

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 June 2013

Strike at Nike factory in Cambodia in fourth week

Confronted with police brutality and sackings, 4,000 Sabrina (Cambodia) workers in Kampong Speu province west of Phnom Penh are maintaining strike action begun on May 21 to demand an increase in their meagre \$US75 monthly basic salary and \$14 per month to help pay for transport, rent and healthcare costs. The company produces garments for the US sportswear giant Nike.

Since walking out of the factory over 20 workers, mainly women, have been hospitalised by brutal police attacks, including one pregnant worker who lost her baby. Riot police using electric stun batons and water canon have attempted to break the strike. At least eight factory representatives of the Free Trade Union have been arrested. This week, factory management sacked 300 strikers for allegedly flouting labour laws and the factory's internal rules.

Cambodia's garment industry employs over 400,000 workers and accounts for \$4 billion, or roughly 80 percent, of Cambodia's total export revenue. The number of strikes by garment workers nearly quadrupled last year to 134, according to the Garment Manufacturers Association of Cambodia. The 48 strikes so far this year are already more than in the whole of 2010 or 2011.

Bangladesh: More police attacks on striking garment workers

On June 10, police fired teargas and rubber bullets at protesting Fountain Garments Manufacturing workers in the Ashulia industrial area on the outskirts of Dhaka, injuring about 30. Workers were demanding a pay rise, bonus payments and a lunch allowance. Additional police were rushed to the area to contain further industrial unrest.

In New Eskaton, a Dhaka suburb, police conducted a two-day battle with striking garment workers. On June 10, a walkout by hundreds of Nadia Garments employees demanding a lunch allowance was joined by workers from Regal Garments and Astras Garments. The strike ended the following day, after police attacked workers with teargas and batons. At least six strikers were detained but later released.

Last week in Ashulia, 50 workers were injured when police used rubber bullets and baton-charged 3,000 employees who had walked out over low pay and were demanding the withdrawal of charges against workers involved in previous industrial action. The Dynasty Group suspended production for several days at its factories in fear of further labour unrest. Ongoing protests since the Rana Plaza catastrophe in Dhaka on April 24 have severely reduced garment production capacity.

India: Kingfisher Airlines employees resume protests

In a long-running dispute over dues, over 60 employees of defunct Kingfisher Airlines set up a camp in the Kingfisher House terminal building at Mumbai Airport on June 6. Pilots, cabin crew and ground staff have not been paid since August. A wife of one of the affected pilots has committed suicide over the financial stress created by non-payment of salaries.

Kingfisher, which is owned by liquor baron Vijay Mallya, started having financial difficulties in early 2012 which sparked a series of strikes by employees over delayed wage payments. The airline has been grounded since October and no longer has a flying licence. Since February Mallya has been promising staff that he would re-launch the airline.

Tamil Nadu soda ash plant workers demonstrate

Tuticorin Alkali Chemicals (TAC) workers protested outside the Provincial Collector's office in Tuticorin on June 10 to demand that the government take over the company. Workers complained that they had not been paid wages for May and the jobs of 40 officers and many contract workers had been terminated. The TAC Employees Union submitted a memorandum to the district collector and brought the issue before the labour minister and chief inspector of factories.

Andhra Pradesh paper workers protest

Rayalaseema Paper Mill (RPM) workers demonstrated in Kurnool on June 11 outside the Labor Office. Workers were demanding unpaid wages for the last three months. The mill reopened in 2007 with 400 employees after being closed for 17 years due to financial difficulties. It is currently one of the largest paper mills in Asia.

Andhra Pradesh jute mill workers locked out

Locked out workers of the Uma Jute Mill in Kothavalasa, Andhra Pradesh protested in front of the Joint Commissioner of Labor Office on June 10. The Indian Federation of Trade Unions submitted a memorandum to the commissioner. The mill produces 30 tonnes of twine a day.

Karnataka daily wage workers in Raichur City end strike

Raichur City Municipal Council daily wage workers called off their five-day strike and protest outside the Deputy Commissioner's office on June 8 after the management agreed to pay wage arrears. Another demand—for compensation for the death of a fellow worker Venkatesh who died while on duty—was not met. A union official told the media that workers would strike again if the remaining demand was not quickly granted.

Pakistan steel workers demonstrate over outstanding salaries

Pakistan Steel Mills (PSM) workers protested on June 7 to demand the immediate payment of outstanding April and May salaries and pensions which have affected 17,000 workers and pensioners. The Pakistan Steel Labour Union called off the protest after PSM's chief executive officer promised to pay salaries early next week. According to one official, the PSM is requesting approval from the government for a bailout in next year's financial budget.

Karachi municipal workers protest

On June 5, Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) workers dumped garbage outside the Sindh provincial assembly and Sindh secretariat to protest the non-payment of salaries. More than 26,000 workers have not been paid for four months. The previous day workers demonstrated in front of the Karachi Press Club parking dozens of loaded garbage trucks. The KMC Municipal Workers Union told the media that the protests would continue until workers were paid.

Burmese plastic bag manufacturing workers strike

Close to 1,400 employees of the San Kaung plastic bag factory in Shwe Pyi Thar township, on the outskirts of Burma's former capital Yangon, have been on strike since May 6 to demand reinstatement of 47 of their colleagues who had been fired without any reason. Workers' other demands include a pay rise, official recognition of the factory union and a management agreement that it will not dismiss workers without a valid reason or punish employees for going on strike.

Strikers have maintained a 24-hour picket at the factory gate since May 26. Thirty workers have been involved in a hunger strike and at least three hunger protesters have been hospitalised. Management has applied to the Dispute Settlement Arbitration Council to end the dispute.

Western Australia: Airport security workers maintain rolling stoppages

Around 80 security screeners, employed by MSS Security are continuing industrial action at the Perth Domestic Airport in a dispute for a new work agreement.

Following 24- and 48-hour strikes in the last two weeks, United Voice members walked out again on June 12 after management locked out 11 security screeners for wearing T-shirts with the slogan "Paid less in the west." At least 25 workers have been locked out since strike action began on May 28.

The MSS workers want a 20 percent pay rise over three years and increases in shift allowances and weekend penalties to bring them on par with MSS screeners in other states. MSS workers in Perth earn 8.7 percent less annually than their counterparts in Adelaide and Melbourne where living costs are significantly lower. Workers rejected a management offer of just 3.2 percent annual increases over four years.

United Voice, however, dropped its pay rise demand by nearly half to just 12 percent over three years before it resumed negotiations with MSS on Friday.

New South Wales coal loader workers continue rolling stoppages

For the fourth time in five weeks, over 200 members of five unions at Australia's largest coal export terminal at Port Waratah Coal Services (PWCS) in Newcastle, north of Sydney, walked off the job for eight hours on June 7 in a dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. Negotiations between PWCS and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), the Transport Workers Union, the Australian Workers Union and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union have dragged on for more than nine months.

The unions want a 5 percent wage rise. The company has only offered 3.5 percent on the base rate and demanded greater productivity and "flexibility", including abolition of current limitations on the exploitation of contract labour, ending management consultation with the unions on changes to work hours and shifts and the jettisoning of a longstanding disputes settling procedure.

PWCS's demands are part of a wider restructuring within the Australian coal industry, triggered by falling demand in Asia. PWCS exports thermal coal from its two terminals at Carrington and Koorangang to Japan, China, South Korea and Taiwan.



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