

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 May 2012

Bangladeshi garment workers protest fatal bashing

Thousands of garment workers in the Ashulia industrial zone on the outskirts of Dhaka clashed with police and the notorious Rapid Action Battalion on May 13 and 14 during a protest over the fatal bashing of a colleague.

Witnesses said that hundreds of workers from the Ha-Meem Group, Sakib Poly and Packaging Ltd had started rallying inside the factory in the morning, after finding the beaten body of Salman Rahman, a store keeper who had been missing for several days. Workers alleged that he was either killed in police custody or at the hands of factory security staff. When the Ha-Meem factory employees walked out in protest they were joined by workers from 350 factories in the estate, who were locked out by factory managers fearing that angry workers would damage their equipment.

At least 100 workers were injured after police attacked them using teargas shells and rubber bullets when over 50,000 protesters spilled onto the Dhaka-Tangail Highway. One protester was run over by a bus and killed while running from the attacking forces.

The protest also followed the death last month of Aminul Islam, an official of the Bangladesh Centre for Worker Solidarity and the Bangladesh Garment and Industrial Workers Federation. He disappeared from Ashulia after receiving a call from a worker requesting assistance. His mutilated body was found several days later showing signs of extreme torture.

India: Air India pilots maintain strike

Over 200 members of the Indian Pilot Guild (IPG) have been on mass sick leave at Air India (AI) since May 7 to protest being denied training on the airline's new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliner planes. International flights have been disrupted, over 20 pilots sacked, the IPG derecognised, and doctors sent to the homes of pilots who reported in sick. Only three pilots have resumed duty.

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.

Tamil Nadu sugar mill union ends strike without resolution

For the fourth time in a year, the TN Federation of All Trade Union of Cooperative and Public Sector Mills has called off strike action by mill workers without resolving their long-standing pay issues. After 38 days of strike action, the federation sent workers back into the mills, claiming it was "in the interests of the farmers and the sugar mill workers." Indicating they were willing to make a deal with the government behind closed doors, federation officials sought an appointment with the Chief Minister to further "explain its demands."

Around 6,000 workers at 15 cooperative and two public sector sugar mills in the Vellore district had been on strike since April 4 in a dispute that began in December 2010. Their demands include a pay rise and dearness allowance on par with other employees on government pay scales.

Last week sugar mill workers rejected a government offer to immediately pay a 10 percent residual of an ad-hoc payment granted in 2010, in addition to a previous agreement to increase the base salary by 25 percent, well short of the 40,000 to 80,000 rupees (\$US729) for government wage scale workers.

Orissa contract nurses on mass leave

Around 300 casual nurses at MKCG Medical College and Hospital went on mass leave on May 14 to join with other nurses from Orissa public hospitals in a rally at Bermampur to demand regularisation and a pay increase on par with regular nurses. The All Odisha Casual Nurses Association wants the current pay rate of 5,200 rupees (\$US95) per month increased to 9,300 rupees. Casual nurses ended a 24-hour strike in March after the government made a commitment to review their demands within 10 days.

Andhra Pradesh construction workers protest

On May 14, hundreds of construction workers in the West Godhavari district rallied outside the Collectorate in Eluru to protest a court order stopping sand mining in the Godavari River from April 1. According to workers, the price of sand has skyrocketed from 1,800 rupees a truck load to 23,000 rupees forcing many builders to stop construction and lay off workers. The protest was organised by the West Godavari District Building Workers' Union.

Sri Lankan postal workers strike

Around 500 employees of the Postal Department in Colombo struck for 24 hours on May 10 to demand better working conditions, including sanitary facilities at a new work site. The United Postal Worker Union called off the strike after 200,000 posted items were left undelivered.

Sri Lankan doctors strike

Around 15,000 government doctors across the country struck on May 11 protesting the Rajapakse government's failure to honour its 2008 commitment to increase the enhanced disturbance, availability and transport allowance (DAT) from 15,000 rupees a month to 29,000 rupees (\$US224). The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) ended the strike after several hours when the government agreed to lift the allowance in June.

Pakistan power workers strike against privatisation

As part of a long-running campaign against government plans to privatise the state-owned power utility and sell nine thermal power plants, workers at 144 sub-divisions of the Pakistan Electric Power Company (PEPCO) walked off the job for 24 hours on May 12.

The Pakistani government intends to transfer PEPCO's duties to a new Central Power Purchasing Agency, acting under the ministry of water and power. The latest action follows six months of limited strikes and protests by members of the 100,000-strong Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA).

Pakistani paramedics strike in Lahore

On May 15, members of the Punjab Paramedics Alliance (PPA) boycotted outdoor patient departments at government hospitals in Lahore in a pay dispute. The strike followed a month of protests and a rally outside the Jinnah Hospital the previous day. 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.

Lahore locomotive maintenance workers protest

Dozens of members of the Railway Mazdoor Itihad held a protest inside the locomotive shed in Lahore on May 15 to demand a review of pay scales and restoration of a technical allowance. Passenger services were affected when workers refused to release locomotives from the shed.

The union said members would down tools for two hours each day until May 19. If their demands were not met by then, workers would lock the locomotive sheds.

South Korean bus drivers vote to strike

Over 91 percent of the 16,400 unionised bus drivers in Seoul voted to take strike action on May 18 if the association of companies running the city's buses refused to pay a 9.5 percent pay rise. According to the union, wages have increased by less than an average of 2 percent per year over the last eight years.

Drivers also demanded the Seoul municipal government reverse its plans to cut the number of city buses. In 2005, 2007 and 2009 drivers voted to strike over wages but each time the union reached a compromise.

Burmese wig factory workers end strike

On May 10, over 1,000 employees at the Hi-Mo wig factory ended a two-day strike and sit-down protest at the labour exchange office in Mayangone township, Burma after the factory owner agreed to address their 78 grievances and increase wages. The factory employs 18,000 workers and exports wigs to China, South Korea and Japan.

Workers were previously paid a basic salary of 8,000 kyat but with added day rates, overtime and per piece bonuses received between 35,000 kyat (\$US43) to 65,000 kyat a month. Under the new agreement they will receive a basic monthly wage of 30,000 kyat and with added payments, about 100,000 kyat. A lawyer for the Hi-Mo workers, however, said it remained to be seen whether the company would fully implement the agreement.

Singapore domestic workers protest

On May 13, 1,000 foreign domestic workers rallied at the Kallang Theatre in Singapore to protest poor and unsafe working conditions. The Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics presented a petition with workers' demands to the Singapore government and various embassies.

Workers demands included one day off a week and an end to dangerous practices such as the cleaning of exterior windows. Between 2007 and last year, 69 workers fell from high-rise flats while cleaning windows or hanging out clothing, 24 died from their injuries. Of the 400,000 foreign domestic workers in Singapore, 200,000 are from Indonesia, of which eight died this year after falling from apartment windows.

Queensland meat workers locked out

Up to 600 employees at the Oakley Abattoir in the Darling Downs, south-east Queensland have been locked out since May 10 in a pay dispute. The lockout followed a 10-day strike by Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) members. Nippon Meat Packers, the

abattoir owner, has agreed to a 4 percent pay rise but wants to speed up the boning line and impose compulsory Saturday work, which AMIEU members have rejected.

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Queensland construction workers walk out

About 100 workers at the Cairns Base Hospital's redevelopment site in far north Queensland walked off the job for the second day in a row on May 16 in a dispute over safety. According to the Electrical Trades Union (ETU), the contracting firm Abigroup has not resolved "fall-from-height" issues. Workplace Health and Safety (WHS) officers were called to the site to try and resolve the dispute.

New South Wales public school teachers stop work

State public school teachers and principals at 2,200 schools in New South Wales stopped work for two hours on May 18 to attend meetings to discuss the O'Farrell government's "school autonomy" reforms. The NSW Teachers' Federation, representing 73,000 teachers, claimed that the reforms, which are included in award negotiations, are aimed at reducing the number of permanent teaching positions at schools, leading to increased class sizes and forcing parents to raise funds to employ teachers to make up the shortfall.

In December, the Teachers Federation welcomed a NSW Industrial Relations Commission decision to award teachers a 2.5 percent interim pay rise, leaving the door open for future increases in negotiations that included "employee-related savings." The 2.5 percent rise was far short of the 3.5 percent teachers wanted to compensate for cost of living increases.

New Zealand meat workers dispute in twelfth week

The Meat Workers Union (MWU), representing nearly 500 locked out workers and 900 strikers at Affco meat processing plants on New Zealand's North Island, has issued a strike notice extending industrial action for another five days from May 18. The MWU is currently in negotiations over the third offer from Affco's owner Talleys in a dispute for a new collective agreement. Affco locked out workers at five of its eight plants on February 29 in response to strike action. The remaining workers have been on strike since April 13.

Affco workers oppose management demands for "flexible hiring" and productivity speed-ups in the new agreement. The company aims 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.

The MWU, which claims to cover 23,000 permanent and seasonal workers at 75 sites in the New Zealand meat industry, has not called out any of its members at other work sites in support of the Affco workers.



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