

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 October 2012

Hall-Mark factory workers in Bangladesh continue protests

Over 200 protesting Hall Mark factories garment workers were injured, most of them by rubber bullets, in clashes with police in Savar, 24 kilometres north-west of Dhaka, on October 23. Large numbers of workers began demonstrating outside the company's office over unpaid wages and bonuses for the Eid-ul Fitr religious festival. When workers then moved to the Dhaka-Aricha highway they were again attacked by police who forced them to disperse.

Close to 35,000 locked out Hall-Mark workers 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 Savar factories, with management blaming a lack of orders.

More protests are expected if more garment factories fail to pay wages and bonuses before the Eid festival.

Bangladeshi hotel and restaurant workers protest

Hotel and restaurant workers held country-wide protests on October 20 to demand implementation of the minimum wage set in 2009 and payment of the Eid festival bonus. A rally was organised outside the National Press Club in Dhaka. One speaker told the demonstration that hotel and restaurant employees are not paid the minimum wage and many employers break labour laws. "Workers are being beaten up and implicated in false cases when they raise their voice against the exploitation," he said.

Over 1.1 million people are employed in Bangladesh's hotel industry. While hotel and restaurant workers demonstrated in August over these issues, the unions have appealed to the government to force hotel owners to comply with the labour laws.

India: Kerala private hospital nurses strike

Close to 300 nurses at four private hospitals in Kannur city, in India's south-west coastal state of Kerala, walked off the job on October 22 with a charter of 17 demands, including a pay rise. The action follows two rounds of talks at the Kannur Labour Office with the Indian Nurses Association (INA), the Qualified Medical Practitioners' Association (QMPA) and the Association of Management of Private Hospitals, which failed.

Nurses' current wages were last revised in 2009. The INA claimed that

the Industrial Relations Commission failed to implement the revised pay scale as recommended by the Balram committee report in June. The report called for a 10 percent annual increment for senior nurses and a three-shift duty system already being followed at government hospitals and many private firms.

An INA official said the union planned to extend the strike to other districts from October 29.

Nalco workers oppose privatisation

On October 20, the entire workforce at the government-owned National Aluminum Company (Nalco) operations in Damanjodi and Angul, in India's north-east coastal state of Orissa, struck for 24 hours to oppose the national government's plan to divest 12 percent of the company. This was the first strike since the company's inception in 1985. Nalco is Asia's largest integrated aluminium complex, encompassing bauxite mining, alumina refining, aluminium smelting and casting, power generation and rail and port operations.

The ten unions at Nalco joined forces in September and formed the Nalco Surakhya Samiti (NSS) to oppose the divestment. They fear that this is the first step to full privatisation.

Karnataka midday-meal workers at state schools protest

Hundreds of midday-meal workers at Karnataka's state schools held a protest march in Bangalore on October 21 to demand better wages, payments for summer vacations and to be made permanent. Workers demanded that their poverty wages be increased from 1,000 rupees (\$US20) a month to 10,000 rupees. The campaign was organised by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU).

Sri Lankan hospital medical support employees stop work

On October 24, Professions Supplementary to Medicine (PSM) workers, including laboratory technologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists, pharmacists and x-ray technicians from 564 government hospitals across Sri Lanka, walked off the job for two hours to demand salary rises, increased overtime and on-call allowances. PSM employees have not had a pay increase since 2001.

PSMs also demanded that a government committee established in 2010

to recruit over 600 professional graduates and nurses immediately send its report to Cabinet. PSM representatives were to meet before the end of the week to decide on threatened strike action.

Sri Lankan public school teachers and principals protest

More than 2,000 public school teachers and principals marched to the education ministry at Battharamulla in Colombo on October 24 over long-standing grievances, including salary disparities and payment of salary arrears from 2008. The government mobilised hundreds of police and army personnel outside the ministry and refused to meet the teachers' representatives.

The Ceylon Teacher Services Union (CTSU) said its members were concerned over the lack of supplementary wages, the militarisation of state schools, the increasing political interference within the local education system, the inability of the government to allocate 6 percent of GDP for the education sector and the privatisation of the free education system. CTSU threatened that action will continue and teachers could close the nation's 9,662 government schools if the government continues to ignore their demands.

Indonesian shoe factory workers clash with police and factory security

Around 1,800 workers, including former employees at the PT Panarub Dwikarya Benoa (PDB) shoe factory in the Tangerang industrial estate, Banten (25km west of Jakarta), protested outside the company's main gate on October 18 to demand better pay and conditions and severance pay for 900 workers sacked in July after participating in strike action over back pay. At least 13 people were injured—some with broken bones—when police and security guards armed with steel pipes tried to end the protest.

In July, 2,000 workers downed tools and occupied the factory over poor conditions. PDB, who supplies sportswear giants Adidas and Mizuno, called in police who used teargas and batons to evict the workers. Only 1,300 were allowed back to work while the rest, mostly young mothers, were forced to sign resignation letters which exempted the company from paying severance pay. Workers who were allowed back began on zero year status.

Demands included payment of wages, health benefits, leave, and better working conditions. "Just to go to the bathroom, or even have a drink is difficult," said one worker. An official of the Independent Textile Garment and Footwear Workers Union said the Workforce Department had ignored continuous written complaints over working conditions at the factory.

Indonesian workers rally for minimum wage

Over 3,000 workers and union representatives from six unions representing metal workers, media, printing, transport and factory workers, rallied outside the Jakarta City Hall on October 24 to demand the provincial government set the 2013 monthly minimum wage at 2.799 million rupiah (\$US311) and for the Jakarta Manpower and Transmigration Department to investigate and stop low wages paid by

employers.

In what appeared to be a predetermined outcome by both unions and government, both sides met during the protest with the unions declaring victory and claiming government representatives had agreed to "investigate" 13 demands. These included calculation of the minimum wage based on inflation and the regional minimum pay rates.

Philippines health workers walk out over privatisation

At least 1,000 government health workers in Manila walked off the job for an hour on October 25 to protest a government plan to privatise state-owned hospitals. According to an official of the Alliance of Health Workers (AHW), at least 26 hospitals are to be turned into corporations—a step toward full privatisation. First to be privatised are the Research Institute for Tropical Medicine in Muntinlupa and the Philippine Orthopedic Center in Quezon City.

Hospitals that remain as state-run institutions will privatise medical services such as laboratories. New building constructions are to be provided under a public-private partnership initiative.

BlueScope workers accept compromise union deal

On October 23, 1,600 workers of BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, New South Wales voted to end a 24-hour stoppage and return to work after endorsing an in-principle enterprise agreement over pay and conditions. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union began negotiations with BlueScope in February. The action followed two- and three-hour stoppages across multiple departments and a 24-hour strike on October 11.

The unions accepted a reduced pay offer of 8 percent over three years in return for maintenance of all previous conditions. Workers had rejected previous company offers that attacked sick leave provisions, removed departmental agreements and scrapped a clause requiring agreement with the unions on any significant changes. The final agreement will be put to workers after union lawyers review it.

New South Wales construction workers picket Woolworths building site

Dozens of workers picketed a Woolworths building site at Balgowlah, on Sydney's North Shore, on October 23 to demand unpaid wages from Southern Cross Constructions. According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), between \$4 million and \$5 million is owed to sub-contractors employed on the site.

Contractors at a nearby Southern Cross Constructions site faced the same issue until the site owner Bunnings paid outstanding money. Woolworths claimed that it has paid Southern Cross Constructions up to the end of this month for work on its site. The CFMEU has not called strike action and is allowing internal work at the site to continue unhindered even though workers are not being paid.

New South Wales community services workers protest

At least 20 workers from the community group F Collect rallied in front of state parliament in Sydney on October 23 to protest against plans to cut nearly \$500 million from the Department of Community Services (DOCS) over four years. 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.

Last week, 20 DOCS workers at Maitland, north of Sydney, walked off the job for an hour to demand increased staffing. They claimed that 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 since 2008 the number of "comprehensive assessments" had fallen and "a very high number" of serious child protection reports had not been responded to.

Queensland: Townsville council workers strike again

For the second time this month 50 Townsville City Council (TCC) workers defied an industrial court order and walked off the job for 24 hours on October 24 in a dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. CFMEU and the Federated Engine Drivers and Firemen's Association have rejected a 3.7 percent pay rise offer from the TCC. The council said it would make a new offer to all field staff later in the week.

Western Australian health and education workers walk out

Hundreds of workers from Western Australia's public schools and hospitals walked off the job on October 25 and rallied at outside parliament in Perth after wage negotiations with the state government broke down. The United Voice (UV) union wants an \$80 per week pay rise for education assistants, cleaners and gardeners. The government has refused to increase its \$28 offer. According to the union, the 10,000 workers affected by the dispute are among some of the lowest paid in the public sector.

Despite strong support from members for decisive industrial action, UV has limited industrial action to a few minor bans and dragged out the dispute for over three months.

New Zealand pilots' union calls off strike

The New Zealand Air Line Pilots' Association (NZALPA) has called off strike action planned for October 26 after it reached an agreement on behalf of 100 pilots employed by Air New Zealand subsidiary Eagle Airways. Workers had demanded an increase to their superannuation from 4 percent of salary to 7.5 percent to align their benefits with those of other Air New Zealand subsidiaries. The union has not publicised the terms of the agreement and indicated that its members will vote on the deal in coming weeks.

New Zealand: Open Polytechnic lecturers vote for industrial action

At least 120 lecturers of the Open Polytechnic of New Zealand have voted to take industrial action after their employer announced plans to cut their research and development time from 30 days to 15.

Tertiary Education Union members said action could include withholding student marks, working to rule and lightning strikes. Lecturers said research time is used for professional development and a requirement to teach a degree program.

Last year the polytechnic taught over 40,000 students from all around New Zealand, making it one of the nation's most extensive tertiary education providers.



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