

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 September 2012

Sri Lankan university teachers continue strike

Around 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) are maintaining strike action begun on July 4 over pay issues, unresolved since 2008. On August 21, the government ordered the closure of all Sri Lankan universities, except for medical faculties, in an effort to break the strike. But teachers remained resolute and the universities were reopened on September 6.

FUTA members want a 20 percent rise in their basic salary, effective from January 2012, education funding increased to 6 percent of GDP, all education reforms to involve university teachers and the general public, and an end to education privatisation and the politicisation of university management.

Teachers at the Sri Jayewardenepura Medical Sciences faculty walked out on September 3 and medical faculty teachers at the Kelaniya University will strike next week in support of the university teachers.

Sri Lankan university teachers are among the poorest paid in Asia with monthly salaries of only 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors.

Bangladesh: Benapole port workers to strike again

The Benapole Port Handling Workers Union, representing thousands of cargo loading workers at the key land port on the Indian border, has called strike action commencing September 12 in a long-running dispute with the port authorities and labour contracting firms over implementation of the government-declared minimum wage. According to a union spokesman, workers are only being paid 13 taka (or 15 US cents) instead of 18 taka per tonne of goods unloaded. It will be the third time in three months that port workers have struck over the issue.

The union has called off strike action each time the government has promised to direct authorities to pay the standard minimum wage. This included calling an end to a four-day strike in June and a three-day strike in July.

Around 80 percent of raw materials used in the Bangladesh garment industry—the country's largest export earner—is imported through Benapole.

Dhaka garment workers protest

On September 1, several hundred employees from the Imam Knitting, Dyeing and Finishing factory in Dhaka marched to the Bangladesh

Knitwear Manufacturers and Exporters Association offices to demand their factory be reopened. Workers told the media the plant was shut down during the Eid religious holiday.

According to workers, over 1,200 employees are without dues and 70 employees retrenched before the holiday were not paid their salaries, the Eid bonus or retrenchment entitlements. The rally was organised by the Sramik League and Roni, Baharane Sultan Bahar and Bangladesh Trade Union Kendra.

Bangladeshi transport workers protest

Drivers and helpers of hundreds of buses, minibuses and trucks blocked the Chapainawabganj-Sonamasjid highway in northern Bangladesh for five hours on September 1 to oppose the latest toll rate rise for the Shreshtha Captain Mohiuddin Jahangir Bridge in Chapainawabganj. It is the third time since April that the Roads and Highways Department has increased vehicle tolls on the bridge.

The District Truck and Motor Workers' Union withdrew the blockade to enter talks with district officials but failed to reach an agreement. Union officials said another campaign will be launched. Transport workers and owners have blockaded the bridge three times in the past four months over the rising tolls.

India: Tamil Nadu carpet weavers walk out

Around 18,000 carpet weavers in Tamil Nadu's Bhavani region have been on strike since August 31 in a dispute over pay. The Bhavani Region Handloom Carpet and Bed Spread Weavers and Dyeing Workers Union is demanding that the master weavers implement a new wage agreement approved by the Department of Handlooms and Textiles.

Weavers claim that 43 rupees a day are being deducted from their wages for warping and winding, a charge that was supposed to have ended on July 1 under the new wage agreement. The co-operative societies are compensating master weavers for the charges but weavers said these deductions were still being imposed. The weavers also want a wage rise for winders, from 78.45 rupees (\$US1.41) to 90 rupees.

Around 1,000 strikers, including women workers, were arrested by the police in Erode during a street protest on September 2. The Bhavani region has 32 co-operative societies and a number of private units involved in handloom carpet manufacturing.

Philippines steel workers locked out

The Philsteel Corporation in Luzon's Laguna province has sacked its 55-strong unionised workforce after employees struck over the sacking of their union officials. The Philsteel Workers' Union (PWU) has been in dispute with Philsteel, a manufacturer of prefabricated steel, since April over a new collective bargaining agreement. Philsteel has refused to negotiate and declared a "CBA moratorium" in an attempt to freeze wages for the next three years.

Management began sacking workers on August 21 after workers established a picket line outside the company office in Pulo, Cabuyao. While the union is affiliated with the Pamantik-KMU (Solidarity of Workers in Southern Tagalog-May First Movement), the group has not taken any industrial action to back the locked out Philsteel workers.

South Korean insurance workers maintain strike

At least 600 of the 700 unionised workers at ING Life Korea have been on strike since July 31 over job security. Global insurance giant ING Group has been negotiating with KB Financial Group over its purchase of ING's Korean subsidiary.

The insurance workers have vowed to remain on strike until ING make a deal with the new buyer that guarantees no loss of jobs and improves the current collective bargaining agreement.

Migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong demonstrate

Female migrant workers marched in Hong Kong on September 1 and rallied outside the Indonesian Consulate General building to demand local authorities and labour recruitment agencies comply with an Indonesian regulation to reduce recruitment fees by 50 percent and not cut their workers' contracts before they officially expire.

The regulation, which was issued by Indonesia's manpower and transmigration minister in May, stipulates that a migrant worker should only pay \$13,436 (US\$1,732), instead of the current \$21,000, before they are allowed to work in Hong Kong.

Some workers said \$3,000 was being deducted from their monthly salaries for seven months in order to pay the so-called recruitment fee. Other workers said they were forced to pay fees to both Indonesian and Hong Kong labour agencies.

Last week's protest was part of a campaign initiated by Indonesian migrant workers over the past three months. In 2010, there were 285,000 foreign domestic workers in Hong Kong, 49 percent of them from Indonesia.

Queensland Catholic school teachers strike

Over 6,500 Catholic school teachers in Queensland walked off the job on September 6 in protest over low pay and increased workloads in a new work agreement. About 700 striking teachers rallied outside the Queensland Catholic Education Commission (QCEC) in Brisbane, the state capital.

The Independent Education Union of Australia (IEUA) said that more than 85 percent of those who returned ballots voted for the one-day strike after talks with Catholic education authorities failed to reach agreement.

The teachers have rejected 2.7 percent annual pay increases over three years from the QCEC because it does not keep pace with the increased cost of living. The IEUA has opposed attempts to impose compulsory medical checks on teachers and is demanding increased release time for preparation work and to deal with student issues.

The Catholic school teachers have also voted for a series of rolling 30-minute work stoppages. Negotiations are due to resume next week.

Queensland state school teachers recently rejected an education department offer of 2.7 percent annual pay increases in return for increased class sizes and watering down conditions. The teachers' unions—public and private—are deliberately isolating their members in order to prevent a unified struggle against the state government and its cost-cutting agenda.

New South Wales steel workers walk out

Hundreds of Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, walked off the job for four hours on September 4 and rallied outside the steelworks for a new enterprise agreement.

The AWU wants continuation of departmental agreements in the new award as well as the preservation of existing sick-leave entitlements and the number of breaks in 12-hour shifts increased from two to three.

After six months of negotiations, the company has offered wage increases of 3 percent in the first year, and 2.5 percent for the next two years. The union is calling for annual 3 percent increases over three years.

The AWU called off its first stoppage last week after BlueScope sought an injunction against any action that could lead to the dumping of metal. The union planned a two-hour stoppage yesterday with future overtime bans.

New Zealand bus drivers to strike

The two unions covering 900 bus drivers of NZ Bus in Auckland, on New Zealand's North Island, have announced that drivers will begin strike action from September 17, after negotiations for a new work agreement stalled. First Union and the Tramways Union members will strike every Monday for nine weeks in an effort to win a \$20 per hour pay rate, beginning in July 2013. The company wants to delay the increase until April 2014.

Drivers also want their overtime penalty rates increased from time-and-a-quarter to time-and-a-half to bring them in line with other NZ Bus employees. A First Union official told the media that split shifts for peak services meant that drivers were away from home for 14 hours per day but only received an eight-hour wage.



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