

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 September 2013

Asia

Bangladesh: Garment workers protest against police attacks

Factory goons, supported by police using teargas, attacked several hundred Masihata Sweaters workers demonstrating in the Gazipur industrial area. The garment workers were protesting against factory owners using law enforcement agencies and local goons to harass workers who had demanded an 8,000-taka (\$US103) monthly minimum wage, as agreed by the wages board, and the right to form trade unions.

Workers ended their protests after Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association officials said their problems could be resolved in discussion between workers, the plant owner and the industrial police.

Meanwhile, 15 workers in Narayanganj, in the Dhaka district, were injured when truncheon-wielding police attacked a demonstration by 900 Fuji Knitwear workers demanding unpaid wages. The factory closed on August 27 without paying 100 workers their salaries.

Police open fire on protesting hotel workers

At least ten employees from different hotels and restaurants in Rajshahi city were injured when riot police opened fire on a demonstration on September 3. The workers were protesting the death of a colleague, Rojob Ali, who they allege died of injuries caused when his employer at the Mazed Hotel pushed him off the hotel roof during an argument.

India: Uttarakhand motorcycle plant workers end strike

About 5,000 workers at the Hero MotoCorps motorcycle plant in Haridwar district ended a two-day strike on September 2 over the termination of a permanent employee, without resolution. On returning to work, 700 permanent employees were asked to pledge that they would not get involved in any future demonstrations. Suspension letters were issued to 16 employees who refused to sign

the agreement.

Workers, however, were assured of a “fair” hearing and told that there would not be any pay cut for the strike protest. The motorcycle workers alleged that the terminated employees were targeted because they had attempted to form a union.

Tamil Nadu contract health workers protest

On September 2, contract health workers at the Rajiv Gandhi General Hospital in Chennai, Tamil Nadu protested over outstanding dues. At least 120 workers had not been paid for the past three months. The low-paid workers only receive 3,000 rupees (\$US45) a month to transport patients between wards. They ended their demonstration after hospital authorities pledged to pay the contract employer what would cover the outstanding dues.

Tamil Nadu agricultural workers protest

Over 50 farmers demonstrated outside the Collector office in Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu on September 2 to demand the immediate release of crop insurance for 2012–13 and a write-off of 2012 banks loans because of crop failure. The protest was part of a state-wide campaign by the Agricultural workers Association, which is affiliated to the Communist Party of India.

The association also wants a 3,000-rupee (\$US45) monthly pension for farmers above age 60, to bring them in line with pensions paid by other states, such as Goa and Rajasthan.

Pakistan utility workers protest

Hundreds of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers marched through Lahore on September 4 over price rises in basic items caused by the Pakistan government’s latest budget. Protesting All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union members also called for better working conditions and workplace safety. Their action followed a similar demonstration in Lahore on August 30. Members of the Pakistan Workers Confederation declared that they would participate in future nationwide protests.

Cambodian Khmer Rouge tribunal workers on strike

About 200 Cambodian interpreters, translators and other employees at the UN-backed Khmer Rouge tribunal in Phnom Penh have been on strike since September 2 to demand wages outstanding since June. The Cambodian government is officially responsible for paying their salaries. The industrial action follows a strike in March by 30 translators who had not been paid for three months.

Khmer Rouge leaders, who are charged with alleged war crimes and other offences committed during their four-year rule of Cambodia in the 1970s, have been on trial since November 2011. The tribunal has met with resistance from the Cambodian government, where many top officials are former Khmer Rouge members.

SL Garment workers in Cambodia end strike

Close to 6,000 striking employees at Asia's largest garment manufacturer SL Garment Processing in the Meanchey district, Phnom Penh ended an 18-day strike on August 30 after management and city authorities agreed to one of their demands. The garment workers walked out on August 12 over eight claims, including an increase in the minimum wage to \$US150 a month and the removal of military police patrolling inside the company's factories.

Government officials, following talks between the Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union and SL Garment, supervised by the Phnom Penh municipal government, ordered that military police be removed from the factories. It is not clear if other issues have been resolved.

South Korea: Seoul call-centre workers end action

Following two walkouts last week by unionised contract workers at Seoul City's 120 Dasan Call Centre, the city government and the three contracting employers have agreed to some of the workers' demands.

The 270-member union, which covers just over half the workforce at the call centre, had demanded a 4 percent pay rise, additional paid leave, a 100,000-won (\$US90) holiday bonus, and a change of status for full-time employees directly hired by the city. The agencies only offered a 1.9 percent pay rise and 30,000 won in extra bonuses.

The union accepted a 3 percent pay rise and 50,000-won (\$US45.20) bonus for the Chuseok and Lunar New Year's holidays. While Seoul city authorities have agreed to reduce workloads, they rejected contract workers' demands for full-time employment.

Indonesian workers demand higher minimum wage

On September 3, for the second time since July, 3,000 workers organised by the Jakarta Labor Forum, marched on City Hall in Central Jakarta to protest the government's restrictions on the 2014 minimum wage increase. Protesters demanded that the city authorities ignore a presidential instruction that said wage rises be based on inflation levels and limited to a maximum increase of 10 percent.

Rally leaders told protesters that with a 40 percent fuel-price rise in July and price increases in basic goods, the minimum wage should be 3.7 million rupiah (\$US323) a month, a 60 percent increase from the current 2.2 million. More rallies are planned this month and in October.

Australia and the Pacific

Queensland sugar workers ordered to end industrial action

Around 200 members of three unions at MSF Sugar's Mulgrave Central Mill on Queensland's far north coast have been ordered by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to end all industrial action while it considers an application lodged by MSF. Australian Workers Union, Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union members began rolling 24-hour stoppages in June in a dispute for a new work agreement.

Negotiations have dragged on since the existing agreement lapsed on May 1, with workers rejecting a 10.5 percent pay rise over three years, stating it did not provide pay parity with colleagues at other sites owned by the company.

Under the Labor government's draconian industrial laws, the FWC can terminate or suspend protected industrial action if it agrees with employer or government claims that the action could threaten to "endanger the life, the personal safety or the welfare of the population" or cause significant damage to the economy.

Western Australian school-support workers protest

On September 4, over 1,000 school-support staff, including education assistants, cleaners and other workers, rallied outside state parliament in Perth to protest the Barnett government's plan to slash jobs and funding. The school-support staff are members of the United Voice union. At least 350 education assistant jobs and 150 education department staff are to be axed, teacher numbers are to be frozen and specialist program funding cut.

The State School Teachers Union (SSTU) held a rally after school hours. One school principal told parents that their school would lose \$280,000 due to budget cuts. While the SSTU has admitted that schools were expecting an extra 18,000 students over the next two years, a union official ruled out any immediate industrial action.



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