

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 April 2013

## Bangladeshi police attack striking garment workers

At least 12 people were injured when industrial police baton-charged striking Kaberi Sweaters garment workers on March 30. The workers' demonstration had spilled over onto the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway for an hour in Gazipur, on the outskirts of Dhaka. Strikers complained that the factory owners were trying to shift the factory to another location in the Prity Group of factories, without informing them.

Following a compromise between the company and union leaders, the protest ended. Management merely promised to pay wages on April 2 and give notification of the factory relocation as per the Labour Law.

## India: Maharashtra university teachers end boycott

More than 45,000 teachers from eight universities in India's western state of Maharashtra have ended the boycott on exam preparations that they began on February 4. The state government has agreed to pay over \$US300 million in salary arrears in accordance with the Sixth Pay Commission, but other issues are unresolved.

The Federation of University and College Teachers Organisations called off industrial action early last year over demands for payment of the arrears and the filling of vacant positions. The government had agreed to the demands, but this was implemented at just two universities.

## Tamil Nadu copper smelter workers protest plant closure

On March 31, around 2,000 people, including employees and contract workers of India's largest copper smelter, Sterlite Copper, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, demonstrated in Tuticorin to demand the reopening of the plant. The smelter was closed by the Pollution Control Board on March 23 after inspectors found gas leaks of highly toxic sulphuric acid. Inspectors were sent to the smelter following a long-running campaign by the local community over "obnoxious" gases in the air causing breathing and other health problems.

Sterlite belongs to the UK-based Vedanta Group and produces half of India's copper output from the 17-year-old plant. Workers

complained that the livelihoods of 3,000 employees were at risk, as well as those of over 20,000 people associated indirectly with the plant.

## Assam tea plantation workers on hunger strike

The All Tea Tribes Students Association began a 50-hour hunger strike in Mariani, Jorhat district on March 30 to protest the failure of the government-owned Assam Tea Corporation to respond to tea garden workers' long-standing demands. The association claimed that workers were owed 400 million rupees (\$US7.4 million) in Provident Fund payments, pending for 8 years, and that their daily wage was still 84 rupees, as against a paltry industrial minimum of 89 rupees. In addition, workers have not been provided with any rations, which are provided in other estates.

## Explosives factory workers demand overdue wages

Employees of state-owned Tamil Nadu Industrial Explosives Limited (TEL) in Vellore rallied at the district collector's office on April 1 to demand the payment of wages three months in arrears. Over the past two years, the TEL Staff Union has called several protest strikes over the delayed payment of wages.

## Tamil Nadu unorganised sector workers protest

On April 1, unorganised sector workers, including construction workers, auto-rickshaw drivers and handloom workers, staged a protest in front of the Thanjavur Medical College to demand compulsory pensions for all workers above the age of 60 and the abolition of compulsory appearances by workers to renew their welfare board memberships. The protest was staged by the Tamil Nadu Unorganised Construction Workers Welfare Association and the Auto Drivers Association.

## Sri Lankan waterboard workers strike

National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) workers walked off the job for 7 hours and picketed the utility's office in Ratmalana on March 28. The Water Supply Combined Trade Union Alliance has called for an 8 percent allowance increase, rectification of salary anomalies and reinstatement of a suspended distress loan facility.

### **Sri Lankan health workers walk out**

Around 3,000 Colombo National Hospital "substitute" employees walked out on April 1 to protest the sudden transfer of a union representative. An All Ceylon Health Workers Union official told the media that the worker was served with a transfer letter without warning or reason. Workers said the transfer was political victimisation and vowed to strike until it was cancelled. Management has threatened to sack the strikers and use military personnel until replacement workers are recruited.

### **Hong Kong port workers on strike**

Close to 200 outsourced contract workers of port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd have been on a sit-in strike since March 28 to demand a 20 percent pay increase. Strikers are ignoring a court injunction imposed on April 2 ordering them to leave the terminals.

The strikers are employed by several different contractors and some have not had a pay increase for 17 years. The Union of Hong Kong Workers said the strikers want hourly wages to rise by \$HK12.50 (\$US1.61). Workers are forced to work 24-hour shifts without breaks, no fixed holidays, no formal meal periods, years without a single pay rise and in hazardous conditions.

### **Tasmanian bus drivers locked out**

Over 300 bus drivers at the Tasmanian government-owned Metro bus company were locked out for 24 hours on April 3 after they entered a one-hour stopwork meeting in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. Close to 2,000 Metro bus services were cancelled in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston. Drivers had begun limited industrial action in February.

The Rail Tram and Bus Union 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. The Labor-Green government has called in former premier and union bureaucrat Paul Lennon to mediate in the six-week dispute.

### **Victorian power generator workers strike**

Workers at the Yallourn power station, in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, walked out for 24 hours on April 3 in an eight-month dispute with the station operator Energy Australia over a new enterprise agreement. Power generation at the plant was cut by 20 percent during the strike.

Workers have been offered a pay increase of 25 percent over four years but the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) wants a consult-and-agreement clause to be added into the contract, allowing it to take part in management's operational decisions. The federal Fair Work Commission has given permission for the CFMEU to call 24-hour strikes during negotiations.

### **New Zealand primary school teachers vote for protest**

Primary school teachers represented by the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) have voted for a nationwide protest on April 13 to oppose the Key government's public education cost-cutting reforms. Teachers held a series of stopwork meetings and public protests in November last year over the reforms, which pave the way for competition, school closures and the introduction of charter schools.

The NZEI has included in the protest teachers' concerns over pay anomalies caused with the introduction of the Novopay payroll system.

The union had inflamed criticism from teachers and parents in February when it suddenly cancelled a strike to oppose school closures in Christchurch, in New Zealand's South Island, and replaced the strike with a community protest. The union had earlier said that the planned strike was not in opposition to school closures, but to protest the fact that the government had not consulted the union sufficiently about its plans.

### **Solomon Islands teachers maintain strike action**

Over 8,000 members of the Solomon Islands Teachers Association (SINTA) are maintaining strike action, begun on March 22, after the government failed to attend a meeting during the week, which it had called to discuss with SINTA its failure to meet its own commitments to pay outstanding wages.

Teachers walked out for over a week earlier this year to demand back payment of a salary increase, to which the government had agreed in 2012. In meetings in early February, teachers agreed to return to work after the government promised to pay the outstanding money in three instalments over a four-week period. According to SINTA, only 2,000 teachers have received their money.



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