

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 November 2012

Bangladesh: Hall-Mark shuts factories in Savar

On October 30, the financially troubled Hall-Mark Group shut down over a dozen factories in Savar, 24 kilometres north-west of Dhaka, without giving any reason. A note was placed on factory gates saying the closure was indefinite. At least 15,000 employees were not paid their monthly salaries and the Eid-ul Azha festival allowances.

A three-day closure of the factories on October 14 caused a workers' protest during which 50 people were injured in clashes with police. Again on October 23, at least 200 Hall-Mark workers were injured, mostly by police rubber bullets, when they protested outside the company's office to demand unpaid wages and bonuses for the Eid holiday.

Police have called in reinforcements in anticipation of mass protests that could spread to other factories. In June, over 500,000 striking garment workers from 350 factories in the Ashulia industrial estate, also on the outskirts of Dhaka, clashed with 1,000 police and Rapid Action Battalion forces in a dispute over dues, pay and conditions.

India: Kerala private hospital nurses escalate strike action

Around 2,000 members of the United Nurses Association (UNA) at 63 private hospitals in Thrissur district, in India's south-western coastal state of Kerala, walked off the job for the day on October 29 in solidarity with colleagues at the Mother Hospital who were on strike for improved wages and conditions. The action followed a strike by 300 nurses at four private hospitals in Kannur district on October 22 for a charter of 17 demands, including a pay rise. The Kannur nurses struck following failed talks with the Indian Nurses Association (INA), the Qualified Medical Practitioners Association (QMPA) and the Association of Management of Private Hospitals.

The UNA and INA are seeking implementation of the Balram report, which 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. At least seven hospitals have instigated legal action to declare the strikes illegal under the Essential Service Maintenance Act.

Jharkhand contract teachers strike

Around 85,000 contract teachers at 40,000 government schools in India's central-eastern state of Jharkhand have been on strike since August 28 to demand job regularisation and better wages. The Para

Teachers Association members have defied a threat by the government to resume work by October 31 or "face severe action."

At a meeting in April the government promised to increase contract teachers' honoraria from 6,000 rupees a month (\$US120) to 10,000 rupees and approve maternity leave. But it failed to honour the commitments and instead offered an increase of just 700 rupees. Teachers have planned protest action in the state capital on November 15 and a picket in front of the chief minister's house on November 3.

Tamil Nadu rail workers walk off the job

The Southern Railway Mazdoor Union (SRMU), representing locomotive pilots in Tamil Nadu's third largest city, Madurai, called a flash strike on October 29 against "back breaking work" and for the filling of vacant positions. Workers complained that there were just 45 loco pilots operating passenger trains in the Madurai division and they hardly received any rest after six days of work. Three trains were added to the rail system from November 1, increasing their workloads.

The strike was called off after two hours following intervention by a senior railway official, who agreed to meet union office bearers on November 3.

Hyundai workers in Tamil Nadu down tools

On October 30, members of the unrecognised Stalinist Centre of Indian Trade Unions-affiliated Hyundai Motor India Employees Union (HMIEU) downed tools for several hours at Hyundai Motor's Sriperumbudur factory, near Tamil Nadu's capital city Chennai, to demonstrate their objection to the latest pay increase.

In early October, management announced that it had "inked" a wage deal for permanent employees with the United Union of Hyundai Employees (UUHE) that would deliver monthly wage increases averaging 14,283 rupees over three years, with 40 percent paid in the first year, and 30 percent in the next two years.

HMIEU members also want reinstatement of 27 workers dismissed during a strike in 2008. HMIEU has not announced any further strike action, instead directing members to wear black armbands as a protest.

Tamil Nadu telecommunications workers on hunger strike

Around 50 employees of India's telecommunications giant Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) are maintaining a relay hunger strike outside the company's office in the state's port city of Tuticorin to demand regularisation as per seniority. Around 600 workers in the district joined the strike on a relay of 50 each day until November 3. The local union president said there were former employees of the defunct Indian Telecom Service whose qualifications have not been recognised, as promised, since joining BSNL in 2000.

Sri Lankan government medical officers strike

Thousands of medical officers at 1,500 state-run hospitals across Sri Lanka walked off the job for 24 hours on October 25 to demand increases in pay and allowances. The government responded by agreeing to meet representatives of the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) later in the day, but has refused the demands for six years.

In addition, doctors want transport allowances to compensate for work-related travelling expenses.

Taiwan workers hold street protest

Close to 3,000 workers and union officials marched to the Presidential Office in Taipei on October 28 to protest against low wages, unfair labour policies, rising prices and a growing labour insurance deficit.

The protest was held in response to several government decisions that included only partially raising the legal minimum wage and introducing separate minimum wages for domestic and foreign workers. In addition, demonstrators expressed concern over a government claim that the labour insurance system could go bankrupt within two decades and that it was considering increasing workers' premiums and reducing payments to retired workers.

Victorian can manufacturing workers end strike

Thirty-two members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) at the Visy can manufacturing plant in Clayton South, Melbourne ended a six-week strike on October 24. Workers struck after Visy, with plants across Australia that recycle waste for metal cans and cardboard containers, imposed a three-day lockout as punishment for calling a one-hour stop-work meeting over a new enterprise agreement. The six-week strike caused the loss of production of over 2 million drink cans a day.

The workers had repeatedly voted down management's proposal to effectively cut the wage of night shift workers by at least 30 percent. The company reportedly finally dropped its bid to take away the nightshift allowance, but other details of the settlement reached by the AMWU remain unclear.

Victoria's WorkSafe employees strike

Members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) at WorkSafe in Melbourne walked off the job for four hours on October 19 after six months of failed negotiations with the state government for a new enterprise agreement. No further industrial action has been announced.

New South Wales cleaners protest

About 150 shopping centre cleaners and supporters rallied outside Sydney's Town Hall on October 31, where the Property Council congress was being held, to demand better pay and conditions. Protesters marched with mops and dusters. Workers complained that cost-cutting property firms were squeezing cleaning companies into cheaper contracts, which meant lower pay and cuts in hours, but not reduced workloads.

The rally was part of the United Voice trade union's long-running "Clean Start" campaign, seeking agreements with employers to grant it coverage over the low-paid contract cleaning sector. Rallies have been held at shopping centres in Victoria, Queensland and New South Wales.

New Zealand construction workers walk out

Members of First Union (FU) at Fletcher Building's Crane Distribution site in Onehunga, Auckland walked off the job on October 25 to demand better pay. A FU organiser told the media that workers were paid as little as \$32,500 a year—not much more than the minimum wage of \$28,000. The company has capped pay rises at 2 percent but workers are demanding 3 percent.

Fletcher Building Limited, which is New Zealand's biggest listed company and Australasia's largest building materials supplier, employs about 19,700 people. Since the financial crash of 2008 it has laid off more than 3,700 employees globally. The company posted a \$317 million profit last financial year.

Meat workers' union negotiates wage cut

About 150 members of the Meat Workers Union (MWU) at Blue Sky Meats (BSM) in Invercargill, the southernmost city on New Zealand's South Island, voted on October 31 to accept a union negotiated wage cut. No vote tally has been released. An MWU official acknowledged that the deal was rammed through despite "a lot of opposition" from members.

The cuts include \$30 a day for boning room workers and \$18 to \$28 a day for labourers. The agreement will mean that slaughter workers will work five days a week instead of four days for the same weekly earnings. MWU officials sided with the employer and told workers they had no option but to accept the cuts. BSM last month told workers that if they did not accept the new wage structure, then wages would be cut anyway by 25 percent for slaughterers and 35 per cent for boners.

The meat processing industry has been affected by a global drop in demand for sheep meat, as well as the high New Zealand dollar. Sheep numbers in Southland fell by 25 percent between 2000 and 2011, with farmers shifting to the more profitable dairy industry. The MWU, which has over 20,000 members, is helping to impose wage and job cuts in order to maintain profitability. The union has agreed to 70 job cuts at BSM's plants, which employ 350 people.

Papua New Guinea seafarers end two-week strike

Seafarers employed by Lutheran Shipping (Luship), a business arm of Evangelical Lutheran Church of Papua New Guinea (PNG), ended a two-week strike on October 18 after the employer agreed to terminate the company's CEO and investigate safety concerns of employees. Seafarers had refused to operate two of the company's ships, which they deemed unsafe for crew and passengers, leaving them stranded at the company wharf at Vocal Point in Lea, on PNG's mid-north coast.

Luship employees claimed that safety inspection records had been falsified to comply with government regulations, that first-aid kits for passengers and crew were left unstocked and life rafts had never been serviced. Ship captains complained that important navigation and communications equipment did not work. In 2008, the National Maritime Safety Authority ordered the grounding of four Luship vessels over safety concerns.



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