

# Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

2 June 2012

## India: Jammu & Kashmir government employees resume strike action

For the sixth time in nine months, over 400,000 government employees of India's northern border state of Jammu & Kashmir struck for three days on May 24 in a three-year dispute over pay and conditions. Around 100 strikers were arrested when they broke a police curfew and attempted to march to the governor's residence in Jammu.

Their demands include payment of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and arrears, 7 percent dearness allowance, the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60, regular employment for 50,000 daily wage workers and ad hoc employees, and increased payments for Anganwadi (childcare) workers.

Despite full support from workers in all government departments, the Joint Consultative Committee of Employees' Associations (JCCEA), representing 50 unions and associations, has called only limited stoppages. The JCCEA has called off strike action whenever the government has threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), which bans strikes and can impose heavy fines or imprisonment on strikers. Hospital and municipal workers have been exempted from the strike in an attempt to avoid imposition of the ESMA.

## West Bengal mine workers strike

Mine maintenance workers at the state-owned Indian Iron & Steel Company's (IISCO) Steel Plant (ISP) in Chasnala, West Bengal struck on May 27 to demand a pay rise and leave for Sundays or payment for Sunday work.

According to workers, ISP stopped paying for Sunday work after IISCO merged with the Steel Authority of India in 2007. The Samyuka Samyog Committee of Trade Unions planned to meet on June 2 to discuss further action.

## Pakistan locomotive maintenance workers end strike action

Pakistan Railways locomotive maintenance workers in Lahore called off two weeks of industrial action on May 29 after the railways minister agreed to hold talks with the Pakistan Railways Loco Shed Employee Union. Workers began industrial action on May 15 to demand a review of pay scales, double pay for working holidays and restoration of a technical allowance.

Industrial action had included two- to four-hour rolling stoppages that severely affected passenger services. The government called the union in for talks on the same day that a series of 24-hour stoppages were due to commence.

## Sri Lankan health inspectors end strike

The Association of Public Health Inspectors (PHI) called off its month-long strike on May 27 after the government agreed to enter talks. PHI members walked off the job on April 25 to demand allowances worth 25,000 rupees (\$US220) to compensate for uniforms, fuel and administration expenses. The association said if talks planned for May 29 were not successful the strike would resume.

## Sri Lankan power workers walk out

After months of protests and threatened strike action, over 15,000 employees of the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) walked off the job in mid-afternoon on May 29 over a long-standing pay issue. A spokesman for the United Trade Union Front said that in January CEB workers accepted a 25 percent pay rise by 2015 but that recent increases in fuel and other living expenses meant the wage increase was inadequate.

Sri Lanka's official annual cost of living increase to April was 5.7 percent. Workers complained that CEB executives and engineers were recently granted a 45 percent pay rise.

## Sri Lankan university teachers to strike

Over 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) will begin national strike action on June 4 over unresolved pay issues from 2008. Following two 24-hour stoppages in August 2010 and March 2011, lecturers and professors in May 2011 resigned en masse demanding a 200 percent salary increase, creation of a special professional category for university teachers and the trebling of the budgetary allocation for education from 2 percent to 6 percent of gross domestic product. The Court of Appeal ordered them back to work after nearly a week without resolving the issues.

Sri Lankan academics are among the poorest paid in Asia, with monthly salaries as low as 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors. They have not received a rise since 1996, and in 2006 the government of President Mahinda Rajapakse cut their academic allowances from 30 percent to 25 percent of their monthly salary.

## Indonesian paper mill workers resume strike

Over 7,600 union members at PT Pindo Deli's twin mills in Karawang, West Java have decided to resume strike action on June 4 after

negotiations for a pay increase failed.

The Pulp and Paper Union of Indonesia called off a two-day strike on May 8 after the company agreed to increase wages by between 11 and 18 percent, depending on classification. The union and company have not been able to reach agreement on classifications and performance pay. The salary increase would apply to over 13,000 workers but even with the increase, the monthly pay rate for most will only be \$US180.

The mills are owned by Asia Pulp and Paper, which is part of the Indonesian Sinar Mas Group that operates nine pulp and paper mills in Indonesia.

### **Cambodia: SL Garment Processing workers walk out**

Over 5,000 employees of the Singapore-owned SL Garment Processing factories in Stoeung Meanchey, Phnom Penh resumed strike action within hours of returning to work on May 28. Workers struck on May 12 for better wages and conditions but ended the walkout believing that a document signed by the union, the government and the Garment Manufacturers Association was a binding deal. The company backed away from the agreement after employees returned to work.

Over three hundred police, supported by the military, were deployed to the factory to remove 1,000 angry workers from the factory compound. One worker said, "We ran away after the factory's security guards held steel bars to fight back at us."

A Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers official said that workers wanted 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. Strikers 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. The official monthly minimum wage for Cambodian garment workers has not been revised since it was set at \$61 in July 2010.

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.

### **Burmese wig factory workers strike again**

For the second time in a month employees at the Hi Mo wig factory in Rangoon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone are on strike. Over 1,000 workers ended a two-day strike on May 10 after the factory manager agreed to address their 78 grievances and increase wages. Monthly salaries were to increase from 35,000 kyat (\$US43) to about 100,000 kyat but after employees returned to work the factory owner sacked the manager, refused to honour the agreement and offered a much smaller pay increase.

Strike action resumed on May 17 and 2,000 strikers are currently occupying the factory barracks. The owner has cut off electricity, water and prevented workers picketing the factory from delivering food. Workers said they would continue their strike until the factory owner agrees to the original deal. The South Korean-owned plant has 18,000 workers and exports wigs to China, South Korea and Japan.

### **Bowen Basin miners' dispute unresolved**

Over 3,500 miners at six BHP Billiton Mitsubishi (BMA) pits in Queensland's Bowen Basin ended a seven-day strike on May 30 in an 18-month dispute over a new work agreement. Industrial action began last July and has involved work bans, rolling strikes and other industrial action by members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union, the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union, and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

BMA has agreed to annual pay rises of 5 percent over three years and a \$15,000 bonus but its "offer" is tied to various cost-cutting trade-offs and health and safety demands that have been progressively ramped up by management during the past 18 months. The unions want equal pay for labour-hire employees, protections for permanent workers displaced by contractors, three breaks for workers on 12-hour shifts rather than the present two, increased superannuation and improved housing.

BHP-Billiton, which made a \$23 billion profit last year, has categorically rejected the union demands. Mine management wants the right to modify mine rosters at any time, a demand that tears up previous agreements requiring that any shift or roster changes be trialed first and introduced only if endorsed by a majority of employees.

The unions have refused to call for joint industrial action with other Australian coal miners and instead are maintaining limited local strike action aimed at breaking up the growing anger of miners over the long-running dispute and keeping them trapped within the framework of Labor's Fair Work Australia industrial court. The union was negotiating in FWA with the company over its insistence that it has the right to change work rosters at any time. Negotiations have been scheduled to resume in Brisbane on Monday and Tuesday.

### **Victorian public school teachers vote for strike**

An overwhelming 96 percent of Victorian's 32,000 public school teachers and principals have voted in a secret ballot for protected strike action in their eight-month dispute with the Baillieu government for a new enterprise Agreement. A state-wide walkout has been set for June 7.

The Australian Education Union wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years and a reduction in the number of contract teachers in a new work agreement. The government is offering 2.5 percent per year, with any further increases offset by productivity gains.



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