

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 November 2013

Cambodian police open fire on garment workers

A female bystander was killed and at least eight protesters were hospitalised from gunshot wounds when heavily armed police blocked 1,000 striking garment workers marching to the prime minister's house in Phnom Penh on November 12. Hundreds of police in riot gear, some carrying AK47s, attacked the procession using water cannon, teargas canisters and live bullets when workers reached the Stung Meanchey bridge.

Employees at the Singapore-owned SL Garment Processing factory in Phnom Penh have been locked out since September 20, after protesting the sacking of 700 workers accused of leading an 18-day strike of 4,000 Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union members in August. Workers had demanded that their monthly wage be increased to \$US150 and protested the order by Meas Sotha, a key shareholder, to station military police at the factory.

The company, which employs over 5,000 people at two factories, produces garments for leading brand names including Nike, H&M and Gap.

Bangladeshi garment workers continue protests over pay offer

At least 30 people were injured when riot police fired teargas into thousands of garment workers demonstrating outside factories for a wage rise on the outskirts of Dhaka on November 11. At least 100 factories shut down in the Ashulia and Savar industrial areas to avoid further violence after the clash erupted that morning.

Hundreds of thousands of garment workers in industrial zones near Dhaka went on strike in September demanding a near tripling of their monthly wage, to \$US100. Workers continued with strikes and street protests after garment unions accepted an offer from the government and manufacturers on November 4 to lift their monthly minimum wage to 5,300 taka (\$67), an almost 80 percent increase. Garment workers are maintaining their demand for a \$100 minimum monthly wage.

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. If

accepted, the latest offer of \$67 would still mean that Bangladeshi garment workers are amongst the lowest paid in Asia.

South Korean airport workers strike

Following a three-hour walkout early in the month, around 1,000 contract workers at Incheon International Airport near Seoul walked out on November 11 for 24 hours to demand job security, improved working conditions and the right to organise. Korean Federation of Public Service and Transportation Workers' Union members have faced threats of dismissal, criminal charges and lawsuits from the airport corporation.

Incheon International Airport Corporation management has demanded that the contracting companies replace union members and leaders or face the cancellation of their contracts. Management responded to Monday's action with scab labour and filming strike participants. Workers resolved to strike indefinitely from November 16 if the company refuses to negotiate.

India: Construction workers in Jammu & Kashmir maintain strike

Around 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 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 workers from local villages, claimed that their salaries are up to 50 percent less than other workers, that they had not been paid for a month and not issued safety equipment.

At least 90 workers were injured and 250 arrested last week when police attacked their demonstration that temporarily blocked the Chenani-Nashri highway.

Uttar Pradesh government employees on strike

Close to 1.8 million workers, 60 percent of government employees in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, have been on strike since November 12 over several demands including removal of salary anomalies. Workers from 250 unions want assured promotions or a promotion scale, pension benefits and removal of salary and allowances anomalies. Action was called after several rounds of talks failed. The government has refused to restart negotiations.

Haryana government workers walk out

Over 250,000 Haryana state government employees walked off the job for 24 hours on November 13 to demand regularisation of about 100,000 temporary workers, many whom have been employees for over 15 years. The strike was called by two government employees' unions, the Sarv Karmchari Sangh and the Haryana Karmchari Mahasangh.

At the same time, drivers and conductors of about 3,200 state-run buses of Haryana Roadways struck for 48 hours. As well as demanding regularisation of government workers, the Haryana Roadways Employees' Union is opposing the government's move to give route permits to over 3,500 private buses on the state roads. They fear it is a step towards privatisation of transport services.

Ansell Lanka workers' strike in fifth week

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. At least 800 strikers protested outside the Labour Ministry in Narahenpita on November 11 to demand authorities settle the dispute.

The Ansell Lanka Branch of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union said 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 sacked workers are charged with "making representations" against the company's newly appointed Human Resources Manager who has introduced higher production targets and is hiring contract workers supplied by manpower agencies.

Northern Territory public school teachers strike

Dozens of public schools throughout Australia's Northern Territory closed on November 12 after 2,000 teachers walked out

over a new work agreement. Australian Education Union members in Darwin voted to extend their action to include four-hour stoppages on November 19 and 27 at regional schools and metropolitan schools respectively if the state Country Liberal government fails to negotiate.

The AEU wants greater job security for teachers and for the government to reverse planned cuts to teacher numbers. According to the union, the Territory government plans to cut at least 80 teaching positions by increasing the number of students in the classroom by up to 30 percent.

Tasmanian meat workers union accepts two-tier wage deal

The Tasmanian Meat Workers Union has called off three weeks of industrial action at Greenham's abattoir near Smithton in Tasmania's north-west and imposed a deal that allows a two-tier wage structure. Some 160 workers struck for 24 hours on October 25 to demand 4 percent annual pay increases over the life of a new four-year work agreement. They rejected a pay rise offer of just 2.5 percent and wage rates for new recruits that would cut their pay by up to \$200 a week.

Under the sell-out deal the company can implement a two-tier wage structure while current employees will receive a 2.5 percent increase in pay with a \$750 sign-on bonus for the first two years, which will increase to a 3 percent increase in pay for the last two years of the agreement. The Meat Workers Union claimed that it had accepted company demands because management showed figures suggesting that the business would be unviable unless new employees' wages were cut.



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