Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 December 2016

Bangladesh: Thousands of garment workers sacked after mass protest

At least 3,500 garment workers from the Ashulia industrial belt, on the outskirts of Dhaka, have been sacked following two weeks of mass protests and factory lockouts. Factory owners have filed several cases against 1,500 workers. Dozens of workers have been arrested while Awami League activists are raiding houses at night searching for workers named by factory owners and wanted by police.

The mass protests were sparked on December 11 when workers from the Windy Group plant walked out to demand an increase in the minimum wage. The strike rapidly spread to other factories in the industrial belt. At least 85 factories were shut down in an attempt to stop the unrest spreading. Police, supported by the notorious Rapid Action Battalion, used teargas and batons in an attempt to disperse protesting workers.

Most strikers returned to work on Tuesday after Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina ordered managers to open the factories. Protest leaders and union officials, however, are staying away or hiding, fearing reprisals from factory managers and police arrest.

The Ashulia industrial belt contains around 4,500 garment factories producing 77 percent of the country's exports and employs over 3.6 million workers. The garment workers want their poverty wage of 5,300 taka ($US67) a month increased to 16,000 taka.

Burmese plastic factory workers' strike in fifth week

At least 150 striking workers from the Shwe Mi plastic factory in Hlaing Tharyar township, West Yangoon, have announced that they will march into Yangon's city centre if the regional government does not soon address their claims.

The strike, which involves nearly 300 workers, began on November 28. While five of the seven points of dispute have been resolved only 130 employees have returned to work. The remaining workers, who remain on the picket line, want a wage increase of 40,000 kyat ($US30) and compensation for exposure to dangerous chemicals.

The plastic factory workers allege that many of their former colleagues suffer from tuberculosis, blood cancer and miscarriages. They attribute these ailments to chemicals used in plastic production and for printing on plastic bags. They told media that the company had reduced the workforce from 420 to 310 but kept the same production targets. Workers want their wages lifted in line with the increased workload.

Nepalese doctors on strike

Some 80 doctors at the Gandaki Medical College (GMC) in Pokhara, Nepal walked out on Monday in a five-year dispute over several issues. Only emergency patients are being treated. Hospital management has announced it has a "contingency plan" and will begin hiring new doctors in six faculties, however doctors at other hospitals in the city said they will support their GMC colleagues.

The doctors want a salary increase, reinstatement of two expelled colleagues and permanent status for contract-based doctors. According to the Labour Act 1991, doctors who have passed the mandatory 240 working days should be granted permanent status.

India: Uttar Pradesh sanitation workers on strike

Around 600 sanitation workers hired by a private contractor have been on strike since December 20 in Greater Noida, Uttar Pradesh to demand their monthly salaries be deposited directly into their bank accounts. They want the contractor bypassed because he charges 2.5 percent commission on each employee's monthly salary. Around 300 workers are demonstrating at the Greater Noida authority office. Several entered the office to hold a sit-down protest.

The Greater Noida authority is ignoring the workers' demands saying the workers' dispute is with the contractor not them. It has hired 500 workers in an attempt to break the strike. The protesting sanitation employees said they will not let new workers collect or transport garbage until their demands are met.

Jammu power workers maintain strike

Contract and daily wage employees from the Jammu and Kashmir Power Development Department (PDD) have been on strike since November 28 to demand permanency, a wage increase and the payment of all wage arrears. They are holding a daily demonstration outside the PDD complex at Canal Road in Jammu. Limited water supply is being maintained by temporary staff and volunteers.

A spokesman from the All Jammu Province Casual/Need Based Workers Union pointed out that over 3,230 casual/need based workers are employed in different divisions of the PDD, many for over seven years. The union also demanded an end to discrimination against

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workers from the Jammu region and they be treated the same as those from Kashmir.

Jammu Kashmir water utility workers still on strike

Jammu Public Health Engineering Department (PHE) daily wage and temporary workers have been on strike since September 15 in a long-running dispute over 40 months of unpaid wages and other demands. Striking workers held a protest march in Mendhar on Monday and presented their grievances to local government officials.

Over 23,000 PHE contract workers ended an 85-day strike in June after the PHE and government officials falsely promised to meet their demands. The workers wanted 35 months unpaid wages, regular pay every month and job permanency. In September members of the All J&K PHE Daily Wagers, ITI Trained & CP Workers Association walked out again over the same issue.

Bathinda sanitation workers walk out again

For the second time this year contract sanitation employees at the Municipal Corporation-Bathinda (MCB) and workers from the JITF contracting company in Punjab province walked off the job on Monday over their long-pending demand for job permanency and an end to employment contracts. According to a union representative the contract sanitation workers receive 6,000 rupees ($US88) per month compared with 6,000 rupees per day for permanent employees.

Around 400 sanitation workers, including sewer men with the Sewerage Board on daily wages, demonstrated outside the MCB office on Monday. MCB officials claimed they would pass on workers' demands to the Local Bodies Department. The protesters who are members of the Sewerage Board Workers' Union said they did not want false assurances but appointment letters.

The workers ended a three-day strike over the same issues in September after a local member of parliament claimed their demands would be met.

Filipino bus workers strike

About 700 drivers and conductors from the DLTB bus line, a provincial bus company in the Philippines' Eastern Visayas region and including in Quezon and Laguna, have been on strike since Wednesday evening. An estimated 10,000 commuters are affected.

DLTB management claims the strike is illegal because the protesting drivers were not members of the union recognised by the Department of Labor and Employment.

The drivers want an increase in salaries which they say is well below the minimum wage. They say that they were paid 404 pesos per day when the company began operations six years ago. During the Aquino administration, their wages were cut to 370 pesos ($US7.45) per day. The drivers also want payment of their 13th month bonus which they claim has been withheld by management.

Queensland coal mine workers reject pay offer

Workers at Rio Tinto's Hail Creek coal mine located in Central Queensland's Bowen Basin have rejected management's latest enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) offer. The coal company offered the miners $10,000 if they accepted the agreement. Fifty-eight percent of the workers who voted on December 19 rejected the deal. A spokesman from the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) accused the company of attempting to "bribe" workers.

The previous Hail Creek mine agreement expired in 2013 and negotiations have been ongoing for two and a half years. An initial offer made in May 2014 was rejected by workers. The miners want the redundancy clause strengthened in the EBA to prevent the company making permanent workers redundant and then employing casuals. They also want a guarantee that labour hire workers would be offered permanent or fixed-term jobs after a certain period.

New South Wales: Court orders mine workers to end industrial action

The Fair Work Commission has ruled that mass sick-leave protest by 81 Delta SBD labour hire employees at the South32 Appin coal mine, 70 kilometres south of Sydney, was unlawful and ordered that industrial action cease until January 16. The action, between November 28 and December 11, was in conjunction with an industrial campaign by the CFMEU to exert pressure on South32 and Delta SBD over attacks on wages and conditions.

The mass sick leave was sparked when Delta SBD offered to transfer employees at its subsidiary Delta Mining to its sister company Delta Coal after Delta Mining unsuccessfully tendered for work at the mine. The union claimed the company was forcing workers to accept substantially lower wages and conditions.

Around 300 contract workers from the South32 mine demonstrated in Wollongong on December 9 over cuts to wages. Workers were told at the Wollongong rally that contract companies were renegotiating contracts in the lead-up to Christmas, putting pressure on families to sign up for less pay or potentially lose their jobs. Workers have refused to sign contracts with Delta SBD and Mastermyne, which they say are illegal.

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