

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 August 2013

## **Bangladesh: Riot police attack demonstrating garment workers**

At least 40 people were injured on August 5 when police used teargas and baton-charged demonstrating garment workers in Gazipur, on the outskirts of Dhaka. Stylo Fashion Garments employees had blocked the Dhaka- Mymensingh highway after management had ignored demands for the early payment of August wages and Ramzan (Eid festival) allowances. The next day, Spectra garments workers blocked the highway with similar demands but dispersed after police arrived.

Meanwhile, seven protesters were injured when police baton-charged 600 garment workers and relatives of workers killed in the Rana Plaza building collapse in Dhaka in April. Workers were protesting at the Savar Bazar bus stop in Dhaka district to demand payment of wages, festival allowances and compensation.

## **Nepalese industrial zone workers in two-day walkout**

Thousands of workers in the Bara-Parsa industrial corridor, in the sovereign state of Nepal on India's northern border, walked off the job for 48 hours on August 6 in a dispute over wages, forcing the closure of 14 major industries. The Joint Trade Unions Committee threatened further strike action if their demand was not settled by August 9. Fearing the dispute could spread to all 300 companies in the industrial zone, employers called on the government to implement Section 80 of the Labor Act and declare the strike illegal.

The dispute was triggered after the government recently increased the monthly minimum wage by 1,800 rupees to 8,000 rupees (\$US102) and lifted all government wage levels accordingly. Private sector industries, however, only increased the pay of minimum wage workers and refused to

pass on the increase to higher paid employees.

The Joint Trade Unions Committee which includes the Federation of All Nepal Trade Union Bhojpura, Federation of All Nepal Trade Union (Revolutionary), General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions, Nepal Trade Union Congress, Federation of Democratic Trade Union and others, has demanded a wage rise for all salary scales.

## **Karnataka contract ambulance workers continue strike**

Over 2,000 contract employees, including drivers and paramedics, of the Karnataka '108' Ambulance Service have been on strike since July 27 to demand regularisation and a wage rise. The government has issued a court order prohibiting the strike and on August 5 their employer GVK-EMRI sacked 197 strikers and threatened to dismiss the rest if they fail to return to work "immediately." While GVK-EMRI has refused to negotiate with the union, the ambulance workers insist that they will remain on strike until their demands are met.

According to the Karnataka Rajya Arogya Kavacha 108, union members are forced to work for more than 12 hours a day. Most are posted outside their districts and paid a paltry 7,000 rupees (\$US240) a month with no job security and regularly have to pay for repairs to the ambulances. The union has demanded that the government's contract with GVK-EMRI be ended and workers absorbed back into the public service.

## **Protesting midday meal workers arrested in Andhra Pradesh**

Up to 45 protesting midday meal workers were arrested when they picketed the District Educational officer in

Nizamabad, Andhra Pradesh on August 5 to demand payment of 12.5 million rupees (\$US250,000) owed to the Midday Meal Agency since 2010. According to the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the government had not paid for the food for high school students' midday meals.

### **Australian Capital Territory nurses to vote on strike action**

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation-Australian Capital Territory branch has applied to the Fair Work Commission for protected action, with ballots to go to nurses next week in a dispute over wages with the Labor Party-Green territory government. The vote is in response to the latest pay offer to all ACT public servants.

The offer consists of a 6 percent pay rise this year to apprentices and trainees, the lowest-paid workers. The percentage increase is reduced for those earning more than \$20,000 per year and those receiving over \$77,000 only receive 2 percent this year and six instalments of 1.5 percent over the four-year agreement.

The Community and Public Sector Services Union, which covers the overwhelming majority of ACT public servants has not called for any industrial action but sought an "urgent" meeting with the government.

### **New Zealand nurses stop work to discuss employment law changes**

Over 47,000 members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) will be holding national stop-work meetings this month to oppose proposed government changes to employment laws. Around 26,000 government nurses at 80 locations of 20 district health boards (DHB) will participate.

According to the NZNO, if the Employment Relations Amendment Bill, currently before parliament, is passed employers can opt out of multi-employer collective bargaining. Currently all DHBs negotiate a multi-employer collective agreement with the unions ensuring that all government health workers in New Zealand receive the same pay and conditions.

The unions claim the bill would weaken collective bargaining provisions, put access to meal and rest breaks at risk, and put more barriers in the way of workers taking

industrial action in support of a wage claim. A nurse employed for 38 years told media that she has "never in all of my years in this profession come across such a threat of turning back the clock on working conditions and education by at least seven decades."

The NZNO stop-work meetings are part of a campaign by the Council of Trade Unions. The peak union organisation, however, has confined its protests to urging workers to send submissions to the government opposing the proposed amendments.

### **Fiji sugar mill workers threaten strike without government approval**

The Fiji Sugar and General Workers Union has threatened to call strike action over pay claims following delays by the Labour Ministry to validate an overwhelming secret ballot vote for industrial action by Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC) workers last month. Ignoring the presence of police and military personnel at the ballot and an order from the FSC for employees not to participate, 67 percent of the corporation's 2,000-strong workforce decided to participate with 90 percent voting for industrial action.

Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama indicated that the military might be used as scabs, declaring, "One way or another, the mills will need to continue to operate even if some people abandon their jobs." FSC management has refused to enter into talks with the union.

The sugar workers rejected a 5.3 percent pay rise and a health and welfare insurance scheme. A union official told the media that wages have fallen by 40 percent in real terms over the last seven years and that the 2,000 sugar workers, who earn just \$7.10 (\$US4.03) a week, could not afford to pay for the health and welfare premiums.



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