

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 July 2012

Bangladeshi garment workers on strike in Ashulia

Around 1,800 Fashion Knit Composite workers in Ashulia on the outskirts of Dhaka, walked off the job on July 22 to demand overtime pay and suspension of factory officials who mistreated workers. Management responded by terminating 115 strikers the next day and called in police who used teargas and rubber bullets in an attempt to end the strike. At least 55 workers were injured. Fearing the dispute may spread, management of five adjacent factories stopped production and locked out their workforce.

In June over 500,000 workers were locked out in Ashulia. Hundreds of factories closed in response to a mass strike over brutal working conditions and poverty wages. Over 80 workers were injured and many arrested when more than 1,000 police and Rapid Action Battalion forces attempted to clear the streets of thousands of striking garment workers.

Bangladeshi garment workers' wages are the lowest in Asia, ranging from 2,500 taka (\$US30) a month to 9,700 taka for experienced workers. Garment workers' real incomes have shrunk by 30 percent due to price rises in essentials and rents over the last 18 months.

India: Orissa contract nurses' strike in second week

Up to 2,000 contract nurses at three government medical colleges and hospitals in Bhubaneswar, Orissa have been on strike since July 15 over various longstanding demands, including regularisation of their services and for an enhanced pay package. Nurses rejected a new government offer to regularise nurses after six years, defying government threats to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA).

According to the All Odisha Contractual Nurses' Association, the offer would only make 100 contractual nurses eligible for regularisation out of 2,200. In other states nurses are regularised after three years' service. The association also claimed that over 10,600 existing vacant nurses' positions in government-run hospitals would remain unfilled under the offer.

The government approached the High Court on Wednesday to hear a "public interest" petition seeking invocation of ESMA against the nurses. Under ESMA nurses could face heavy fines if they refuse a court order to return to work.

Andhra Pradesh steel plant workers strike over privatisation

Over 38,000 Vizag Steel Plant (VSP) workers in Visakhapatnam walked

out for 24 hours on July 24 in protest against the central government's plan to sell 10 percent of its equity in Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Limited (RINL). RINL is the corporate entity of VSP. The Congress-led central government hopes to raise 25 billion rupees (\$US445 million) from the sale.

According to union leaders, the steel plant had borne the total cost of an expansion project out of its internal accruals and that its present reserves were \$1.2 billion. Workers fear that the 10 percent equity sale is the first step to full privatisation. The strike was called by VSP's 16 unions, including the Progressive Front, Congress affiliated INTUC and contract workers' union.

West Bengal agricultural labourer killed in a wage dispute

Agricultural labourer Radhanath Soren, 65, was fatally beaten this month by a group of about 60 farmers during negotiations for a revision of daily wages. About 100 farm workers in Nabagram village downed tools on July 21 to demand a daily pay rise from their current minimum of 50 rupees (\$US1) to 120 rupees.

Farmers only offered 80 rupees during negotiations attended by 75 labourers and, according to one worker, "slapped and punched some of us." The farmers allegedly beat Radhanath when he tried to restore order at the meeting.

Karnataka communications workers protest

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) contract workers protested outside the general manager's office of the national telecommunications giant in Mysore on July 23 to demand reinstatement of 20 sacked contract workers. The Karnataka State BSNL Non-permanent Workers' Union, representing 200 contract workers, are also demanding the minimum wage be implemented, pay slips and identity cards issued, holiday payments, and monthly wages paid on time before the fifth of every month. A union leader told the media that the workers' memorandum to management should be taken as a strike notice if their demands were not met immediately.

Karnataka government daily wage workers protest

On July 24, members of the Karnataka State Schedule tribe, Schedule

Caste and Daily Wagers Association demonstrated in Bangalore to demand regularisation of the 15,000 state government daily wage workers. Workers complained that many of them have been on contract for 15 to 20 years earning 165 rupees (\$US3.3) a day, which is half the pay of a regular worker doing the same job. They are also not entitled to other benefits received by regular workers.

Sri Lankan teachers and principals protest

On July 25, government school teachers and principals supported by parents protested outside the education ministry in Battaramulla, on the outskirts of Colombo, over long out-standing demands. These include rectifying salary anomalies, payment of dues and recognition of promotions and transfers.

A spokesman for the Teacher and Principal Services Collective said the government claimed that 278 million rupees (\$US2.4 million) was allocated for the salary arrears but no payments had been made.

Cambodian garment and footwear workers continue strike

Many Kandal garment and footwear workers remain on strike despite thousands of strikers returning to work on July 12, after a Cambodian government announcement that it had reached agreement with employers to pay an extra \$US10 in monthly bonuses and allowances.

The increase, which commences on September 1 and applies to about 600,000 workers, falls far short of workers' demands. These included a rise in the current base rate of \$61 a month for eight-hour days, six days a week, an extra \$25 a month for transportation and housing and increases in other payments.

Around 150 employees of Tai Yang and Camwell factories, which supply Levi's and Gap, refuse to return to work until a pay anomaly over seniority payments is resolved. Strikers ignored termination notices from management and marched into Phnom Penh on July 23 to put their demand to government officials. Meanwhile, 1,000 striking workers from the Golden Gain Shoe Company played drums and carried banners listing their demands when they marched through Phnom Penh to the National Assembly.

Master & Frank garment workers are also continuing their strike, demanding reinstatement of the factory's sacked leader of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (C.CDWU). Several female workers were attacked by security guards and hospitalised this week after they tried to prevent management recruiting scab labour.

Taiwan power and communications infrastructure workers strike

On July 20, several dozen employees of the state-run RPTI International power and communications systems support company, walked off the job over delayed salaries and missing retirement payouts. At least 300 workers are owed three to five months' wages. Many of those who have worked in the company for decades are worried that they will not receive their retirement payouts.

One employee told the media that he and colleagues had approached management several times about the issue. "All they could tell us is that

they don't have sufficient money and asked us employees to work hard with the company to overcome the hardship," he said.

According to the Confederation of Taipei Trade Unions RPTI is \$4 billion (\$US133 million) in debt and owes employees over \$17 million in salaries and retirement payouts. RPTI was created by the Executive Yuan's Veterans' Affairs Commission in 1975 as a private company but is managed by government appointees with most of its funding coming from state-run businesses such as Taiwan Power Co and Chunghwa Telecommunications Co.

Philippines radio broadcast workers end strike

Over 20 striking members of the Radio Mindanao Network (RNM) Davao Employees Union ended an eight-day strike on July 18 after station management signed a new collective agreement that met most of their demands.

Under the agreement employees will receive a 40-peso daily salary rise starting July 28 and a 60-peso increase by 2013, two sacks of rice per year, a signing bonus of 2,500 pesos and a daily meal subsidy.

Management also agreed to provide three days' emergency leave and five days' sick leave which are convertible to cash if not used, 70 days' maternity leave, medical health insurance and a 5,000-peso hospitalisation assistance payment.

RNM workers walked off the job and turned off the broadcaster's two transmitters on July 11 after management refused to begin negotiations due to start in May to review their expired 2011 collective agreement.

Australian construction workers strike

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at 22 Lend Lease building sites across Australia walked off the job for 48 hours on July 24 following a breakdown in negotiations for a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA). A CFMEU official said the main points of contention were wages, a job security clause requiring the company to offer subcontractors the same pay and conditions as union employees, and provisions for apprentices to work on Lend Lease sites.

Other issues include the date of operation of increases, site allowance, use of electronic site access cards, crane crew rates, and extended coverage of the EBA to include Western Australian members. The union and company have resumed negotiations.

Victorian industrial testing technicians strike

More than 30 technicians from three Victorian worksites of ALS Industrial, Australia's largest industrial testing company, have been on strike for three weeks after management walked out on negotiations for a job security clause in a work agreement. The company is opposing union demands that ALS will not employ contractors under terms and conditions less favorable than the ALS agreement.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members are concerned that ALS recently purchased Austpower (a rival testing company) which they are running as a separate corporate entity and using non-union labour on inferior pay and conditions. Workers fear that

without the job security clause their jobs and conditions are threatened.

While the AMWU has accused the company of trying to divide workers by pitting Austpower non-union workers against ALS employees, the union has not made any attempt to improve pay and conditions for the Austpower workers.



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