hour after hearing of the death of a colleague who was run over by a van while returning to work from lunch. Ten people were injured when police attempted to end the demonstration.

Last week, thousands of garment workers in the Ashulia industrial zone also clashed with police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion during a protest over the fatal bashing of a colleague by factory authorities and police. At least 100 workers were injured after police attacked them using teargas shells and rubber bullets when over 50,000 protesters spilled onto the highway.

Air India pilots' strike in third week

Over 100 Air India pilots have been sacked since 200 pilots went on sick leave on May 7 to protest being denied training on the airline's new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes. International flights have been severely disrupted after the rest of the Indian Pilot Guild's (IPG) 400 members joined the industrial action. The IPG has been derecognised and doctors sent to the homes of pilots who reported in sick. Only four pilots have resumed duty. Meanwhile, management has mobilised retired pilots to break the strike.

The dispute is over unresolved wage differentials between pilots when AI merged with its sister cargo airline India Air in 2007, adding about 800 pilots to AI's existing 700 pilots. The former India Air pilots, members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA), are paid 50 percent less than IPG pilots. While IPG pilots are paid a fixed salary, ICPA pilots are only paid for the hours they work and not for training.

The current dispute was triggered because AI management has offered 50 percent of training places on the Dreamliners to the cheaper ICPA members, meaning 150 IPG members will not be trained. IPG pilots also want payment of pending arrears from 2007, travel on first class when not working and the opportunity to be promoted as commanders within six years. AI management told the media that apart from IPG office bearers, all the sacked pilots could be taken back if they immediately ended their strike.

The Indian government has established a special medical board to carry out medical examinations on all the striking pilots. Under Indian law, if sick leave extends beyond 14 days, the pilots have to pass a medical examination to retain their flying licenses.

Tamil Nadu load workers protest

Chennai Metro Load Workers Union members protested outside the Tamil Nadu Collectorate in Chennai on May 21. Workers were demanding job regularisation and a pay increase to 100 rupees per tonne from the current 58 rupees and implementation of the International Labour Organisation's 55kg maximum load standard for a single worker. They also want employment state insurance and a pension fund.

India: Municipal workers demonstrate

After a month of demonstrations and rolling strikes by Haryana municipal workers, about 1,000 rallied outside the minister for urban local authorities residence on May 20 to demand job regularisation and an end to the use of contractors over regular workers.

The protesters, which included sanitation and horticultural workers who are mainly hired through third-party contractors, want 15,000 permanent jobs for daily wage Class-3 and Class-4 employees. The minister said he would meet with workers' representatives of the Nagar Palika Karmchari Sangh on May 23.

Pakistan: Karachi police attack human development workers

On May 21, for the fourth time in seven weeks, contract workers for the semi-government National Commission for Human Development (NCHD) were assaulted by police with water cannons, tear-gas and batons while protesting outside the Karachi Press Club. More than 60 workers have been arrested and many others injured in the attacks.

Over 700 NCHD contract workers began protesting on March 29 to demand job regularisation and the reopening of projects that affect 5,000 jobs. After a decade on the job, the NCHD contract workers, who assist in the improvement of education and healthcare at 3,000 schools in the Sindh province, were still denied benefits received by full-time employees.

Police attack Punjab welfare workers

Close to 2,000 protesting contract workers of the Punjab Population Welfare Department were attacked by police in Lahore on May 16 when they refused to end their demonstration outside the Civil Secretariat's office. Protesters rejected the secretariat's verbal promise to meet later over the issues and forced their way into the government compound. Close to 200 workers were arrested and many received head injuries when police baton-charged the group.

The protest followed a week of strike action coordinated by the All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA). Their demands included the immediate regularisation of 35,000 jobs and the reversal of the government's plan to merge the welfare and health departments. APCA said strike action would continue. Contract workers are only paid 7,000 rupees (\$US76) a month.

Punjab paramedics maintain rolling stoppages

Punjab Paramedical Alliance (PPA) members at the Lahore Children's Hospital boycotted the outpatients department for two hours and demonstrated outside the hospital on May 21. The year-long state-wide wage dispute has involved protests and rolling two-hour stoppages at public hospitals. Paramedics ended industrial action in February over the same issues after health officials agreed to consider their demands.

PPA members want a service structure for lesser qualified Grade 1 to Grade 4 employees, a health professional allowance, and regularisation of contract workers. According to paramedics, the Punjab chief minister has failed to honour a promise made in May 2011 to give "high priority" to their demands.

On May 22, PPA officials said that paramedics would end strike action but maintain daily two-hour protests at all government hospitals until June 2, after which action will be escalated.

Rolling stoppages by Lahore locomotive workers in second week

Locomotive maintenance workers at the Pakistan Railways locomotive sheds in Lahore have extended their daily two-hour strikes to four hours from May 19 and threatened to lock the sheds from May 28 if their demands are not met.

Loco Shed Mazdoor Union members began industrial action on May 15 to demand a review of pay scales, double pay for working holidays and restoration of a technical allowance.

Sri Lankan university non-academic staff strike again

Thousands of non-academic staff in Sri Lankan universities launched a 48-hour strike on May 22 to demand a pay rise and correction of pay anomalies dating back to 2006. This is the fourth time since November 2011 that members of the Inter University Trade Union Federation have walked out over the issues. Each time the federation has accepted the false pledges from authorities who said they would soon resolve the issues. At least 12,000 employees are affected.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Over 5,000 employees of the Singapore-owned SL Garment Processing factories in Stoeung Meanchey, Phnom Penh have been on strike since May 12 to demand better working conditions. An official of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers (C.CAWD) said workers want a \$US5 increase in their base pay of \$61 a month for eight-hour days, six days a week and an extra \$25 a month for transportation and housing. The official monthly minimum wage for Cambodian garment workers has not been revised since it was set at \$61 in July 2010.

The strikers, who claim they were regularly required to work on their one day off a week or denied sick days and ordered to work up to 16-hour shifts, have rejected a \$5 bribe from management for each employee who returns to work. Last Friday the Phnom Penh municipal court ordered striking employees back to work and warned 23 of their representatives, including three members of C.CAWD, that they faced legal action.

SL Garment Processing has an annual turnover of \$26 million producing garments for Levi's, Gap and other international brands. On May 2, thousands of garment workers from three factories in the Phnom Penh municipal province struck in an attempt to win a salary rise above the \$61 monthly minimum.

South Korean bus union accepts lower pay rate

The union representing over 16,400 Seoul municipal bus drivers called off strike action planned for May 18 after reaching a deal, at the last minute, with bus operators for a wage increase. Over 91 percent of drivers had voted to take strike action after operators refused to pay a 9.5 percent pay rise drivers said was needed to compensate for eight years of average wage increases that were below 2 percent. The average consumer price index (CPI) for the same period was 3.16 percent.

In the compromise deal accepted by the union, drivers will get a wage increase of just 3.5 percent and a 40,000 won (\$US34) increase in extra pay for accident-free driving. In 2005, 2007 and 2009 drivers voted to strike over wages but each time the union accepted a compromise.

Bowen Basin miners resume strike action

Up to 3,500 workers at six BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) coal mines in Queensland's Bowen Basin remain on strike after walking out on May 24 in an 18-month dispute for a new enterprise agreement. The seven-day strike follows months of rolling stoppages and two secret ballots of BMA mine workers in which they overwhelmingly rejected a company deal.

The company had offered miners annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus for each worker in exchange for new productivity demands. BHP Billiton, which made \$23 billion profit last year, has rejected claims for three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, equal pay for labour-hire employees, protections for permanent workers displaced by contractors, increased superannuation and improved housing. The company also wants to change work rosters at any time.

While the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and other mining unions have denounced the BMA for the breakdown in negotiations, the unions have isolated the Bowen Basin miners and refused to call for joint industrial action by other Australian coal miners.

Queensland meat union imposes speed-up deal

On May 21, after five weeks of industrial action that included a 12-day lockout of 600 meat workers at Oakley Abattoir, the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) has endorsed an enterprise agreement that imposes increased productivity demanded by the company.

The abattoir, which is located in south-east Queensland's Darling Downs, is owned by Nippon Meat Packers. Management wanted an increase in the boning line in exchange for a 4 percent pay rise. The company also wanted compulsory Saturday work.

New Zealand meat union shuts down long-running dispute

The 12-week industrial dispute between Affco and its 1,500 members of the New Zealand Meat Workers Union (MWU) at Affco's eight North Island meat processing plants ended on May 22 after the union reached a backroom deal with the giant corporation.

Nine hundred striking and 500 locked out Affco workers were involved in the dispute in opposition to management demands for "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in a proposed new agreement. The company aimed to smash up longstanding work practices and alter manning levels and tally rates on a shift-by-shift basis. Workers are covered by a core collective contract, with site agreements determining additional terms and conditions

While the union claims that the settlement retains protection of wages and employment security, no details have been released and closed-door negotiations are continuing. Last year the MWU and the Council of Trade Unions endorsed cuts in pay and conditions on 100 meat workers who were locked out for 65 days at CMP Rangitikei.



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