

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 November 2013

Bangladeshi garment workers reject pay offer

Thousands of garment workers in Gazipur, on the outskirts of Dhaka, walked off the job on November 5 to demand a near three-fold increase in the minimum monthly wage to 8,000 taka (\$US100). About 17,000 Apex Limited workers and over 5,000 Islam and Standard Garment Factory employees demonstrated while Mitali Fashion workers blockaded the Dhaka-Tangail highway.

Authorities suspended work at 65 garment plants, fearful that the protests would spread further. As in previous demonstrations, police baton-charged workers and used rubber bullets and teargas to try and break up the protests.

The strike followed an announcement a day earlier by a six-member government, management and union panel which recommended lifting garment workers' monthly minimum wage to 5,300 taka (\$67), an almost 80 percent increase.

Garment workers were last granted a wage rise in 2010, when their unions accepted 3,000 taka (\$US36) monthly minimum wage. At the time thousands of garment workers took to the streets to protest against the unions' endorsement of the poverty wage.

Sri Lankan medical health workers strike

On November 1, over 30,000 hospital workers in 25 categories, including pharmacists, radiologists, physio and occupational therapists, and paramedics, walked off the job nationally for 24 hours.

The Health Services Trade Union Alliance, representing 15 health sector unions, wants a 10,000-rupee (\$US8.78) monthly DAT (disturbance, availability and transport) allowance, a 200-rupee rise in hourly overtime payments, the current 4,000-rupees telephone allowance received by Special Grade categories extended to Grade One government health services, and duty-free vehicle permits for Special Grades in all categories.

Ansell Lanka workers maintain strike action

Nearly 1,000 workers at Ansell Lanka, a multinational rubber-glove manufacturer in Sri Lanka's Biyagama Free Trade Zone, have been on strike since October 11 over the sacking of 11 employees, including the trade union president and other office bearers. The workers are charged with "making representations" against the company's newly-appointed Human Resources Manager who has introduced higher production targets.

Union leaders claimed that the sackings were in response to worker's protests after female employees were ordered to produce 60 pairs of surgical gloves per minute during a five-hour shift.

The Ansell Lanka employees are opposing the new production targets and the use of contract workers supplied by manpower agencies. The Ansell Lanka Branch of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union said that employees have vowed to remain on strike until the issues are resolved.

An Ansell Lanka worker was killed in 1994 when police attacked a peaceful demonstration of striking employees.

India: Police assault striking construction workers

At least 90 workers were injured and 250 arrested when police attacked a demonstration of 1,500 construction workers employed by the Australian-owned Leighton Welsun Contractors at the nine-kilometre Chenani-Nashri tunnel on the Jammu-Srinagar highway in India's northern state of Jammu & Kashmir.

The workers have been on strike since October 25 over safety issues, a pay rise, reinstatement of ten workers sacked in 2011, and release of 150 workers arrested by police. The workers, mainly from local villages, claimed that their salaries had not been paid for a month and that they had not been issued safety equipment.

Pakistan utility workers oppose privatisation

Hundreds of Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) employees protested in Lahore and Rawalpindi on November 4 and 5 against government plans to privatise the country's power sector. Workers chanted slogans and carried banners opposing privatisation and the rising cost of living.

Under International Monetary Fund's directives, the newly-elected Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government has made public sector privatisation a priority in this year's budget. The budget has also slashed subsidies for essential needs and increased sales taxes, triggering high price rise.

The demonstration, which was organised by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union, is part of a long-running national campaign against privatisation. Preparations for the privatisation of WAPDA were begun by the previous government.

Pakistani municipal workers demand back wages

Lakki Marwat Municipal Committee workers in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa rallied on November 4 to demand the immediate payment of two months' overdue wages. The demonstration was called by the Municipal Workers Welfare Union.

Delays or non-payment of state and municipal workers' salaries are increasing as the national government slashes budget allocations to these sectors. Karachi Metropolitan Corporation workers walked out in January to demand wages for last November and December. In September, 22 health workers in Rawalpindi resigned over five months of unpaid dues. The non-payments have impacted on 53,000 health workers in Punjab province.

Teachers strike at Chinese private school in Jiangsu

At least 200 teachers at the Donghai Foreign Languages School at Lianyungang city, in the eastern Chinese province of Jiangsu, are on strike for better pay and benefits. Students supporting the teachers rioted when police vehicles suddenly arrived at the school. Teachers prevented riot police entering the school.

The striking teachers want to be employed on civil service contracts as directed by city officials more than a year ago. Whilst this was subsequently agreed to by the school authorities it was never implemented. Non-civil contract teachers frequently complain of below minimum living standard wages and often go unpaid for months. A teacher told the media that school management and local officials were currently negotiating to end the strike.

South Korean hospital workers end strike

Union officials at the Seoul National University (SNU) Hospital, the largest general hospital in Seoul, reached a tentative collective agreement with the management on November 4, ending a 12-day walkout. The agreement calls for a 1.3 percent wage rise, an increase of 30,000 won (\$US28) per month in danger-pay allowance, and a transition of 100 non-regular workers to regular employees by 2014.

The deal is yet to be ratified by union members. About 400 of the union's 1,400 members in three departments walked out on October 23. The hospital workers had demanded a 13.7 percent wage increase, improved conditions and the contracts of 1,143 temporary workers upgraded.

Woolworths warehouse workers in Victoria end strike

Around 350 National Union of Workers (NUW) members at the Woolworths' Barnawartha North warehouse in regional Victoria ended an eight-day strike on November 2, after a mass meeting voted to accept their employer's latest pay offer.

The supermarket giant increased its pay offer from 74 cents per hour to \$1.06 per hour over the life of a new two-year enterprise agreement. Saturday penalty rates will increase from 125 percent to 140 percent and

forklift drivers will receive a \$0.40 per hour allowance from January 1, 2015.

Workers at Barnawartha North, Woolworths' warehouse in Tasmania and at the company's Liquor Distribution Centre in Brisbane, Queensland had taken action on October 25 to demand an improved pay rise equal to the one offered at Woolworths' Melbourne warehouse.

The company had offered Melbourne workers a \$1.04 per hour increase but only 74 cents per hour for regional employees, increasing the wage disparity to \$225 a week. Regional workers, however, remain disadvantaged as the NUW deal only reduces the wage disparity to \$203 per week.

RACV call centre workers walk out

Australian Services Union (ASU) members at the Royal Automobile Club of Victoria (RACV) roadside assistance call centre in Melbourne walked off the job for four hours on November 6 in a dispute for a new work agreement. Workers rejected management's latest offer of a 2.5 percent pay rise, which required them to work an extra 100 minutes a week and drastically reduced redundancy benefits.

An ASU official complained that RACV management has just approved an 11 percent pay rise for directors, while call centre staff will see conditions cut. RACV claimed its offer was "fair and equitable."

Tasmanian nurses and midwives end industrial action

Members of the Tasmanian branch of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) suspended two weeks of work bans on November 6 after the federation endorsed a revised pay and conditions offer from the state Labor government. The offer is an interim 12-month enterprise agreement with a 2 percent wage rise and some improvements in skill mix with no reduction of current conditions.

An ANMF official claimed that the offer addressed the union's key concern about a lack of senior clinical nurses on wards after-hours by opening the Grade Four rating to a new cohort of applicants. Members are to vote on the offer by the end of next week.

This is the second time in current negotiations that the ANMF leadership have endorsed the government's offer. In early October members rejected a union deal for a 2 percent pay rise that imposed mandatory rostering of annual leave, removal of 11.5 public holidays a year and the reduction of eight-hour shifts to six hours. ANMF officials admitted that every nurse in the state would have lost about five days of public holiday leave which would have nullified the 2 percent salary increase.

New Zealand workers protest industrial law changes

On October 30, several thousand workers at over 900 work sites across New Zealand protested against the National Party government's Employment Relations Act Amendment Bill, which unions say will cut pay and remove basic rights for New Zealand workers.

According to the unions, if the Bill, currently before parliament, is passed employers can refuse to negotiate a collective agreement and opt

out of multi-employer collective bargaining in order to undercut their competitors on wages and conditions. The new law also makes it harder to strike, allows employers to reduce meal and rest breaks, and removes safeguards on low-paid contract workers when the employer's contract changes.

The New Zealand Council of Trade Unions (CTU) coordinated the demonstrations under the title of the "Give Us a Break" but limited action to petitions and "tea-break" protests. A government Select Committee on the proposed amendments has received thousands of submissions opposing the changes.

Gold mine workers in Papua New Guinea end strike

Around 1,000 workers at the state-owned Ok Tedi (OTML) gold and copper mine in Papua New Guinea's Western Province ended a two-day strike on November 1 without resolving any issues. The strike was in response to PNG government plans to slash production by one-third. The mine's 6,000 workforce is to be made redundant and a smaller workforce hired in 2014.

Mine management claims that all staff will receive the same level of redundancy entitlements. A Mine Workers Union official told media that workers were concerned that they would receive a smaller payout than those who accepted an earlier redundancy offer. The union did not say if any of the issues in a 17-point petition sent to the government had been resolved.



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