

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 March 2013

Strike at General Motors in Thailand enters seventh week

Around 2,000 assembly-line workers at the General Motors Pluakdaeng factory in the coastal city of Rayong, in the Gulf of Thailand, have been on strike since February 8 after managers added a Saturday shift without paying overtime. Although 3,000 workers remain at work, production has tumbled from 600 cars per day to just 100.

Strikers have set up a picket outside the factory and are petitioning the US embassy and the Prime Minister's Office over their grievance. A spokesman for the Workers Union of GM Pluakdaeng said outside workers were helping with food supplies to maintain the picket, but offer no perspective except to continue the picket for at least three months.

Cambodian garment workers maintain strike action

Close to 300 of the 2,900 employees at the E-Garment factory in Kandal province, on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, have been on strike since January and are picketing the factory in a dispute over union coverage. The strikers, members of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU), are trying to retain the trade union's presence at the factory. They have been subjected to physical violence from police and officials of the government-approved factory union, the Motanapheap Kamakor Khmer Union (MKKU).

Strikers are demanding that management honour the agreement signed with C.CAWDU to reinstate 33 union members dismissed in 2007 and reinstate the eight C.CAWDU union leaders dismissed after being violently attacked inside the factory by MKKU members in 2010. E-Garment's parent company, Yee Tung Garment Company, a Hong Kong-based multinational, has used the cover of the MKKU at its various related Cambodian companies to illegally use scabs to break strikes and intimidate workers.

According to a report by the US-based Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a supervisor at one of Yee Tung's factories, Century Miracle Apparel in Ramtha, ordered several male employees to forcibly drag back to work and beat female Burmese workers who were on strike against labour abuses. WRC reports that after this attack, hundreds of Burmese workers at the factory said they wanted to return to Burma. However, the company has prevented them from leaving by imposing substantial penalties in exchange for their departure.

Pakistan education employees fight for wage rise

The non-teaching employees of about 500 schools of the Pakistan Federal Directorate of Education (FDE) have been on strike since March 6 to demand wage increases and time-scale promotions. On Tuesday, the protesting employees locked FDE premises, forcing officials out of offices. At least 30 schools in Islamabad remain closed.

A workers' Joint Action Committee called the protests, which have continued despite promises from local authorities to address their demands. Workers complained that their demands had been ignored by the FDE for over three years.

India: Assam tea plantation workers demand payment of wages

Around 2,000 plantation workers at the Bhaithakal tea estate in Karimganj district, in India's north-eastern state of Assam, have been on strike since March 19 to demand the immediate release of two weeks' pending wages. The estate is owned by a Kolkata-based plantation owner, M K Basu. Work in the plantation, factory and office has come to a standstill. Workers complained that the manager had fled the estate, leaving no one in authority.

The plantation workers are paid a meagre daily wage of 73 rupees (\$US1.34) and not provided with many basic facilities, like electricity and water. The strike was organised by the Barak Valley Tea Workers Union, affiliated with the Indian National Trade Union Congress.

Tamil Nadu handloom workers on strike

On March 18, weavers at thousands of handloom units across Tamil Nadu, in southern India, began a week-long strike to demand the withdrawal of import duties on silk. According to the Handloom Silk, Yarn Saree Weavers and Traders Association, over 100,000 handloom weavers in Coimbatore, Erode, Dindigul, Salem and Tirupur districts use imported silk for their products. The import duty on raw silk is 5 percent, but the national government budget this year proposed increasing it to 15 percent.

Karnataka load workers demand higher wages

On March 18, load workers, members of the Workers Force Union, gathered outside the office of the Food Corporation of India in Mandya, Karnataka to demand higher wages. Currently they are paid just 36 rupees for each tonne of produce loaded. The union has demanded a slight rise, to 46 rupees per tonne (\$US0.85), and improved job security.

Karnataka village government workers protest

Local government workers, who are covered by the State Gram (Village) Panchayat Employees Association, marched to the district commissioner's office in Chitradurga, Karnataka on March 18 to demand payment of several months of dues. In addition they demanded the resolution of pay disparities and implementation of promotions. Workers complained that the non-payment of wages was causing hardship for their families.

Madhya Pradesh medical teachers strike over pay

Around 200 medical teachers, affiliated to the Madhya Pradesh Medical Teachers Association, went on mass leave on March 18 over pay and entitlements at the MY Hospital and Chacho Nehru Hospital at Indore in Madhya Pradesh, central India. Their demands included salaries on par with University Grant Commission grades, pension benefits, group insurance and payment of arrears. A memorandum was submitted to the Dean of Indore Medical College. The Teachers Association exempted emergency services from the doctors' action.

Andhra Pradesh ambulance workers hold sit-in

Ambulance workers of the '108' ambulance service at Kadapa Collectorate in Andrapradesh staged a sit-in strike on March 13. Their demands included an increase in the monthly minimum wage to 15,000 rupees (\$US300), rectification of salary disparities, a 200-rupee daily allowance, free travelling facilities, 500,000-rupee compensation if an employee dies on duty and an end to illegal suspensions. Workers submitted a memorandum of their demands to government authorities.

Supermarket workers protest in Bangalore

On March 19, employees of Metro Cash and Carry, a subsidiary of a German wholesale giant, demonstrated in front of the Bangalore Town Hall to protest the suspension of a trade union leader and demand

better wages and conditions. Demonstrators accused management of trying to "break the union" by suspending an official when he filed a complaint over basic rights and harassment.

Victorian electricity generation workers locked in dispute

Workers at Victoria's largest power station, Loy Yang B, in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, planned to strike for 24 hours on March 22. Limited industrial action started in February, cutting energy generation at the plant by 20 percent a day for 12 hours. The power station supplies about 17 percent of the Australian state's energy.

The workers are covered by the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). The CFMEU and the generator's owner, GDF Suez, have been in negotiations for several months over a proposed new enterprise agreement. GDF Suez has appealed to the federal Labor government's Fair Work Commission to halt the strike.

Last week, the Victorian Supreme Court granted an injunction to stop workers taking "go-slow" industrial action at the nearby Yallourn Power station in their dispute with the station operator, Energy Australia, for a new work agreement. The court ruled that the "go-slow," which cut power generation by a third between four and six o'clock each afternoon, was not "protected industrial action" under the federal Fair Work anti-strike laws.

Neither union campaign has had an impact on Victoria's electricity supply, according to the Australian Energy Market Operator.

Tasmanian bus union blocks strike action

In preparation for a sell-out, the Rail Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), representing 300 bus drivers at the Tasmanian government-owned Metro bus company, is blocking any industrial action in a dispute with the state Labor government over a new work agreement.

Following a series of ineffective limited stoppages, the state's peak trade union body, Unions Tasmania, has launched a "no fares campaign," calling on the public to refuse to pay fares every Thursday. Metro has threatened legal action against that drivers and members of the public.

In return for a new enterprise agreement, the RTBU wants annual 3 percent pay increases over three years but Metro has offered just 2.1 percent, leaving drivers on less than 75 percent of Tasmania's average weekly ordinary time earnings. Metro's board recently awarded itself a 24 percent pay increase.



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