Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 June 2012

Bangladesh: Over 500,000 garment workers locked out

Over 500,000 workers at 350 garment factories in the Ashulia industrial zone on the outskirts of Dhaka have been locked out since June 11 when hundreds of workers began protesting on the Dhaka-Tangail Highway to demand a pay rise. Factory owners closed their plants after an increasing number of workers walked out to join the protest.

More than 1,100 police and Rapid Action Battalion forces, using tear gas, rubber bullets and batons, have attempted to clear the streets and end the protests. Over 80 workers sustained injuries in the first two days of the protest. Police have begun targeting individuals and have made many arrests.

The monthly wages for Bangladeshi garment workers are the lowest in Asia, ranging from 2,500 taka ($US30) for new entries to 9,700 taka ($US111) for a grade 1 operator. According to a spokesman for the National Platform to Protect Garment Workers and Industries, garment workers' real incomes have shrunk by 30 percent due to the rise in prices of essentials, rents and inflation over the last one and a half years.

Concerned that the protests could extend to other districts, the government has announced that it will subsidise rice purchases for garment workers. The unions have said that if employers reopened their factories and the police dropped all charges and released strike leaders they would direct the employees back to work.

Air India pilots' strike in seventh week

Four hundred Air India (AI) pilots are defying Indian government threats and continuing strike action begun on May 8. While the airline has been able to maintain up to 75 percent of its flight schedules this is diminishing because 100 strike-breaking executive pilots are begin to experience fatigue. At least 20 have refused to continue flying. Management of the state-owned carrier has begun advertising to replace the 101 pilots it has already sacked.

The current dispute was triggered after AI management offered 50 percent of training places on its new fleet of Boeing 787 Dreamliners to lower-paid members of the Indian Commercial Pilots' Association (ICPA). The IPG pilots are also demanding outstanding salary arrears from 2007, first-class travel when not working and the opportunity to be promoted as commanders within six years. While IPG pilots are paid a fixed salary, ICPA pilots are only paid for the hours they work and not for training.

According to IPG, the airline illegally stopped paying May and April salaries. An eleventh round of talks began on June 18 between IPG, AI and the labour commissioner.

Tamil Nadu handloom workers end strike

Close to 1,000 handloom workers in Sellur, near Madurai city, returned to work on June 16, ending a 21-day strike after labour department officials and handloom owners agreed to increase wages by 18 percent. The handloom workers told the media that they were forced to forgo their demand for a 50 percent pay rise because their families were starving after three weeks without income.

Kerala domestic workers protest

On June 15, the Self Employed Women's Association organised domestic workers to protest outside the Secretariat in Thiruvananthapuram to demand official recognition. Workers want the establishment of a minimum wage, fixed working hours and respect from employers. Their wages have only increased from 40 rupees to 130 rupees ($US2.62) per day in the last seven years. Protesters demanded an immediate pay increase to 200 rupees per day.

Gujarat textile workers on strike

At least 3,500 employees from the Arvind's Denim factory in Naroda have been on strike since June 4 to demand a 40 percent pay rise. They were joined on June 18 by 1,500 workers from Arvind's subsidiary plant, Ankur Textiles in Rajpur. The government has declared the strike illegal and management is hiring contract workers to break the strike.

Pakistan: Karachi Metropolitan workers strike over pay

Hundreds of machinery department workers at the Karachi Metropolitan Corporation walked out for the day on June 11 to demand overtime payments and revision of the employment structure that was promised five years ago. Workers also opposed plans to shift the facility to a different location. Garbage collection in the city was suspended for the day.

Sri Lankan tea estate workers' strike in fourth week

© World Socialist Web Site

About 850 Park Estate workers remain on strike after walking off the job on May 28. The strikers demand the tea estate factory be reopened and 70 factory workers forced into field work to be returned to their jobs. Management closed the facility in early January, claiming that a boiler needed repair. Workers fear that management wants to shut the factory, destroy their jobs and construct a luxury hotel on the premises.

On June 2, workers plucked tea, brought the harvest to the factory and then occupied the facility to demand it be reopened. Management immediately contacted the police and dozens of officers were mobilised and evicted the workers. While the police are now guarding the facility, estate workers are continuing their protests.

Acting on the basis of previous experiences, the workers decided not to inform the unions before going on strike, knowing that they would oppose any industrial action. Predictably the Ceylon Workers Congress, the dominant estate workers' union, refused to support the protest and criticised workers for not notifying it in advance. When management flatly refused to open the factory, the unions simply called for more discussions with the company and the labour commissioner.

Sri Lankan non-academic university workers' strike in second week

Thousands of non-academic staff at 13 universities and 26 related institutions are maintaining strike action begun on June 6 to demand a pay rise. After talks failed between the Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC) and government officials on June 20, 2,000 strikers protested at the University Grants Commission offices in central Colombo. Workers are demanding an immediate 25 percent pay rise and rectification of salary anomalies dating back to 2004.

The latest walkout is the fifth since November 2011 and follows strikes and protests over the issue since 2003. Each time the unions have accepted empty promises from authorities who said they would resolve workers' claims. The issue has become all the more pressing since Rajapakse's government cut price subsidies.

Non-academic staff told the media that they would remain on strike until their demands were met. At least 12,000 employees are affected.

Sri Lankan health inspectors resume industrial action

Public Health Inspectors (PHI) have imposed work bans since June 18 after the latest round of talks with the government for a pay rise reached deadlock. Members of the Association of Public Health Inspectors (APHI) had called off a month-long strike on May 27 after the government agreed to enter talks.

APHI members previously walked out in April to demand allowances worth 25,000 rupees ($US220) to compensate for uniforms, fuel and administration expenses. The association said members would report in sick from June 27 if their grievances were not resolved.

South Korean taxi drivers strike

At least 220,000 taxi drivers struck for one day on June 20 in nationwide action to demand higher fairs and cheaper fuel. According to the Korean Taxi Workers' Union, cab fares in South Korea are still comparable to China and 77 percent cheaper than in Tokyo.

Tens of thousands of drivers rallied in central Seoul demanding a rise in the 2,400-won ($US2) flag-fall rate, designation of taxis as public transport, and price cuts to liquefied petroleum gas (LPG), which fuels most taxis. The price of LPG has increased by 50 percent in the past four years.

There are at least 290,000 registered taxis in South Korea including 90,000 in Seoul.

Coca-Cola workers in the Philippines issue strike notice

The Bacolod Sales Force Employees Union filed a notice of strike before the National Conciliation and Mediation Board in Bacolod City on June 15 in a dispute for a new collective bargaining agreement with Coca-Cola Bottlers Philippines. Workers have rejected management demands that across-the-board wage increases be replaced with "pay for performance."

A union spokesman told media that the scheme will slash workers' pay and benefits. Pay increases would be determined by evaluating individuals according to 3Ps—their performance, participation and presence.

New South Wales firefighters strike

For the first time since 1956, thousands of firefighters in New South Wales (NSW) walked out for five hours on June 21 to oppose the state Liberal government's changes to workers compensation. At least 250 stations closed but firefighters still attended call-outs.

The walkout follows rallies and stoppages last week in Sydney and regional centres by thousands of workers, including nurses, public servants and construction workers. The unions offered no perspective to fight the cuts.

While the government modified the legislation on Friday, exempting firefighters and paramedics, the new scheme dramatically impact on hundreds of thousands of other public sector and private industry employees.

Medical expenses will now be capped, weekly payments reduced and benefits cut after a set period, depending on the severity of the injury. Workers with "minor" injuries will receive no payments after five years. No compensation will be granted for injuries sustained travelling to and from work. Families and dependants of people injured or killed on the job would no longer receive benefits for nervous shock.

The NSW government claimed the cuts were necessary to reduce WorkCover's projected $4 billion deficit, but according to WorkCover's 2011 annual report, the premium collection rate was "sufficient to cover the scheme's costs."

Victorian community nurses impose work bans

More than 800 community nurses at 20 Royal District Nursing Service (RDNS) centres across Victoria began industrial action on June 18 to demand better pay and reduced workloads. Community nurses have not had a pay increase since October 2010.

Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) members have reduced patient

© World Socialist Web Site

assessments and stopped processing paperwork required for state government funding. The action follows 11 months of negotiations.

The ANF has limited its demand to the same real wage cut that it recently imposed upon public hospital-based nurses—a 2.5 percent annual wage increase (current CPI inflation is over 3 percent) and $1,000 a year for professional development.

RDNS has offered a 2.5 percent annual wage increase for four years and annual allowances worth up to $700 for full-time nurses and less for part-time nurses. The nurses' federation claims that RDNS management wants to reduce current entitlements, including sick leave, carers leave and qualifications allowances.

Victorian TAFE workers protest

As a part of ongoing state-wide protests, several hundred TAFE (technical and further education) workers and supporters demonstrated outside the Rural Press Club in Ballarat on June 15, where Victoria Premier Ted Baillieu was speaking. The state Liberal government's recent budget slashed education spending, including $300 million from TAFE. Protesters chanted "Save TAFE, Sack Ted." An estimated 2,000 teaching jobs are threatened by the cuts.

The University of Ballarat has reported its TAFE would lose $20 million, a 40 percent funding cut, forcing it to close up to 60 programs. Central Gippsland Institute of TAFE revealed it had made 32 positions redundant and Bendigo TAFE is expected to axe about 120 jobs. South-West TAFE reported that it would lose $11 million and cut 43 jobs.

Papua New Guinea power workers end strike

Over 2,000 PNG Power Limited (PPL) employees ended a two-day strike on June 19 after the O'Neill government agreed to consider their demands. PNG Power Workers Union members had walked out to demand unpaid entitlements from when PPL took over Elcom in June 2010. They also opposed government plans to restructure Papua New Guinea's power industry without first consulting unions.

The PNG government agreed to temporarily suspend its proposal to transfer management of PPL's Yanki and Rouna hydro schemes and power distribution assets in Port Moresby and other major centres to Israeli company LR Group. The government said it would begin talks with unions and landowners on its proposals and other outstanding issues.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site