

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 August 2014

Bangladesh: Tuba garment workers maintain hunger strike

Around 1,600 garment workers of five units of the Tuba Group at Badda in Dhaka walked off the job on July 28 to demand unpaid wages. Around 1,000 have been on a hunger strike inside one of the factories. Police, backed by plant owners, forced their way into the building on Wednesday and evicted union leaders. Twenty workers were injured and ten were arrested. Around 100 police are stationed outside the factory.

Tuba Fashion, Tuba Textile, Bukshan Garments, Tayeb Design and Mita Design employees have five demands, including full payment of wages, overtime and bonuses for May, June, and July, compensation for the 112 workers who perished in the 2012 Tuba Group-owned Tazreen Fashions fire in Ashulia, and the death penalty for Tuba Group managing director Delwar Hossain, who is currently in prison.

Although over 100 hunger strikers have fallen gravely ill, only 500 of the 1,600 strikers accepted Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association's (BGMEA) offer to pay two months' salary to be distributed to the workers on Wednesday, with the remainder paid by August 10. A Garment Workers Unity Forum official told the media that the strikers had vowed to maintain their protest until all their demands were met.

Nokia workers in China protest

Hundreds of employees at a research centre in Microsoft Corp's Nokia phone business division in Beijing have been protesting since July 31 claiming that the parent company failed to provide appropriate compensation to laid-off workers. The campaign erupted after Microsoft e-mailed a redundancy compensation plan to Nokia employees, who were required to sign the plan within two weeks.

Microsoft offered employees two months' salary plus the monthly salary multiplied by the number of years served at the firm. According to workers, the plan is worse than another compensation package for other Microsoft workers. The company threatened to fire anyone who refused to accept the deal.

Over 90 percent of around 5,000 employees at Nokia's research centre and factories in China will be laid off. The layoffs are part of a larger retrenchment plan by Microsoft, which bought the Finnish company's devices and services unit for \$7.2 billion on April 25. On July 17, Microsoft announced that it would begin to reduce the size of its overall workforce by up to 18,000 jobs in the next year.

Cambodian garment workers protest

Around 900 Cheng Sheng Garment workers in Phnom Penh protested outside the ruins of the burnt out factory on July 31 to demand a quick payout of their final pay and severance entitlement. A Chinese supervisor was killed when the plant caught fire last month.

Workers rejected an offer of \$100 loans to tide them over while the factory sorted out its finances. One worker told the media that Cheng Sheng Garments owed much more than \$100 in wages and severance and feared that if the offer was accepted that they would have to wait several months for their full payout.

Meanwhile, 70 workers from the Xing Chang Sin factory in Phnom Penh marched to the Ministry of Labor on August 1 after the factory allegedly failed to pay wages for the past two months. According to the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union, the factory suspended operations in mid-June but told its staff of more than 500 that they would be paid when business resumed on July 31. The factory, however, remains closed and workers fear that it will never reopen.

In an unrelated dispute, on August 4 several dozen employees from the Vantage River Textile factory in Mittapheap district, who had been on strike since August 1, marched to the local labour department to protest the sacking of seven employees. The labour department said a case had been filed with the Arbitration Council but would not be attended to for 15 days.

India: Jammu & Kashmir transport workers end strike

State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) workers in India's far north state of Jammu & Kashmir called off a three-day hunger strike on July 31, following assurances from the company that their demands would be met. Workers walked out on July 28, after the SRTC failed to pay a 15 percent dearness allowance and salary arrears as per the fifth pay commission.

India: Assam government teachers and health workers protest

Teachers and health workers in Assam demonstrated outside the state assembly in Dispur on August 4. Over 380 multi-purpose health workers who were hired on contract in 2009 for just 6,000 rupees (\$US97) a month are demanding employment regularisation. Protesting teachers from lower primary schools and secondary schools also demanded appointment of assistant teachers as per class strength. The protest was organised by the All Assam Contractual MPW (M) Employees Union.

Pakistani livestock workers protest

Employees of the Punjab Livestock and Dairy Development Department (PLDDD) demonstrated in Lahore on August 5 to demand the provincial government reinstate them as regularised workers. They allege that while workers employed on phase 1 and 2 had been regularised, 800 contract workers recruited six years ago in phase 3 of the project were never regularised and were recently placed on 12 months' leave. The workers said that they ended two previous protests outside the Punjab assembly after the government gave false promises to resolve their issues.

Queensland gas field construction workers strike

Some 148 construction workers at the \$60 billion natural gas processing site at Curtis Island, near Gladstone, Queensland have voted to take strike action in a dispute for a new wage agreement. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union has notified the employer, US construction company Bechtel, that protected industrial action will commence on August 7. Two other unions, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, plan to take co-ordinated industrial action against Bechtel over similar issues.

The unions, which cover about 8,000 workers on the project, have rejected a 13 percent pay increase offer and want the fly-in-fly-out roster changed from four weeks to three weeks on and one week off. This has been rejected by the company.

Western Australian tugboat engineers' union cancels strike

Tugboat engineers employed by contractor Teekay Shipping at Port Hedland, Australia's largest iron ore exporting port on Western Australia's north coast, have cancelled planned strike action this weekend, after BHP Billiton and tugboat operator Teekay threatened legal action. BHP and Teekay claimed that the proposed action fell outside the Fair Work Commission's Protected Action Ballot Order.

Anxious to avoid any inconvenience to the mining industry the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE) told the media that it withdrew the strike notice "because we think there can be some further discussions with the parties."

Engineers want annual pay increases of 3.5 percent over three years and increased crew numbers to reduce shift hours. According to the AIMPE, tugboat crews and engineers are working beyond their 12-hour shifts, some up to 18-hours, to cope with the record amount of iron ore being exported from the port.

Deckhands, who are represented by the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), and tugboat officers from the Australian Maritime Officers Union are also planning to strike for better wages and conditions. The MUA wants four weeks' annual leave and a pay rise to bring their members into line with what tug masters are paid at the port. The unions have been negotiating for a new wage deal since July last year.

Stevedores in Western Australia to strike

Around 80 stevedores, employed at the port of Esperance on Western Australia's south coast, planned to strike for three days on August 6 in a nine-month pay dispute with Esperance Ports Sea and Land (EPSL). The stevedores want 4 percent annual pay increases and a 2 percent income protection payment.

The MUA called off planned strike action in mid-July after workers accepted a reduced offer from EPSL management. The EPSL board, however, refused to ratify the deal. The MUA is desperately trying to avoid strike action and offered to call off the three-day strike if EPSL returns to the negotiating table.

Lockout of building-supply workers in New South Wales in seventh week

Twenty-four employees of Ausreo, which supplies concrete reinforcing products to the construction industry, have been locked out of their factory in Wetherill Park, a south-western suburb of Sydney, for seven weeks after demanding wage parity with their interstate colleagues. They have been maintaining a daily protest outside the factory gates.

Most workers are level-four machine operators earning \$20 an hour. They want their hourly wage rate increased by \$3 and improved redundancy provisions. Ausreo has only offered a 3 percent "Christmas bonus" but paid at management's discretion.

The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). The union, which has over 100,000 members, has isolated the locked out workers and refused to mobilise any section of its membership to fight Ausreo.

Tasmanian Catholic school teachers strike again

Tasmanian teachers and support staff at 37 Catholic schools walked out again on August 7 in a protracted dispute for a new wage agreement. It followed a month of rolling four-hour stoppages by thousands of Catholic school teachers and support staff in Tasmania and New South Wales. Teachers at meetings in Hobart, Launceston and Devonport in Tasmania have voted to escalate industrial action.

Around 50 percent of Catholic teachers and support workers are members of the Independent Education Union (IEU), which has lodged over 30 claims nationwide. These include a pay increase, entitlements and classifications on a par with government schools, and minimum 12-month contracts for staff. Negotiations began 18 months ago. The last agreement between the IEU and the CEO was signed in 2009.

The Catholic Education Office has responded to the breakdown in negotiations by drafting its own revised enterprise bargaining agreement to be put to an Electoral Commission ballot.

Papua New Guinea public school teachers vote for strike

Over 45,000 public school teachers in Papua New Guinea are participating in a strike ballot conducted by the PNG Teachers Association after months of ongoing pay disputes. The action follows 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.

In June, the Teachers Association reported a breach of the salary award agreement to the Industrial Registrar and gave notice that it would conduct a ballot to begin industrial action in August. The government responded by saying that the agreement on teachers' salaries and allowances would be rectified but failed to commit to rectify other anomalies associated with teachers not appearing on the payroll.

New Zealand public health workers vote to strike

Health workers across New Zealand's public health service have voted to take industrial action. Around 12,000 workers represented by the Public Service Association, voted 87 percent in favour of industrial action after the District Health Board (DHB) offered a miniscule 0.7 percent annual pay increase, and rejected demands for additional training and professional development. A DHB spokesman said bargaining for six collective agreements had been ongoing for up to 12 months.

Industrial action will include mental and public health nurses, physiotherapists, anaesthetic technicians, dental therapists, and administrative staff among others, and will be composed of work to rule from August 25 to September 10, an overtime ban and a two hour strike in the first week of September, and a three hour strike the following week.



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