

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 July 2015

## China: Lever Style factory workers remain on strike in Shenzhen

Hundreds of workers of Shenzhen Artigas Clothing & Leatherware, contracted by Hong Kong-based Lever Style, are maintaining a factory occupation begun on June 8 to stall further removal of plant equipment as part of the factory's relocation. The company produces goods for Japan's Fast Retailing, which owns the Uniqlo clothing brand.

Workers are demanding collective negotiations with management over unpaid compensation and other terms related to the plant relocation. Around 500 of the company's 900 employees have already moved to a new location 5km away. About 100 of the workers who do not want to relocate have learnt that Artigas never paid their legally-mandated pension contributions. Artigas said it was willing to negotiate on a one-on-one basis but this was rejected by the protesting workers.

On July 8, Lever Style demanded all Artigas workers leave the factory, threatening to cut water and power supply. The workers have vowed to remain in the plant and "fight to the end."

## Burmese workers reject new minimum wage

Over 200 workers from 15 different factories at the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone demonstrated in the capital Yangon (formerly Rangoon) on July 12 to oppose the National Minimum Wage Committee's (NMWC) proposal to set the daily minimum wage at 3,600 kyat (\$US3.18). Workers want a 4,000-kyat daily minimum.

The NMWC, which includes ministries, employers and labour organisations, announced the proposed new minimum last month. The deadline for objections to their proposal was on the day of the protest. Employers claim they will be forced to close their factories if the current daily minimum of \$2.65 is raised.

One demonstrator said that even a daily wage of 4,000 kyat barely covers living expenses. A protesting skilled worker said she worked from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day for just \$75 a month, but rarely received her full pay cheque.

## Cambodian garment workers protest

Some 500 striking employees from two factories of Akeentech in Phnom Penh and one owned by Sixplus in southern Cambodia's Kandal province marched through Phnom Penh to the Labour Ministry on Tuesday. They submitted petitions appealing for government officials to support their struggle for better working conditions and subsidies for food

and transportation.

While both companies meet minimum wage requirements they fail to provide the full subsidies typically paid to other Cambodian workers. A spokesman from the Union Federation for Worker Security said that workers wanted compensation for transportation, an additional \$5 in rent subsidies and an extra 1,000 riel (\$US0.24) for food.

## Hong Kong railway workers reject pay offer

At least a dozen Mass Transit Railway (MTR) workers protested outside corporation headquarters on July 9 to oppose its average 5.25 percent increase pay offer. While management claimed the offer was in line with inflation, workers said that because management grades its 14,000 non-managerial employees on 1 to 5 efficiency ratings many workers would only receive 2.17 percent. The union wants a general pay increase of 8 percent, and the restoration of allowances, such as overtime pay and night shift subsidies, that were cut during the SARS epidemic in 2003. Although the deadly epidemic had only a minor effect on the Hong Kong economy MTR used the drop in tourism and general travel as an excuse to cut employees entitlements.

## Bangladeshi sugar mill workers demand wages

Workers at the state-owned Rangpur Sugar Mills in Mohimaganj, the largest mill in Bangladesh, occupied the mill's administrative office on Sunday demanding payment of unpaid salaries and the Eid religious holiday bonus. Organised by the Rangpur Chinikal Sramik-Karmochari Union, the occupation followed a march along several main roads.

Workers complained that they had not been paid for three months and would not have sufficient money for the Eid celebrations. Management claimed it was having trouble selling its sugar and had a cash flow problem. The media reported, however, that the mill regularly over-supplies the market, leaving it with tonnes of sugar in storage.

## Bangladeshi garment workers protest

About 500 garment workers of Scissor Apparel (Extension) in Chittagong demonstrated on the Sholashahar-Oxygen Baizid Bostami Road in Nasirabad on July 11 to demand payment of wages. Industrial police assisted by the Chittagong metropolitan police forced the protesters

to disperse. Authorities promised to pay wages the next day.

Anticipating further protests and strikes over non-payment of wages leading up to the Eid holidays at the more than 700 garment factories in Chittagong, the industrial police force has been strengthened and deployed to 70 factories deemed “vulnerable” by government authorities.

### **India: Sanitation workers in Telangana on strike**

Around 70,000 municipal sanitation workers in Telangana state in southern India have been on strike since July 6. They are demanding a wage rise for contract employees—from 8,500 rupees (\$US134) to 14,170 rupees a month—and for permanent employees—from 9,500 rupees to 17,380 rupees. They also want housing for municipal employees, health cards and a 500,000-rupee life insurance scheme.

The strikers are members of the Telangana Municipal Employees and Workers United Association and the Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation employees union. Thousands of tonnes of garbage are piling up in cities and towns across the state.

The government called union delegates into talks on Monday but refused to negotiate until the unions called off the strike. Workers vowed to remain on strike until their demands are met.

### **Andhra Pradesh sanitation workers on strike**

Tens of thousands of municipal sanitation workers in Andhra Pradesh walked off the job in a state-wide strike for an indefinite period on July 10. They want a pay rise in line with the 10th Pay Commission, health cards, general provident fund accounts for permanent employees and pay scale and dearness allowances for outsourced and contract employees.

The strike was called by the Municipal Workers Joint Action Committee in conjunction with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, the All India Trade Union Congress and the Indian Workers’ Union.

### **Punjab sanitation workers protest**

Sanitation and sewage cleaning contract workers of the Ludhiana Municipal Corporation rallied in Ludhiana, Punjab on Tuesday and submitted a memorandum to the municipal commissioner demanding permanent employment and insurance cover. Organised by the National Sanitation Workers Union, protesters said that during the 2012 assembly the Deputy Chief Minister falsely promised workers that they would be made permanent.

The sanitation workers’ demand for permanency has been long pending. In July 2010, Ludhiana sanitation workers protested the municipal corporation’s failure to grant promised permanency. The demonstration erupted after authorities said they had cancelled the lists of 3,400 workers seeking permanency because “they were not up to the mark.”

### **Punjab unskilled rural workers protest**

Workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) protested in Abohar and Hanumangarh on Tuesday to demand basic work facilities and payment of wages on time. Workers said that water and shelter is not provided and the working day was too long. They complained that they were forced to remain at work until 5 p.m. even when they completed their tasks by 1 p.m. Many employees are forced to bring their children to work with them.

The MGNREGA provides rural people with 100 days of unskilled manual work per year for just \$3.30 a day. Wages frequently are not paid on time.

### **Nurses at Gandhi Hospital in Hyderabad strike**

Around 200 contract nurses at the Gandhi Hospital in Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh walked out an indefinite period on Tuesday to demand a 50 percent pay rise, from 10,000 rupees (\$US157) to 15,000 rupees a month, and permanent employment. Some nurses said they had been working at the hospital for nine years and not offered permanent positions.

### **Retired Tamil Nadu transport workers protest**

Retired Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) workers protested in Chennai on July 14. A spokesman for the TNSTC retired employees association said around 15,000 retired employees—conductors, drivers, fitters and administration workers—were not paid gratuity, provident fund or pension and other retirement benefits due to them since 2011.

### **Pakistan: Islamabad health workers protest**

Workers at five government hospitals in Islamabad demonstrated for two hours outside the National Press Club on July 11 to oppose government moves to slash the health risk allowance. They demanded that the allowance be increased on par with salaries. Employees from Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Polyclinic, Capital Hospital, Federal General Hospital and National Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine were involved in the protest. They threatened to strike if their demand was not met before the July 17 Eid holiday.

The risk allowance is internationally recognised for health workers exposed to life-threatening viruses. Islamabad health workers were paid the allowance in 2011, after a 35-day protest campaign. The Nawaz Sharif government is increasing its attack on government workers’ pay and other benefits in line with International Monetary Fund demands that it slash federal budget spending.

### **Sacked meat factory workers in Karachi protest**

Several dozen sacked workers from the Organic Meat Company in Karachi protested outside the plant on Monday to demand reinstatement.

Over 60 workers were terminated when they demanded minimum wages and improved working conditions. They called on the company to pay the legal minimum wage, establish an eight-hour working day and provide health, leave and other basic allowances. The factory employs over 250 people who work in oppressive conditions for, on average, 12 hours a day.

### **Tasmanian firefighters protest**

Over 40 Tasmanian Fire Service (TFS) workers rallied outside the state parliament in Hobart on Wednesday to demand increased budget funding for the service. Firefighters are concerned that the state Liberal government's cost-cutting move to merge the State Emergency Service (SES) into the TFS is insufficiently funded. The United Firefighters Union wants the planned \$1.5 million increase in annual funding for the TFS, increased to \$2.5 million a year.

### **Papua New Guinea: Goroka hospital staff walk out again**

Forty general staff and one doctor at the Goroka Provincial Hospital in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands submitted their resignations and walked off the job on July 6. The long-running dispute with the government and hospital administration is over urgently needed equipment better facilities and building maintenance.

The hospital workers' action follows a mass walkout and resignation of 400 employees in January over the dismissal of five senior staff members, including the hospital manager who had supported the workers' demands. In March doctors joined nurses and other support staff who struck over the dispute. On both occasions the protesting staff returned to work after the government falsely promised to resolve the issues.

On July 9, the newly-appointed administrator Ken Wai ordered that the five dismissed senior staff members be immediately reinstated and the Eastern Highlands Provincial Health Authority chief executive officer be suspended and replaced by a long serving senior doctor. Wai rejected the staff resignations on Monday and urged doctors and sectional heads to list the necessary items and equipment for purchasing.



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