Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 June 2013

Bangladeshi cigarette rollers on strike

Hundreds of bidi (hand-made cigarette) workers in Barisal, 100km south of Dhaka, have been on strike since June 23 to demand a minimum wage board and withdrawal of a new bidi tax. The 2013–14 budget plans to impose a 60 percent tax on bidis, lifting their price near to low-cost machine-made cigarettes. Workers fear this will see smokers move away from bidis, threatening the livelihood of several thousands of men and women and the handicapped in the bidi industry.

Spokesmen for the Bidi Sromik Federation and Barisal Karikar Bidi Sromik Union told the media that the tax is aimed at restricting the bidi industry and does not apply to machine-made cigarettes.

India: Delhi metro construction workers strike

Over 300 construction workers for BL Kashyap, a contractor for the Delhi Metro Rail Corporation (DMRC) stopped work on June 25 over salary issues. The strikers are involved in the Jaipur Metro rail project and their walkout affected work at six stations.

One construction worker told the media that BL Kashyap has not paid wages for the past four months. Strikers agreed to resume work the next day, after the company gave an assurance that a wage payment would be made in two days.

Tamil Nadu agricultural workers protest

Over 1,200 farm workers, including 800 women, blockaded a main road in Thanjavur city to demand six months' dues. The demonstration was part of 23 separate protests across the Thanjavur district. Police arrested nearly 152 workers including 118 women. The protest was called by the Farmers Organisation, which is controlled by the Communist Party of India-Marxist.

Those employed under the Mahatma Gandhi Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme are only paid 148 rupees (or three US cents) a day. The wage rate is set by the national government. Those workers who have been paid claim they only received 110 rupees a day.

Nokia Siemens workers in Chennai on strike

Over 200 unionised employees out of 800 staff at the Nokia Siemens factory in Sriperumbudur near Chennai have been on strike since June 6 to demand reinstatement of five suspended workers and recognition of their union. Management has refused to enter talks on a new work agreement with the factory's union, which is affiliated to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

The plant opened in 2008 and manufactures a range of telecom equipment for 2G, 3G and 4G technologies. It produces 1.3 million units per year. Management claimed production was unaffected by the strike.

Tamil Nadu postal workers strike

Around 300 members of the National Federation of Postal Employees in Chennai's business district on Anna Salai (formerly known as Mount Road) struck for 24 hours on June 21 over 15 demands. These include establishment of a Seventh Pay Commission and the roll-back of a new pension scheme.

A federation official told the media that postal workers oppose pension deductions from their salaries because the new scheme involves "private players."

Pakistan: Punjab government employees demand higher pay

Government workers in Pakistan's Punjab province protested outside the provincial assembly on June 20 to oppose a 10 percent wage increase proposed in the government's latest budget. The protest included clerks and teachers and is part of a state-wide campaign. It followed demonstrations in several cities. Workers have denounced the increase, stating that it does not cover the

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rising cost of living.

The All-Pakistan Clerks Association has demanded 15-50 percent salary rises, depending on which city a worker is employed in, and wants the increase calculated for the total pay, not just the basic wage.

Cambodian casino workers sacked for striking

More than 400 striking workers at the NagaWorld hotel and casino complex in Phnom Penh were sacked this week in a dispute for better pay. Around 1,000 staff, including croupiers, drivers and cleaners, have been on strike since June 13 to demand their minimum wage be increased from $US80 to $150 a month and for improved working conditions.

Strikers are maintaining a 24-hour protest outside the casino. Last week, riot police and security guards broke up a peaceful demonstration, mostly by women, and briefly detained 19 workers. Management claimed the strike is illegal and refused to attend a mediation session called by the Arbitration Council.

NagaWorld is owned by the Hong Kong-listed Nagacorp Ltd. Gambling is legal for foreigners in Cambodia and draws tens of thousands of Thais and Chinese—betting is banned in their countries—to its casinos. NagaWorld posted a $113 million net profit last year. According to workers, their demands represent just 1.5 percent of the net profit.

Filipino steel workers locked out

Over 130 permanent employees at the Pentagon Steel plant in Apolonio Samson village in Quezon City have been locked out since April 12. Management told authorities that the factory had closed and it sacked the workers. The locked out workers, however, are maintaining a 24-hour picket at the factory gate and have told media that contract staff and scabs were running the plant.

On June 19, 100 members of the Philippine National Police, including the heavily armed SWAT, attacked the picket line and escorted a jeepney-load of scab workers into the factory and delivery trucks with finished steel out the gates. Police returned several days later to again escort delivery vehicles past the picket.

The National Labor Relations Commission has begun mediation sessions with Pentagon and workers' representatives. Workers want an agreement that allows them to return without management retaliation. They are also demanding the company withdraw any cases filed against employees and ends all discrimination, illegal transfers, summary sackings and other previous attacks on workers' rights.

Victorian power station workers locked out

On June 21, 75 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) at the Yallourn power station, in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, were locked out by their employer, Energy Australia, just prior to resuming industrial action. The maintenance and construction workers, who are in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement, held three 24-hour strikes in April and have put in place overtime bans.

CFMEU members have been offered a 25 percent pay rise over four years but the union wants a consult-and-agreement clause added to the enterprise agreement, allowing it to participate in operational decisions. This has been rejected by management.

The CFMEU and Energy Australia were in talks for eight months before the company broke off negotiations in April and attempted to move the dispute to the Fair Work Commission (FWC).

Energy Australia told the media it had no plans to lift the lockout and would keep the power station running using non-union labour. Locked out workers have a 24-hour picket at the station's main gate. Conciliation talks are set to commence in the FWC on July 2.

New Zealand: Striking LNG tanker drivers protest

LNG tanker drivers for Rockgas, the consumer natural gas arm of one of New Zealand's largest energy retailers and electricity generators Contact Energy, joined 40 other protesters outside the Auckland office of National MP Jami-Lee Ross against his bill allowing the use of strike breakers on June 25.

The drivers are members of the FIRST union and four weeks into an eight-week strike over proposed wage cuts. They claim that Ross's bill, which repeals part of the Employment Relations Act 2000, will allow employers to use volunteers, contractors or other casual employees during strikes or lockouts.

Eight of ten Rockgas drivers originally walked off the job in June 3 over a proposed pay cut. Their action followed a six-day strike in April, after three months of failed negotiations between Rockgas and the FIRST union for a new employment agreement.

The company wants a two-year agreement that cuts $1 per hour to the current base rate. Drivers are seeking a pay rise in line with higher wages paid to workers at Rockgas's competitors, better conditions and improved safety.

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