

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 October 2013

Cambodian garment workers continue strike

Workers at the Singapore-owned SL Garment Processing factory in Cambodia have been on strike now for almost two months. They are demanding their monthly wage be increased to \$US150 and the reinstatement of sacked union representatives. The company produces garments for leading brand names including Gap and other US corporations. Last week Levi Strauss announced that it was ending its relationship with SL Garment Processing.

In early August almost 4,000 members of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union walked off the job after Meas Sotha, a key shareholder, ordered a military police presence at the factory. Sotha claimed the presence of military police in the factory was to protect the workers.

Cambodia's apparel sector accounts for over 80 percent of the country's total exports. International garment corporations are drawn to Cambodia by its extremely low wages and government concessions.

Thai Rayon workers in Thailand remain locked out

Thai Rayon textile workers in Ang Thong, Thailand remain locked out after going on strike on September 18, after negotiations over a new work agreement (CBA) became deadlocked. The strike was the first at the plant in 39 years.

The 849 workers, who are members of the Thai Rayon Union, want an increase in the monthly wage from 5,000 baht (\$US161) up to 6,000 baht and an improved bonus payment. Signed in 2010, the current CBA expired on May 31 this year. The company wants to reduce nearly all the benefits workers had previously gained and cut the monthly wage to just 3,000 baht. It is also demanding productivity increases.

Most Thai Rayon employees have worked at the factory for over 20 years. The company also employs around 150 agency workers for maintenance, cleaning and security.

Thai Rayon made 1.3 billion (\$US41 million) in profits last year. Previous years were also highly profitable for the company. Thai Rayon is owned by global conglomerate Aditya Birla Group which has chemical and textile companies in 26 countries and employs 130,600 workers.

South Korean teachers protest against deregistration threat

Members of the Korea Teachers and Education Workers' Union (KTU) held a protest rally in Seoul on October 11 to demand President Park Geun-hye withdraw an administrative order calling for the union to terminate the membership of 22 teachers who had been sacked by the previous government.

Last month the Labor Ministry warned the KTU that it faced losing its legal status within a month if it refused to comply with the order. A union spokesman claimed the teachers had been dismissed after they "expressed political opinions" and "for fighting against corruption in private schools."

The KTU has about 60,000 members and is the nation's biggest teachers' union. It was established in 1989 and gained legal recognition in 1999.

Bangladesh garment workers demand wages and festival allowance

On Monday hundreds of garment workers from Liberty Fashions Wear in Ashulia demonstrated outside the plant and tried to block a main road to demand the company pay outstanding overtime dues and an allowance for the upcoming Eid-ul-Azha festival holiday.

Police used batons, tear gas and rubber bullets, injuring about 50 workers and also pedestrians. Workers reportedly fought back during the half-an-hour battle, pelting police with stones.

Over 4,000 workers are employed at the plant. Workers said they had held several demonstrations for the outstanding payment. Management promised to pay up on October 3 but had then locked the factory gates, sparking the protests.

Eight other factories covered by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association have also failed to pay outstanding wages and the festival allowance, sparking protests and demonstrations, including in Gazipur Narayanganj and Dhaka Badda.

In Dhaka Badda workers from two Tuba Group factories demonstrated on Saturday over the same issue and confined the owner Delwar Hossain to the premises until management agreed to pay up. Over 200 police were deployed to the site. Delwar Hossain

owned the Tazreen Fashion factory in Ashulia where 122 workers perished in a fire last November.

Indian mosque staff threaten to strike

Workers at the Mecca Mosque and Shahi Mosque in Hyderabad in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh have threatened to strike. They are demanding the payment of salaries that have been outstanding for a month.

Forty-four workers are employed at the mosques with 20 acting as security guards. Others work as cleaners and gardeners. The mosques are under direct management of the Minorities Workers Department.

Mining giant Peabody locks out miners

Giant mining company Peabody locked out 200 workers from its Helensburgh Metropolitan Colliery on the New South Wales south coast for 72 hours on October 13 after they voted to impose work bans in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The bans decision followed a 48-hour strike last weekend, the second such work stoppage this month.

Peabody is demanding employees accept an agreement that “lifts productivity and reduces costs”, including a three-year pay freeze. This would result in the mine’s pay levels being 20 percent lower than similar mining operations in the region. While the company claims the agreement would provide job security it has already axed 42 jobs at the pit this year as part of its plan to slash 400 across its operations in NSW and Queensland.

A Peabody spokesman told the media that the company “was exercising its rights under the Fair Work Act to idle the mine for the 72 hour period.” The Fair Work industrial laws, introduced by the former federal Labor government with the full backing of the trade unions allow employers to impose lockouts. Workers, however, are forced to go through a lengthy drawn out process, including secret ballots, before they can take industrial action.

Food processing workers seek pay increase

Workers at Coca-Cola Amatil subsidiary Crusta Riverland’s juice-bottling facility near Waikerie in South Australia began industrial action to bring their pay into line with workers at metropolitan Coca-Cola plants. The Australian Workers Union (AWU) claims the rates at other Coca-Cola facilities are 50 percent higher.

The planned industrial action will include flexibility and overtime bans and a series of stop-work meetings. The AWU has

been involved in negotiations with the company for a new enterprise work agreement for the last six months. Coca-Cola bought the Waikerie company for \$25 million in 2004.

Palliative care nurses impose bans

Victorian nurses at Banksia Palliative Care Service voted to begin industrial action October 22, after 11 months of negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement failed to resolve issues.

The nurses, who are members of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, provide specialist palliative care to patients in their own homes in the north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne. Banksia is a not-for-profit organisation based in Heidelberg. Industrial action will include bans on paperwork that affects funding. The nurses will also distribute material to win public support.

The dispute centres on management’s refusal to upgrade the nurses’ classifications to reflect their specialist nursing qualifications and experience. The pay difference between the classifications is up to \$2,000 a year. Banksia nurses were previously classified as 3B but over the last five years management has classified new palliative care nurses at the lower rate.

Hospital workers in French Polynesia maintain strike

Strike action by around 400 workers at Tahiti’s Taaone Hospital, French Polynesia’s main hospital, is continuing. Industrial action on October 8 was for permanency. Many of the workers have been employed at the hospital on limited contracts for many years even though under French labour laws such contractual arrangements are no longer than 18 months.

While management claims that an agreement has been reached giving an unspecified number of workers permanent contracts the union claims that various grievances have still not been addressed. During the strike workers picketed the hospital but allowed access to ambulances.



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