

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 June 2014

Asia

South Korea: KBS journalists end three-week strike

After the board of directors at the state-run KBS, South Korea's largest broadcaster, called for the resignation of CEO Gil Hwan-young on June 5, the two labour unions at KBS tentatively called off a three-week strike. Members of the National Association of KBS Journalists and the KBS Journalists Association, with 2,500 and 1,200 members respectively, had walked off the job to demand the resignation of Gil, who they accused of interfering in news reportage, biasing it in favour of the government.

Gil was an appointee of South Korea President Park Geun-hye's increasingly unpopular government. The two unions warned that if the government and the board of directors moved to appoint another figure like Gil Hwan-young, they could call another strike.

This is not the first time that media workers have taken action over political bias by management. In 2012, over 4,000 journalists and production staff at South Korea's major public TV and cable broadcasters, KBS, MBC, YTN and Yonhap News Agency, walked off the job at various times during a six-month strike period.

Burmese woodworkers protest

At least 700 striking workers of the Chinese-owned Lucky Treasure woodcutting factory in Sinkkaing Township, accompanied by hundreds of supporters, marched to Mandalay in central Burma on June 8 in a dispute over new contracts. Around 500 police blocked their attempt to enter the city. According to a Federation of Trade Unions of Burma (FTUB) spokesman, the demonstration was the latest of four strikes at the factory, beginning in June 2012, during which several union leaders were sacked.

The dispute escalated in March when factory owners broke an agreement over new contracts, which requires workers to undergo a three-month probationary period, regardless of how long they have worked there, and gives management the right to arbitrarily terminate employment.

The FTUB told the media that as a result of the ongoing unrest, the Border Affairs Ministry deployed 28 administrators to pressure complaining workers to quit their jobs. So far, 14 workers have accepted money from the authorities to leave.

Cambodian garment workers strike

Over 800 striking employees at the T&K garment factory in Por Sen Chey district's Canadia Industrial Park in Phnom Penh, are maintaining a picket outside the factory in a dispute over nine demands. On June 9, a week after the strike began, Union Federation for Worker Security representatives walked out of negotiations when management said workers would never receive the 2,000 riel (\$US0.50) daily lunch allowance allegedly promised to them before the Khmer New Year.

Workers complained that lunch became unaffordable after prices rose when the minimum wage was lifted from \$80 to \$100 a month. They said they were not afraid of losing their jobs and would strike until all demands were met.

Cambodian box manufacturing workers march

About 20 employees at the Japanese-owned cardboard box maker Harta Packaging marched from Ang village to the Japanese Embassy in Phnom Penh on June 10 to ask for support in a long-running wage dispute. Workers at the factory went on strike in February demanding seniority wages, retroactive to 2004. That strike was ended after six days by a court injunction ordering the employees to return to work, whereupon the factory fired 285 workers.

Hong Nang, 28, who has worked at the factory for 10 years, said: "We had waited a long time before we decided to go on strike because we saw that the Japanese owners did not care for us."

India: Delhi steelworkers on strike

More than 1,500 workers at 26 hot-rolling steel plants in the Wazirpur Industrial Estate, Delhi have been on strike since June 6 to demand safer working conditions and their entitlements such as Provident Fund (PF), Employee State Insurance Corporation (ESIC), health benefits cards, occupational safety measures and wages for overtime work, as mandated by law. Workers also complained that they are paid just 8,000 rupees (\$US135) a month and forced to work 12 hours a day without any compensation.

Strikers, represented by the Garam Rolla Mazdoor Ekta Samiti (Hot Steel Workers Unity Front), said they would extend the strike to include all workers in the 600 steel plants in the estate, who face the same conditions.

Andhra Pradesh jute mill workers protest

Locked out workers at the public company, Sri Lakshmi Srinivasa Jute Mill, in Vizianagaram city, northern Andhra Pradesh, protested outside the labour commissioner's office on June 9 to demand the mill's immediate reopening and payment of entitlements. Management of the jute bag manufacturing plant locked out workers on May 31 following protests when workers discovered that the company had not deposited contributions to LIC (life insurance corporation), PF and ESIC for the past two years.

The Stalinist CPI (ML)-affiliated Indian Federation of Trade Unions (IFTU) organised the protest. According to the IFTU, management followed similar practices in Aruna and Bobili jute units. Management at the Aruna unit lifted a lockout after 15 days and agreed to pay two years of unpaid entitlements in instalments.

Locked out West Bengal engineering workers protest

Around 200 locked out employees of India's oldest civil engineering company, Jessop and Company, part of the Ruia Group, which also owns Dunlop India, protested outside the Ruia offices in southern Kolkata on June 3. The protest to demand the reopening of the factory was organised by INTTUC, the trade union wing of the ruling Trinamool Congress.

Jessop closed its huge 70 acre factory at Dum Dum, north Kolkata, in May blaming "hooliganism" by a section of the workforce. However, workers complained that 500 employees were not paid for over five months, and no Provident Fund or Gratuity was given. A government labour official reportedly accused Ruia of looting the assets of the company after taking it over from the national government in 2003.

Meanwhile, 11 trade unions held a joint convention in central Kolkata, demanding the re-opening of three recently closed Kolkata companies, Jessop, Hindustan Motors and Dunlop.

Tamil Nadu furniture factory workers walk out

Around 40 workers at Wipro Enterprises, a 30-year-old furniture factory in Vallanchery village, near Chennai, the capital of Tamil Nadu, have been on strike and picketing the factory since June 2. Workers complained that despite appeals over several months for a pay increase for employees who had been with the firm for at least 10 years, management refused to consider the request. Current monthly wages are between 8,000 and 15,000 rupees. Some workers have begun a hunger strike.

The Pacific

New Zealand public sector workers strike

Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment (MBIE) employees, including immigration officers and mediators, walked off the job on Friday and held protests in Wellington and Auckland. The Public Service Association, representing 1,150 MBIE workers across the country, is trying to negotiate a new work agreement. After a year, the best pay offer from MBIE was nil for those entitled to progression through their salary scale and just 1 percent for everyone else.

According to a *Trading Economics* report, New Zealand's inflation rate for this year to June stands at 1.5 percent and is predicted to rise during the next three quarters to over 1.8 percent.

Papua New Guinea public school teachers threaten to strike

The union covering public school teachers in Papua New Guinea has given the government an ultimatum to rectify persistent pay anomalies caused since the Department of Education adopted a computerised payroll system a decade ago. Teachers complained of underpayments affecting 25,000 colleagues and said the problem is worse for graduate teachers, some of whom do not even appear on the payroll.

The PNG Teachers Association has reported the breach of the salary award agreement to the Industrial Registrar and given notice that it plans to hold a secret ballot to conduct industrial action in August.



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