

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 June 2012

Bangladeshi garment factories end lockout

Over 350 garment factories in the Ashulia industrial zone on the outskirts of Dhaka ended a nine-day lockout on June 21, enabling 500,000 employees to return to work. Several hundred workers at the Envoy Group factory only agreed to resume work after management agreed to pay wages lost during the lockout.

Factory owners had locked their factories while over 1,000 police and Rapid Action Battalion forces, using tear gas, rubber bullets and batons, attempted to clear the streets of thousands of striking garment workers protesting for better wages and conditions. Over 80 workers were injured and many arrested.

Concerned that the protests could extend to other districts, the government announced that it would subsidise rice purchases for garment workers. The unions had 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.

Bangladeshi garment workers' wages are the lowest in Asia, ranging from 2,500 taka (\$US30) for new entries to 9,700 taka 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 price rises in essentials and rents over the last 18 months.

Air India pilots' strike continues

Four hundred Air India (AI) pilots, members of the Indian Pilot Guild (IPG), are defying Indian government threats and continuing strike action begun on May 8. Around 300 pilots went on a 48-hour hunger strike in Mumbai and Delhi on June 25. At least ten pilots remain on hunger strike.

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 beginning 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 IPG has been derecognised and the airline has illegally stopped paying salaries accrued up to two months before the strike began.

The pilots' struggle 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). Other demands of the IPG pilots include outstanding salary arrears from 2007, first-class travel when not working and the opportunity to be promoted as commanders within six years.

Air India employees are covered by at least nine other unions which have isolated the dispute. None of the unions, including the ICPA, have

called for a united campaign to support the striking IPG pilots.

Gujarat textile workers remain on strike

Almost 8,000 employees at textile mills of Arvind, Ashima, and Asarwa Ltd in Ahmedabad are maintaining strike action begun on June 4 to demand a 40 percent pay rise and the reinstatement of 400 workers sacked for participating in the strike. The government has declared the strike illegal and managers have hired contract workers to break the strike.

Workers claim their pay, which is 5,000 rupees (\$US87) per month, has not been increased for decades. The Ahmedabad Textile Mills' Association has refused to enter talks with the Textile Labour Association (TLA) unless they get signatures from 80 percent of striking workers supporting the union's demands.

Sri Lankan university non-academic staff end strike

On June 26, the Inter University Trade Union Joint Committee (IUTUJC), representing thousands of striking non-academic staff at 13 universities and 26 related institutions, called off their 19-day strike after the University Grants Commission (UGC) and Labour Commissioner agreed to rectify salary anomalies within 45 days and issue a circular to that effect.

Non-academic staff walked out on June 6 to demand an immediate 25 percent pay rise and rectification of salary anomalies dating back to 2004. The issue has become all the more pressing since Rajapakse's government cut price subsidies.

The latest call to end strike action is the fifth since November 2011 and follows strikes and protests over the issue since 2003. Each time the unions accepted empty promises from authorities who said they would resolve workers' claims.

Sri Lankan sand processing workers walk out

Employees at the state-owned mineral sands factory Pulmodai walked out on June 25 and demonstrated outside the plant against the Ceylon Mineral Sands Corporation's plan to privatise the factory. Workers alleged that the government plans to sell the factory to a Chinese company and that factory officials were about sign an agreement. Other workers at the corporation supported the strike and stopped production of mineral

sands.

Pakistan: Punjab young doctors' strike in second week

Members of the Young Doctors Association (YDA) employed at Lahore public hospitals have been on strike since June 18 to demand service structure revision. Outpatient departments remained closed. Under the existing service structure young resident doctors who do not share a private practice receive low wages and lower service-related benefits.

According to the YDA, a doctor begins with a salary as low as 24,000 rupees (\$US253) per month.

The Pakistan Medical Association, consisting of senior doctors, has pledged to back the YDA strike and called a meeting of other doctors' unions to discuss support action.

South Korean truck drivers on strike

Up to 80,000 South Korean truck drivers have been on strike since June 25 restricting the movement of shipping containers to and from major sea ports by 70 percent. The government sent 100 military container trucks and 200 drivers to various ports with little effect.

The Korean Cargo Transport Workers' Union (KCTWU) has demanded an average fare increase of 30 percent, along with a tax cut on gas purchases. The union also wants changes to the subcontract system for truckers, which it alleges only benefits large logistics companies. Contracted drivers complained that they pay commissions as high as 40 percent of freight charges to cargo brokers. An average truck driver earns 1 million won (\$US864) a month.

While union leaders and the government have been in negotiations since Tuesday afternoon, drivers vowed to continue the strike until all their demands are met.

South Korean construction workers on strike

Close to 30,000 construction workers walked off the job on June 27 to demand outstanding wages due, improved working conditions and better pensions. The union also demanded occupational health and safety insurance coverage for all construction workers, citing a death toll of 577 at construction sites last year.

According to the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), the total amount of overdue wages for construction workers has reached 166 billion won (\$US147 million) with 70 percent of this from government infrastructure projects.

Indonesian refinery workers protest

For the third time in a week, on June 25, thousands of workers at the Pertamina oil refinery in Balongan, West Java walked off the job and picketed the plant for improved working conditions and in protest against the Indonesian state oil and gas company outsourcing of labour.

Police fired teargas at the pickets in an attempt to disperse workers and restore fuel deliveries to fuel depots. While talks between the workers and the company are ongoing, strikers said they would continue blocking fuel supplies.

Cambodian garment workers strike

On June 25, 1,600 employees at the Taiwan-owned Yung Wah garment plant in Kandal province downed tools to demand better working conditions. An official of the Cambodian Workers Economic Federation said it was the third time workers had stopped work to try and secure a 60,500-riel (\$US15) transportation and housing allowance, a 3,000-riel daily lunch stipend and a 4,000-riel good performance bonus, as well as improved wages.

Factory management claimed that the demands were in excess of the Labour laws and the strike has been declared illegal by the Arbitration Council.

NSW mine equipment manufacturing workers locked out

About 150 employees of mining machine manufacturer Bucyrus in the Newcastle suburb of Beresfield were locked out for two days after striking for 24 hours on June 25 in a dispute over a new work agreement. Bucyrus, a member of the Caterpillar group of companies, has flatly rejected the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union's demand for a nine-day fortnight and pay parity with other workers in the mining industry.

The main sticking point in negotiations is the nine-day fortnight, which employees said they needed to compensate for the 50- to 60-hour week they regularly work due to a shortage of skilled workers. Negotiations are continuing in Australia's industrial tribunal Fair Work Australia.

NSW TAFE students and teachers protest

Around 200 Technical and Further Education (TAFE) students and teachers rallied in Newcastle CBD on June 28 to oppose cuts to 35 courses at Hunter TAFE that will affect more than 500 students and dozens of teachers.

A NSW Teachers' Federation organiser told the rally that the changes were linked to state government funding cuts. The list of affected courses includes music, hospitality, information and technology and engineering.

Victorian mental health nurses escalate strike action

Following ten months of failed negotiations, 350 psychiatric nurses, mental health clinicians and support staff from across Victoria have voted to begin a series of rolling eight-hour strikes from July 5 in their dispute with the state government for better wages and conditions. Industrial action that began on April 10 had involved a series of two-hour rolling stoppages.

On top of an 18 percent pay rise over three years, the Health and

Community Services Union (HCSU) wants more staff for night shifts and high-dependency units, and better training. The government has offered annual 2.5 percent increases over three years. Victoria's consumer price index for the last quarter of 2011 was 3.1 percent.

Queensland meat workers begin strike action

Members of the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union at Australia's largest meat processor JBS walked off the company's Rockhampton plant (north of Brisbane, the Queensland capital) on June 22 and voted to continue with weekly stoppages in a wage dispute.

JBS has threatened to lock out workers at its larger Dinmore Plant near Brisbane if union members go ahead with a 4-hour strike planned for June 29. The union wants a 4 percent annual pay rise but the Brazilian-owned meat processing company has only offered 3 percent.

Unions at Queensland's Gladstone port call off strike

Three unions representing port workers at Australia's biggest coal loading port Gladstone, on Queensland's central east coast, have called off a week-long strike planned for June 29 after reaching a deal with the employer to move negotiations in their eight-month dispute into Fair Work Australia.

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), the Maritime Officers Union and Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers are in dispute over an enterprise bargaining agreement with Dutch-based towing company SMIT Marine, which operates tug boats in Gladstone port.

The three unions want a 37.5 percent pay rise for tug masters and engineers, followed by an annual 8 percent pay increase. An MUA spokesman said the pay increase would give members closer pay parity with workers at the Hay Point terminal, north of Gladstone.

Gladstone port ships thermal and coking coal for a number of companies with mines in the Bowen Basin coal field in central Queensland including, BHP Billiton, Cockatoo Coal, Jellinbah Group, Wesfarmers, Xstrata and Yancoal. The port loaded 54.6 million tonnes of coal for export onto 610 vessels in the 11-month period ended May 2012. SMIT Marine has a monopoly on towing operations of all large ships at the port. The strike would have frozen all exports.



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