

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 October 2012

Bangladeshi garment workers protest

About 35,000 protesting garment workers in Savar, 24 kilometres north-west of Dhaka, clashed with police on October 14. At least 50 people were injured as they demonstrated to demand two months of unpaid entitlements. The conflict followed the sudden closing by Hall-Mark of its 60 factories, with management blaming a lack of orders.

Fearing another outbreak of mass protest like the demonstrations that occurred in June in the Ashulia industrial zone, also on the outskirts of Dhaka, the Bangladeshi government appointed a committee that it claimed would open the factories and pay workers' arrears by October 18. In the June demonstrations over pay and conditions, 500,000 garment workers from 350 factories confronted 1,000 police and Rapid Action Battalion forces.

Pakistani factory workers demonstrate

On October 13, scores of factory workers and All Pakistan Trade Union Federation officials demonstrated in front of the Lahore Press Club. Their demands included provision of health cover, improved safety, a "decent" minimum wage and an end to privatisation. They also called for severe punishment of the employers responsible for 370 deaths in factory fires in Karachi and Lahore last month.

Protesters complained that although the official minimum monthly wage is 8,000 rupees (\$US88.25), most factory owners pay just 3,000 to 4,000 rupees per month. Most factory jobs are on a contract or daily wage basis, making workers ineligible for social security and old age benefits.

Sri Lankan steel smelter walkout

At least 59 immigrant Indian workers at the Bhuwalka Steel Industries (BSI) smelter at Madampe near Chilaw, on Sri Lanka's mid-north coast, walked off the job on October 12 to oppose a four-day wage cut and other grievances. The smelter has over 300 employees, of whom about 200 are Indian immigrants.

BSI (Sri Lanka) is a wholly owned subsidiary of BSI (India). Established in 2000, it manufactures billets and rolled steel products. BSI has been accused of being part of a scam where impoverished workers in India are shipped by agents to Sri Lanka and forced to sign work contracts written in English, a language they do not understand. They are paid a fraction of what was promised.

The scam was exposed when 29-year-old Indian worker Manas Kumar

Mallick died from electrocution while on the job at a BSI Sri Lanka sister company, Confab Steel Private Limited. The company had issued Mallick an illegal work visa and was not covered by accident insurance.

India: Andhra Pradesh tourism workers strike

Some 300 contract and daily wage workers of the state-run Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (APTDC) in Visakapatnam struck on October 15 to demand regularisation (permanency) in accordance with an agreement signed in 2010. Other demands were for an end to outsourcing and for part of the corporation's income to be spent to develop tourist areas. APTDC was compelled to cancel bookings due to the strike. Bus, taxi and boat services operated by the APTDC were also suspended. Andhra Pradesh municipal workers oppose outsourcing

Dozens of Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) sanitation workers demonstrated at the main VMC office on October 13 to oppose the corporation's plan to sack up to 1,000 workers and outsource their jobs to labour hire agencies. Workers also demanded that 320 workers recently sacked be reinstated.

The downsizing process started in 2009 when sanitation workers' salaries increased from 2,100 to 3,900 rupees (\$US79) a month. The outsourcing is part of a plan by VMC to cut expenses by 2.15 million rupees per month. The protest ended after the VMC Workers Union claimed that municipal authorities had promised to reinstall all suspended workers.

Punjab medical college sanitation workers strike

At least 250 contract sanitary workers at the Government Medical College and Hospital in Chandigarh, in India's northern state of Punjab, walked off the job on October 15 over their three-year demand for uniform allowances and bonuses. These workers are responsible for cleaning the biomedical waste in the wards and emergency areas. As a result of the strike, medical operations were suspended.

A Contractual Sweepers Union (CSU) official told media that although the workers had not had a salary increment for several years, the hospital principal had told them to leave when they attempted to present him with their charter of demands.

Chinese electronics factory workers end strike

Thousands of employees at the Singapore-owned appliance-maker Xinfai Electric in Xinxiang, Henan ended a four-day strike on October 12 after management purportedly agreed to their charter of eight demands, which included higher pay, better benefits and management reforms. Xinfai Electric, a leading Chinese refrigeration manufacturer, employs around 15,000 people.

The dispute started with several hundred employees gathering at the factory complex gate to demand better pay. As the protest gained momentum, more demands were added, and eventually the workers presented a detailed eight-point list of long-standing grievances.

Management promised to raise salaries by 300 yuan to 1,500 yuan (\$US238) a month, and by another 200 yuan in January. Improvements in overtime and holiday pay were also agreed on, and the company promised to transfer two managers that workers had blamed for the factory's poor performance this year.

Victorian school teachers on strike

Public school teachers across Western Victoria held a half-day strike on October 17. The action, part of a series of limited rolling stoppages and bans, followed a similar half-day strike by teachers in Melbourne's east two days earlier. The strikes followed two statewide one-day stoppages by Australian Education Union (AEU) members.

The AEU presented a log of claims to the state government over 18 months ago, calling for a 30 percent wage increase over three years, lower class sizes and the end of short-term contracts. About 22 percent of teachers and 45 percent of support staff are employed on a contract basis.

The state government has insisted on a 2.5-percent annual wage ceiling—which it has imposed on all public sector workers—combined with the introduction of performance-linked pay, increased hours for secondary teachers and other productivity demands.

BlueScope Steel workers vote to maintain industrial action

Around 500 workers at BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, New South Wales struck for 24 hours on October 11 in a dispute for a new work agreement. The action followed two- and three-hour stoppages across multiple departments. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union began negotiations with BlueScope in February.

According to the unions, BlueScope is trying to change sick leave provisions, remove departmental agreements and scrap a clause requiring agreement with the unions on any significant changes.

New South Wales community services workers walk out

About 20 Department of Community Services (DOCS) workers at Maitland, north of Sydney, walked off the job for an hour on October 17 to demand increased staffing. Workers said staff shortages and budget cuts meant that only one in 10 cases of "at risk" children was being properly investigated. An ombudsman's report found that after DOCS was streamlined in 2008 the number of "comprehensive assessments" had fallen and "a very high number of serious child protection reports" still

received no response.

Internal Treasury documents released in July revealed that the O'Farrell state government plans to slash 15,000 public sector jobs over four years, including 1,000 in DOCS. The department will be required to axe \$20.7 million worth of permanent employees in 2012-13, with another \$3.8 million cut from the temporary staffing budget.

NZ Bus drivers reject union-backed pay offer

On October 15, 900 bus drivers in Auckland, New Zealand's largest city, rejected a fourth pay offer from their employer, NZ Bus. The offer would gradually raise wages to \$20 per hour by November 2013. Drivers are seeking \$20 per hour, starting from July. The latest offer apparently was no advance on the previous one.

First Union and the Tramways Union, backed by the Council of Trade Unions, have publicly supported each of NZ Bus's offers. Union officials claimed that more than half the drivers voted for the latest offer, but it still failed to receive the 60 percent vote needed to pass.

Drivers earn between \$14.05 and \$16.75 an hour, with split shifts often keeping them away from home for long hours. They were particularly angered by roster changes, introducing longer hours and additional weekend shifts. At least 1,000 employees, including cleaners, and four unions, are in dispute. The unions have not called strike action.

Ports of Auckland dispute continues

Negotiations are continuing in a protracted dispute between 330 members of the Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) and Ports of Auckland Limited (POAL) over a new collective agreement. The dispute, which included strikes and a lockout through March and April, has been running since December 2011. Workers are opposing POAL's wage rise trade-off that includes a new on-call roster system and further contracting-out of port shuttle work.

After the lockout ended, MUNZ dragged out the dispute and staged numerous ineffective protests featuring personalities from the Labour Party, Green Party and Auckland Council. The collective agreement with MUNZ expired at the end of September, opening the door for a splinter union at the port, PortPro, representing 30 non-striking workers, to ratify a collective agreement with POAL.

French Polynesian tugboat pilots end strike

A week-long strike by 20 tugboat pilots for better pay at the Port of Papeete in French Polynesia was called off on October 15. The workers' union had not mobilised support from other port workers, leaving the way clear for the government to commission French Navy tugboats to help large ships, including a fuel tanker and other cargo ships, to dock in the port unhindered.



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