

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

30 November 2013

Nokia workers in China remain on strike

Close to 1,500 employees at Nokia's mobile phone factory in the industrial city of Dongguan, in southern China, are maintaining strike action, begun on November 20, to protest unfair treatment following the sale of the company's mobile phones business to Microsoft Corporation. They threatened to extend industrial action after the company terminated the contracts of 59 employees for failing to return to work.

Hundreds of protesters picketed outside the factory, holding banners such as: "If you want to change the marriage, you have to first offer compensation." Workers demanded redundancy payments, saying they were being forced to sign new contracts with worse terms of employment. It is common in China, when factories change hands, for new contracts to remove all seniority, requiring workers to start again with a loss of privileges, as if they were new hires.

Electronics factory workers in Shenzhen end strike

Close to 5,000 workers at a Shenzhen factory run by Dutch semiconductor giant ASM ended their 22-day strike on November 21 after management agreed to partially meet some of the workers' demands. Workers downed tools on October 31, held up banners and marched through the factory when ASM announced it would move part of the factory to a location outside Shenzhen.

In the deal, the company agreed to increase both the basic salary and subsidies by 20 percent for those employees who relocated with the company, and offer a severance package, according to the law, to those who did not relocate. It also promised to provide an additional housing allowance of 200 yuan, or free accommodation at the factory, and open better communication channels between workers and management.

The pay deal fell far short of workers' initial demands for a 3,000 yuan (\$US426) basic monthly salary and restoration of the original 500 yuan subsidy. Currently workers receive a monthly salary of just 1,200 yuan (\$190) and a 200 yuan subsidy. Seven workers' representatives were sacked immediately after all strikers returned to work.

Cambodian garment workers' strikes at record level

Strikes at the SL Garment and Alim Cambodia clothing factories are the latest in a record number of strikes this year by workers demanding better wages and conditions. According to figures from the Garment Manufacturers Association in Cambodia, the number of strikes in the first

seven months of this year hit 83, compared to 81 the previous year and just 18 in 2011.

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 (C.CAWDU) 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.

SL workers this week vowed to continue their strike after management ignored a court order to rehire 19 union representatives and activists. The order to rehire the workers—all members of the C.CAWDU—came just days after riot police fired live bullets into a crowd of 1,000 SL Garment workers demonstrating in Phnom Penh. A bystander was killed and 8 workers hospitalised with gunshot wounds.

On November 19, more than 100 striking workers from the South Korean-owned Alim Cambodia garment factory in Phnom Penh marched to City Hall to demand the dismissal of four managers. About 400 workers had been on strike for two weeks over several grievances, ignoring municipal court rulings for them to return to work. Demands included the sacking of the four managers, a 2,000-riel (US40 cents) lunch allowance and wage uniformity. One worker told the media: "We want the factory to increase our payment, because they pay us only \$89 per month." After paying for food, housing, electricity and water, she was left with less than \$30 a month.

More stoppages in Bangladesh's garment factories

On November 26, garment workers from Multifabs Limited in Gazipur, about 54 kilometres north of Dhaka, demonstrated outside their factory to demand pay parity with workers in other Gazipur factories. They were later joined by workers from three adjacent factories—Mitali Fashions, Moontex Limited and Alim Knitwear Limited. Police were called in, and fired teargas canisters and baton-charged the protesting workers. The authorities at all four factories then closed their doors, fearing reprisals.

Bangladeshi granite mine workers walk out

Workers and miners at the state-owned mine of Madhyapara Granite Mining Company (MGMCL) at Parbotipur, 300 kilometres north of Dhaka, struck on November 25 after management failed to respond to a charter of five demands. All production at the mine stopped and workers vowed not to return to work until their demands were met.

Demands include a 20 percent dearness allowance, an end to retrenchments and outsourcing of jobs, reinstatement of eight retrenched miners and regularisation of the jobs of diploma engineers.

MGML has washed its hands of the dispute, saying the company signed a contract in September with a Belarus-based company for the mine's maintenance and production, and workers should take their grievances to it.

India: Uttar Pradesh government forces end two-week public sector strike

The Uttar Pradesh state government invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act against striking government employees, forcing them to return to work on November 22. Under the Act, supported by a High Court order, the strikers were liable for heavy fines or jail terms if they did not return to work.

Close to 1.8 million workers—60 percent of government employees in Uttar Pradesh—walked off the job on November 12 for a charter of 15 demands. Workers from 250 unions want removal of salary anomalies, assured promotions or a promotion scale and pension benefits.

The Allahabad High Court last week directed the government to restart a dialogue with the unions. State Workers Power Union leaders said subsequent talks failed to advance on any of the demands in the charter.

Karnataka cement workers protest

More than 3,000 daily wage and contract workers at two major cement factories in Gulbarga district, in India's southwestern coastal state of Karnataka, held a procession in Gulbarga city on November 26 to demand wages due to them as per the cement wage board and national wage agreement. Shramajeevigala Karmika Sangha trade union officials did not call for further strike action and instead presented a memorandum to the Commissioner's Office demanding that the government intervene to ensure that cement companies stand by the national wage agreement.

Tamil Nadu village health workers demonstrate

On November 22, several hundred members of the Tamil Nadu Village Health Nurses (VHN) Association in the cities of Tirupur and Coimbatore demonstrated to demand promotions and pay parity with health inspectors. They complained that VHNs and health inspectors enter the service on the same basic pay scale but only the inspectors get grade pay increases after five years of service.

Pakistan hospital paramedics walk out

Lahore General Hospital paramedics walked out on November 22 to protest delays in salary payments and allowances, and demand job regularisation for over 100 employees. They also protested salary deductions for hundreds of paramedics due to erroneous attendance

recording machines. The protest continued until November 25 when dozens of paramedics held a sit-in in the hospital premises.

In another dispute, on November 19, Peshawar district government teaching hospital paramedics struck work and began hunger strikes to demand service-related allowances, timely promotions and better facilities. The Khyber Pakhtunkhwa Paramedical Association suddenly called off the strikes on November 25 without resolving any issues. Officials said they would meet on December 2 to discuss further action.

Sri Lanka: Ansell strike in seventh week

Nearly 1,000 workers at Ansell Lanka, an Australian-based 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 Ansell Lanka Branch of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union said the sackings were in response to workers' 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 new Human Resources Manager, who introduced higher production targets and is hiring contract workers supplied by manpower agencies.

The strike is the longest ever in a Sri Lankan free trade zone. In desperation, hundreds of strikers marched to the Australian High Commission in Colombo on November 20 to request help to resolve their issues. Workers are maintaining a daily protest at the company's main gate.

Indonesian doctors and medical students protest

Hundreds of doctors and medical students rallied at the South Sulawesi prosecutor's office in Makassar on November 26 to protest the arrest of three doctors accused of malpractice. A patient died of complications after the doctors performed an emergency cesarean section operation in an attempt to save the life of the baby and mother. The baby survived.

According to data compiled by the World Bank, 220 mothers die in Indonesia for every 100,000 live births. Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore and Myanmar all reported lower death rates. Rejecting the government's attempt to put the blame for Indonesia's poor and inadequate public health system at the feet of health workers, protesting doctors called on the prosecutor's office to immediately release their three colleagues and demanded that the government "stop criminalising doctors."

New South Wales hospital nurses strike

Nurses at Bathurst Base Hospital, west of Sydney, held a 24-hour strike from 7 am on November 29 to protest against the local Health District's decision to close five beds in the hospital's medical ward from December 9. Nurses and midwives set up a "strike line" outside the hospital during the stoppage.

NSW Nurses and Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members voted

for the strike in a secret ballot at a union hospital branch meeting last Tuesday, and also demanded that state Health Minister Jillian Skinner appropriately fund the hospital to avoid service cuts and “enable the provision of safe patient care to the community.” A public meeting will be held in Bathurst on December 2 to rally support.

NSW private hospital nurses protest

Westmead Rehabilitation Hospital nurses demonstrated for over an hour outside the hospital in Sydney on November 28 in a dispute for a new two-year enterprise agreement. Their employer, Pulse Health, has refused to improve on its latest pay offer, which nurses rejected on October 15. According to the nurses’ trade union, the NSWNMA, Pulse’s offer would leave the Westmead nurses behind other Pulse facilities and behind other private hospitals in the area. Nurses want the Registered Nurse pay rate of \$36.20 an hour. Pulse owns two other private hospitals in NSW.

Queensland Red Cross nurses walk out

On November 23, Queensland Nurses Union members at 14 Australian Red Cross Blood Service blood bank facilities in Queensland walked off the job for one hour to demand an improved offer in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement. Red Cross has refused to restart negotiations that ended in September. Nurses want minimum shifts of six hours and an increase from four to five weeks’ annual leave in recognition of public holidays worked.

Northern Territory teachers continue limited stoppages

Public school teachers in Australia’s Northern Territory carried out a four-hour strike on November 27 as part of a campaign for a new work agreement. The strike, which affected schools in the territory’s capital, Darwin, and included nearby Palmerston, followed a similar four-hour stoppage in regional centres on November 19 and a full day territory-wide strike earlier this month. Work to rule bans commenced on Monday.

Teachers have rejected the territory’s Country Liberal government’s offer of 3 percent annual pay increases over four years—the current inflation rate for the territory is 3.9 percent. According to the Australian Education Union (AEU), the government plans to cut at least 420 teaching positions within three years from the current 2,500, while increasing the number of students in each classroom by up to 30 percent. In addition, contract teaching and ancillary positions are not being renewed, with close to 1,000 of the current 4,000 education staff targeted for termination.

The government is putting its offer to a formal vote of both union members and non-union members, to be held from December 2 to December 20. The AEU called on teachers to vote no.

Mine equipment workers protest in Western Australia

Workers at the Westrac heavy machinery manufacturing plant at

Guildford, east of the Western Australian capital of Perth, demonstrated on November 22 to protest the planned sacking of more than 400 workers, including 75 apprentices.

Westrac, a subsidiary of Seven Group Holdings headed by billionaire Kerry Stokes, has moved to cut 630 jobs in total at its Australian operations, in response to the downturn in the mining industry. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union has not put forward any plan to defend Westrac jobs, but instead directed the anger of workers toward “foreign” 457 Visa workers and demanded they be sacked first.

South Australian construction workers walk out over safety

Close to 900 construction workers at the \$1.85 billion Royal Adelaide Hospital site in South Australia’s capital city walked off the job on November 22, following the third crane safety mishap at the site in three weeks. At a safety meeting, workers decided that the site, managed by contractors Hansen Yuncken and Leighton, was no longer safe and decided not to return for three days.

According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, a crane boom made contact with a neighbouring crane. Other incidents involved faulty brakes on a crane and issues related to fatigue. One worker told the media: “The whole job is just a joke. We couldn’t believe it happened again.”



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