

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 June 2016

Hong Kong construction workers walk off

More than 100 workers at the West Kowloon high-speed rail construction site in Hong Kong downed tools and occupied the site on Monday to demand six weeks of unpaid wages. A Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions representative said the subcontractor claimed it was unable to pay wages because the project builder, Gammon-Leighton, failed to honour a payment commitment. Workers ended the strike in the afternoon after the company agreed to pay wages on Thursday.

Another mass fainting in a Cambodian garment factory

More than 100 garment workers at the Orient International Enterprise factory in Kampong Speu's Samrong Tong district fainted soon after beginning work on Monday, blaming pesticides sprayed by the company on Sunday. All affected workers were rushed to hospital but were too ill to be released until late in the day. A Cambodia Youth Power Union League spokesman said although fans were on and the windows were open in the factory, the fumes were still too strong.

Fainting has become a regular occurrence in garment factories across Cambodia. During 2015, according to the Ministry of Labour, a total of 1,806 workers in 32 factories fainted in the garment and footwear sector. In February, over 30 female workers at a footwear factory in Kandal province collapsed on the job. Poor ventilation was blamed, combined with chemical residue from pesticides sprayed the previous day.

Indian bank employees protest in Tamil Nadu

Members of the Indian Bank Employees Association held a day-long protest in Dharmapuri, Tamil Nadu on May 28 to demand job permanency for temporary and sanitation workers, along with the implementation of pension schemes and the filling of all job vacancies.

Workers complained that 3,000 casual workers in the banking sector, who earn just 100 to 200 rupees per day, would continue for years on low wages with no entitlements if their jobs were not made permanent. There are 3,700 vacancies in banks throughout Tamil Nadu, according to the association.

Karnataka steel factory workers on strike

Workers from the steel fabrication manufacturer JSW Structures Limited (JSSL) in Bellari, Karnataka have been on strike and holding a demonstration outside the labour department office in Ballari since April 12. They are protesting the anti-labour policies of management, supported by the Karnataka state government. Workers claimed that five JSSL employees were terminated, 15 employees were placed under suspension and 29 transferred outside the state, in violation of the company's standing orders.

The strikers' demands include the reinstatement of the retrenched workers with arrears, the revocation of the transfer orders, the withdrawal of false cases lodged against workers and the convening of tripartite, government-union-employer talks on pay revision. JSSL management has refused to enter negotiations with the government and the Trade Union Centre of India.

Delhi University teachers protest over greater workloads

Scores of Delhi University teachers marched to parliament on Monday. They boycotted the correction of undergraduate exams in protest against the University Grants Commission (UGC) criteria to ascertain their academic performance. The Delhi University Teachers Association members began the protest on May 24.

Teachers said UGC amendments would lead to job cuts of 50 percent and drastically worsen the pupil-teacher ratio. The new UGC norms are based upon the academic results of students, axing teachers' jobs if students do not perform well. They also increase workloads. Associate professors' direct teaching workloads would rise by eight hours a week.

Pakistan: Punjab nurses strike to demand service structure

Nurses at government hospitals in Punjab province have been on strike since Monday to protest the government's delay in implementing the previously agreed service structure, including a pay scale upgrade and health risk allowance. Members of the Young Nurses Association also want the lifting of the suspension of several colleagues.

Services in Lahore are severely affected, while nurses continue their sit-in protest in the city centre and the Punjab Assembly. The government has threatened to take "strict action" against those who "forced" nurses to strike.

Punjab brick kiln union closes down strike without resolution

Leaders of the Bhatta Mazdoor Union called off a two-day strike of brick kiln workers in Toba Tek Singh on May 28 on the mere assurance from a state government official that he would summon the brick kiln owners to discuss their pay demand. The strike was part of a series of struggles by the poorly-paid kiln workers in different districts of Panjab to be paid the meagre increase in minimum pay promulgated by the government last year. The workers demanded they be paid 962 rupees (\$US9.18) per 1,000 bricks they make, and that educational facilities be provided for their children, including free uniforms and stationery.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers maintain protest

Workers at privately-owned jute mills in the Khulna industrial belt held a protest march with their families on Monday, making eight immediate demands. It followed a demonstration on the Khulna-Jessore highway when workers demanded the reopening of all closed jute mills before the holy month of Ramadan.

The Private-Owned Jute, Yarn and Textile Mill Workers Federation is also calling for the immediate payment of all outstanding salaries, allocation of funds for ongoing operation of the mills and reinstatement of all retrenched workers.

A federation spokesman said the mills have accumulated tens of millions of rupees in unpaid wages. He set June 4 as the deadline for realising workers' demands, and warned they would impose blockades on highways and railways for an indefinite period, beginning on June 5.

Bangladeshi unemployed nurses maintain protests

Hundreds of protesting unemployed nurses blocked the road in front of the National Press Club in Dhaka on Monday and marched to the residence of the health minister to protest changes in recruitment criteria. Nurses began street protests on March 30 after the Public Service Commission published an advertisement to appoint 3,616 senior nurses. The nurses want the positions filled on the basis of seniority and merit, as in the past.

On May 1, the Bangladesh Diploma Bekar (unemployed) Nurses Association and Bangladesh Basic Graduate Nurses Society called off a series of strikes and protests after false promises from the health minister.

Victorian power workers apply for strike ballot

The union covering workers at the Loy Yang A power generating plant in Victoria's Latrobe Valley has lodged another application with the Fair Work Commission (FWC) to ballot members on possible industrial action over a new work agreement. The dispute over wages and conditions for nearly 600 workers has dragged on for the past ten months.

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) unsuccessfully lodged an application for a strike ballot in March, accusing AGL Energy of not bargaining in good faith after it failed to attend six scheduled negotiation meetings. The FWC rejected the union's application on a minor technical ground.

Workers rejected the company's proposed agreement in December. The CFMEU says AGL Energy wants to reduce superannuation payments, cut

long-service leave and other entitlements, remove minimum staffing levels and change restrictions on some work practices. Workers are also concerned that various cost-cutting measures will endanger work safety.

Salaries under the proposed enterprise bargaining deal have already been agreed, with AGL offering a 21.5 percent increase over four years in return for the extensive trade-offs.

New South Wales garbage collectors on strike

Around 70 garbage collection workers on the New South Wales Central Coast, north of Sydney, walked off the job for an indefinite period on Thursday in a dispute over job security. Members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) decided to take protected industrial action after negotiations with the newly-installed council administrator ended without agreement.

The workers are employed by waste management contractors. They want clauses inserted into the council's waste service tenders that protect local jobs, existing workers and their conditions. The administrator has refused to make a commitment in writing.

French Polynesia airline strike in third week

Following failed negotiations on Sunday, Air Tahiti (domestic) workers threatened to extend for a month their strike that began on May 13 over fears of job and pay cuts due to falls in domestic travel. The unions blamed the airline for the lack in progress, while Air Tahiti has called on the government to intervene.

Airline management wants to reduce domestic flights to some regions from once a week to once a fortnight. This would cut jobs and cause major inconveniences for outlying island residents. As redundancies due to the strike are likely, more employees of related industries have joined the strike, which has affected the entire archipelago of French Polynesia. Unlike in France, there are no unemployment benefits in the country's Pacific colony.

New Zealand community support workers to hold another strike

More than 200 Community Living Trust workers who provide caregiving services for the elderly and intellectually disabled in Waikato, a region on New Zealand's North Island, announced they will strike a second time after their employer offered an "improved" pay increase of just 15 cents an hour. Members of the Primary Services Association and E Tu unions stopped work for two hours on May 19 after rejecting a 9 cents an hour (\$3.60 a week) offer. Workers this week voted to walk off the job for two one-hour strikes on June 9 and 22.

Wellington airport catering workers win fight against youth wages

A catering company at Wellington Airport has withdrawn a proposal to introduce youth wages in a new collective contract. Workers of US

contracting company Delaware North last week voted to strike after the company refused in December to negotiate a new work agreement with the E Tu trade union unless it could introduce youth rates.

The Starting-out Wage, also known as youth rates, is legal under certain criteria for workers under 19 and is 80 percent of the adult minimum wage of \$15.25, or \$12.20 an hour. The catering workers accused the company of wanting to take advantage of its high employee turnover rate (84 of 86 new recruits over the past two years have left) to drive down wages. Delaware said it would restart negotiations without the demand for a youth wage clause.



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