Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 June 2013

South Korea: Renault Samsung workers maintain rolling stoppages

Around 2,650 unionised workers at the Busan plant of Renault Samsung Motors (RSM), the Korean unit of French automaker Renault, are continuing rolling stoppages begun on June 3 over a new wage agreement. Following a four-hour walkout last week, workers downed tools for two hours and four hours on the morning and night shifts respectively on June 17.

Union demands include a 130,498 won ($US117) monthly base pay raise, allocating 30 percent of the company's net profit for workers' bonuses, extending the retirement age to 61 and a 10 million won technical education allowance for employees' children. Management wants to freeze wages and reduce benefits. No agreement was reached in last year's wage negotiations.

RSM began operating in 1998 and is South Korea's fourth-largest auto manufacturer.

Industrial action continues in Bangladesh garment zones

Following weeks of walkouts, factory closures and brutal attacks from riot police, garment workers in Dhaka's industrial areas—Tejgaon, Gazipur and Savar—were again confronted by baton-wielding police, backed up by water canon and rubber bullets, during protests last week. In Tejgaon, 15 workers were injured by police on June 17 when several hundred Utah Apparels employees demonstrated after their factory was found closed that morning. Workers from six nearby apparel factory units joined the protest and blocked the Tejgaon-Gulshan road link.

On the same day in Gazipur, 10 workers were injured by police when Uni-gear garment employees walked out and blocked the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway to demand an increased attendance bonus and other benefits. The authorities closed the factory for an indefinite period in response.

In Savar, Cosmopolitan Industries employees walked out on June 8 to oppose the dismissal of 165 fellow workers for allegedly organising 6,500 workers in a campaign for a wage rise. Owners shut the factory indefinitely, fearful that the industrial action would spread. Stick-wielding thugs, alleged to have links to Juba League, Bangladesh's ruling party youth movement, were mobilised in an attempt to break up the protest.

Bangladeshi coal miners suspend strike

On June 8, 1,000 workers at Bangladesh's only coal mine, the Barapukuria Coal Mining Company in Dinajpur district, ended a two-day strike after the government agreed to discuss five demands with the Barapukuria Workers-Employees Union (BWEU) and the mine's Chinese owners, XMC and CMC. Miners' demands include improved safety, job security through employment regularisation and life insurance, disbursement of bonus profits for 2011 and 2012, introduction of a rationing system, and the appointment of Bangladeshi doctors.

The tripartite meeting was scheduled for June 20 and the BWEU warned that if the issues were not resolved by June 25 strike action would resume.

India: Communication contractors strike in Goa

Around 350 contract workers involved in the construction and maintenance of the giant state-owned Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) telecom network have been on strike in Goa since June 19. They want BSNL to fulfil its recent commitment to the Assistant Labour Commissioner that all contract workers would be paid statutory labour legislation entitlements. This includes a provident fund, bonus payments, revised minimum wages, holidays, overtime, and direct employment in line with departmental workers.

Andhra Pradesh domestic workers protest

On June 18, domestic workers in Vijayawada protested outside the Vijayawada Municipal Corporation (VMC) to demand ID cards and release of promised housing plots. According to the All India Democratic Women's Association, there are about 30,000 domestic workers in the Andhra Pradesh city struggling to survive on meagre incomes. Most of them live in illegal huts on canal bunds and hilly areas around the commercial city.

The VMC has failed to honour a commitment it made to domestic workers that would provide them with new housing as part of a project commenced in 2003.

Andhra Pradesh zinc smelter workers protest

Following 90 days of protests, Visakhapatnam Zinc Smelter workers rallied outside the plant's main gate in Gajuwaka on June 7 to demand the smelter be reopened. The owner, Hindustan Zinc, has been steadily winding down production for over a year and transferring production to its

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plants in other Indian states. Operations ceased in March, affecting over 800 jobs, including 300 contract workers.

The remaining 260 workers have rejected offers to either transfer interstate or accept voluntary redundancy. According to a Zinc Smelter Mazdoor Sangh union official, wages have not been paid for three months and utility supplies to company housing were disconnected on June 2. The union has made an appeal to the state government to demand the smelter be reopened.

Pondicherry pharmaceutical workers strike

Casual employees at Shasun Pharmaceuticals' Pondicherry plant on India's south-east coast have been on strike since June 15 to demand permanency. All production has been halted at the Ibuprofen API (active pharmaceutical ingredients) and the formulations manufacturing facility.

Shasun Pharmaceuticals has five plants in India and employs 1,800 people worldwide. The Pondicherry plant manufactures solely for export.

Tamil Nadu elementary school teachers protest

On June 16, elementary school teachers rallied in Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu and submitted a charter of 22 claims to the District Elementary Education Officer. The demands include a mental health counsellor for every 10 schools, filling of close to 96,000 vacant positions and a pay rise as per the Sixth Pay Commission.

Cambodian garment workers strike

On June 19, about 3,000 striking M&V International Manufacturing workers in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district protested on National Highway Two to oppose low wages and poor working conditions. Strikers ended the demonstration after government officials and factory management agreed to negotiate with ten workers inside the factory. Workers said, however, that the government and management "showed no interest" in granting any of their demands. Strikers are ignoring an arbitration council return-to-work order.

The employees, mostly women, have been on strike since June 3, after management rejected their charter of 11 demands. These include a pay increase, $US1 per day allowance for food, an extra $5 for transport costs, a $3 bonus for working on a public holiday, no sackings of pregnant workers and the provision of paid maternity leave.

The strikers also want management to stop docking workers' pay for being late. One worker complained that the company was deducting $US10 from the salaries of workers who were late by just one minute. The basic salary for Cambodian garment workers is only $80 a month.

Indonesian workers protest against fuel subsidy cut

Thousands of protesters rallied across Indonesia on June 17 against the government's plan to cut the fuel subsidy. An estimated 4,000 demonstrators gathered outside the national parliament in Jakarta, setting fire to tyres and waving banners that read "Reject the fuel price rise."

Over 19,000 police and military personnel were deployed in Jakarta to contain the protests and blockade the Jakata-Tangerang toll road in order to prevent other demonstrators entering the Indonesian capital.

In Sumatra police used teargas to stop hundreds of protesters storming the local parliament in Jambi city. In Medan, North Sumatra, angry demonstrators burnt a US flag outside the US consulate before trying to storm Polonia International Airport. At Ternate, in north eastern Indonesia, around 2,000 protesters clashed with local police as they tried to occupy the Baabulah Airport.

While only a small percentage of Indonesians are private car owners, the subsidy cut will increase petrol prices by 44 percent and drive up the cost of living. It will be the first fuel price increase since 2008.

Western Australia: Perth Airport security screeners' dispute continues

Industrial action called by the United Voice (UV) union, which covers 80 security screeners over a new work agreement with MSS Security at the Perth Domestic Airport, has entered its fourth week. At least 25 workers have been locked out since strike action began on May 28.

After a series of 24-hour and 48-hour stoppages, UV reduced its members' pay rise demand from 20 percent over three years to 12 percent. Management has maintained its original offer of 3.2 percent annual pay increases over four years.

UV organised a protest at the Perth Airport on June 19 at which union officials claimed that similar demonstrations would be held at other Australian airports to demand that MSS brings Western Australian security screeners' pay into line with their eastern states colleagues. MSS workers in Perth earn 8.7 percent less than their counterparts in Adelaide and Melbourne where living costs are significantly lower.

Industrial action was wound down this week and bans imposed on checking bag, aerosol and lap top computers.

New South Wales coal loader dispute enters sixth week

Unions representing over 200 workers at Australia's largest coal export terminal at Port Waratah Coal Services (PWCS) in Newcastle, north of Sydney, have extended strike action to include seven days of four-hour stoppages starting on June 20.

Negotiations between PWCS, a subsidiary of Rio Tinto, and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Maritime Union of Australia, 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, as part of a wider restructuring within the Australian coal industry due to falling demand in Asia, 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.

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New Zealand McDonald’s workers continue protests

Unite union members at two West Auckland McDonald’s stores walked off the job for several hours and picketed one of the stores to demand better pay and conditions on June 13. Walkouts and protests by 1,500 Unite members began in April after workers rejected a 25 cent per hour wage increase offer in a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Unite has only demanded pay parity with workers at the KFC restaurant chain. KFC workers received a $1 pay rise six months into the job, as opposed to the 25 cent pay rise after six months at McDonald’s. According to Unite, McDonald’s owes its workers about $2.5 million in unpaid wages across its 260 stores.

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