

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 November 2014

Asia

Cambodia: Sacked Juhui Footwear workers maintain protests

On October 25, some 1,000 sacked Juhui Footwear workers in Kampong Cham province protested outside the factory to demand reinstatement. Twenty-five workers were injured when 100 riot police, supported by 100 factory security guards, baton-charged the demonstration. Workers ran away after police fired shots into the air. Ten protesters were arrested. Five have since been released but the Provincial Court ordered that the remaining five be held while charges against them of “inciting intentional violence and intentional damage” were investigated.

The dispute began on September 1 when 5,000 employees walked out over demands relating to overtime payments and lunch allowances. They returned to work but struck again on September 16 after management refused to negotiate. The company responded to the second walkout by firing the entire workforce. Around 3,000 workers, who are not members of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers’ Democratic Union, were reinstated. The company has refused to rehire the sacked union members.

Last Saturday’s demonstration erupted after management claimed it would reinstate the sacked workers but when they arrived at the factory, management said only 70 would be allowed in.

Cambodian garment factory workers on strike

More than 5,000 workers from the Grand Twins International garment factory in Phnom Penh’s Pur Senchey district have been on strike since October 20 over 16 demands. This includes a monthly \$15 accommodation allowance and an end to forced overtime. Last Saturday, 2,500 strikers protested on the National Road 4, blocking traffic for several hours.

The workers have been in dispute with the company since 2006 when it changed its name from QMI to Grand Twins without giving a guarantee that workers would not lose seniority, along with related benefits and potential severance pay. Workers have approached the Trade Union Cambodia Support Workers to represent them, explaining that the factory-approved union failed to address their complaints.

Cambodian minimum wage talks fail

A tripartite working group set up to negotiate with the government’s Labour Advisory Committee (LAC) on next year’s minimum wage in Cambodia’s garment sector has stopped meeting after reaching a stalemate. Made up of 27 members—nine each from employers, the government and unions—the group ended talks after a meeting on Tuesday, when employer representatives refused to budge from a monthly wage offer of \$110 per month. Cambodia’s official poverty line wage is \$120 per month.

Up to 2,000 workers from six garment unions of the Collective Union of Movement of Workers held rallies on October 12 and 13 in Phnom Penh to demand that their monthly minimum wage be increased next year from \$US100 to \$177. Eight unions on the LAC, none of which participated in the rallies, said they would settle for \$140 a month. Only one supported the \$177 demand put forward by workers.

Indonesia: Freeport mine workers to strike

Three unions, representing 20,000 workers at Freeport-McMoRan’s giant copper mine in Papua, have called a one-month strike for November 6 after the company failed to make changes to local management following a series of fatal accidents. Workers are demanding management take responsibility for 44 deaths at its mines in the last two years.

Earlier this month, hundreds of angry protesting workers blocked access for two days to the open-pit area of the Grasberg complex, where production was temporarily suspended following the death of four workers on September 27. The protesting workers erected a banner at the roadblock that declared: “4 people in Wanagon, 8 people in Boton Ore, 28 people in an underground mining site, and 4 people in Grassberg, there must be someone responsible for those who died in all of these accidents.”

Freeport is the largest tax payer in the Indonesian economy. Its Grasberg open pit in Papua produces around 140,000 tonnes of copper ore per day and the underground mine about 80,000 tonnes.

India: Neyveli Lignite Corporation unions call off strike

Unions representing about 13,000 contract workers, half the workforce of the Indian government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu, called off their 52-day strike on October 24 after the Joint Action Committee made a deal with the company. The deal was a sell-out. While workers will receive a pay increase, which will not come into force until the existing wage agreement expires in 12 months, their major demand for job permanency was abandoned. Contract workers are subject to arbitrary and brutal working conditions and many are paid as little as 10

percent of the wages paid to regular workers.

Based on the existing four-slab system, the unskilled daily wages will be increased from the current 370 rupees to 480 (\$US7.82), semi-skilled 379 rupees to 500, skilled 388 rupees to 515 and highly skilled from 397 rupees to 525. Until the new wage deal comes into force, half the amount will be paid in two instalments, the first payment on November 1 and the second a year later.

Karnataka village doctors resign en masse

Around 2,800 doctors of the health and family welfare department from across Karnataka rallied at Freedom Park in Bangalore on October 27 after submitting their resignations. The Karnataka Government Medical Officers' Association said all doctors returned to their duties the next day to serve the mandatory one-month notice period before leaving.

Doctors have advanced 13 demands, which include job security and pensions for doctors on contract, filling of vacancies, improved methods for paying wages and increase wages on par with medical education doctors.

Karnataka village government workers strike

About 1,600 workers from 165 village panchayats in Raichur district, Karnataka stopped work on October 27 to demand unpaid wages. The Karnataka State Gram Panchayat Employees' Association claims that at least 70 percent of the workers have not been paid for 30 months. Workers also complained that wages were below the minimum and promotions were due.

Andhra Pradesh postgraduate homeopathy doctors end strike

Close to 50 post-graduate doctors at the Government Homeopathic Medical College in Ramanthapur, Hyderabad called off their 42 day strike on October 27 after state officials gave certain commitments on the doctors' demand for the release of their stipends, pending from February 2013. Doctors complained that since the bifurcation of the state neither officials from Andhra Pradesh nor Telangana were willing to pick up the tab and release arrears.

Pakistan oil and gas workers oppose privatisation

On October 25, Oil and Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) workers blocked the Indus Highway outside its Nashpa dehydration plant to protest the proposed privatisation of the company. According to workers, a large number of employees would become jobless if the OGDCL was privatised. They threatened to launch a series of protests across the country if the government did not reverse its decision to privatise state assets.

Under the International Monetary Fund's directive, the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government has made privatisation of public sector

utilities a priority. While workers at other government-owned firms have been waging campaigns against privatisation their unions have restricted action to limited strikes, protests and other techniques aimed at wearing workers down and preventing genuine unified industrial and political action by all public sector workers against privatisation and the government's social austerity demands.

Australia and the Pacific

Australia: AMWU suspends Simplot industrial action

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, which covers workers at Simplot vegetable processing plants at Bathurst and Kelso in New South Wales, and at Devonport and Ulverstone in Tasmania, has suspended all industrial action for two weeks. The union is negotiating a new enterprise agreement at the Fair Work Commission with the food processing company.

The dispute has escalated since September after nine months of negotiations stalled. Workers want a 12 percent pay increase over three years, income protection and guaranteed hours for casuals. Simplot is demanding a wage freeze for year one, 2 percent increases in years two and three at its Kelso and Bathurst plants, and 2 percent each year for the next three years at Ulverstone and Davenport factories. The offers are below the inflation rate and are in effect a pay cut.

Talks are scheduled to commence in the Fair Work Commission on November 6.

Western Australian hospital workers walk out

Non-clinical staff at the Royal Perth Hospital (RPH), in Western Australia's capital, walked off the job on Thursday to attend a stop work meeting over job cuts. According to the United Voice union, nearly 90 percent of support workers will need to pass a merit-based process to retain their jobs but at least 150 will lose their jobs.

The Liberal state government is using the opening of the new Fiona Stanley Hospital in Perth to attack jobs and working conditions at other public hospitals. Non-clinical staff from five different public hospitals protested in Perth in July over fears that jobs will be axed when at least two hospitals close and others downsize after the Fiona Stanley Hospital opens and is staffed by contract workers. At least 5,000 low-paid non-clinical workers are affected.

United Voice previously ignored workers' concerns and agreed to the staffing of the Fiona Stanley Hospital with a labour contract company. The union has refused to mount a campaign to protect jobs but called on the government to consult with the union when other parts of the health system are restructured.

New Zealand bank employees protest

As part of ongoing industrial action for a new collective agreement, ANZ Bank workers at its call centres in Auckland and Wellington walked off the job for five hours on October 28. Their action followed the

picketing of an ANZ-sponsored cricket match in Hamilton the day before.

ANZ workers voted overwhelmingly in early October to take national industrial action in support of an improved pay offer and in opposition to management moves to impose adverse changes to working conditions. The vote followed industrial action by FIRST Union members at several ANZ branches.

ANZ management wants to introduce a highly-casualised work system where employees will be informed month-by-month which days they will be rostered on and the starting and finishing times. First Union claimed that its members were willing to compromise and allow up to 20 percent of the workforce to be flexible, but ANZ demanded that every new worker starts on the insecure work contract.

The bank has offered pay increases of just 2 to 3 percent, despite having raked in a \$1.37 billion profit last year and cutting its workforce by 10 percent, the equivalent of 7,400 full-time positions. ANZ is New Zealand's largest and most profitable lender.



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