

Thirty thousand coconut fibre workers strike in India; Chinese workers protest closure of Sanding housekeeping company

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 July 2018

## Chinese workers protest closure of Sanding housekeeping services

Hundreds of workers, managers and customers protested in major Chinese cities this week over the abrupt closure of a housekeeping chain called Sanding. Workers said they were cheated out of wages with some owed last year's wages. Demonstrations were held in Zhengzhou, Wuhan, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shanghai, Tianjin, Xi'an, Suzhou, Nanjing, Ningbo, Chengdu, Chongqing, Hangzhou and other cities.

The overwhelming majority of employees of the company were informal contractors who did not receive social insurance or standard salaries but worked on a commission basis. Managers were also persuaded into funneling thousands of yuan into customer membership cards, which were used to bolster the company's financial position in preparation for a stock market listing. The company promised them cheaper stock options upon going public.

## Taiwanese department store workers demand flexible hours

About a dozen protesters gathered outside the Zhongxiao branch of the Pacific Sogo department store in Taipei on Tuesday morning to demand more flexible working hours during typhoons. The demonstrators were from the Sales Workers Union and other labor groups who called for an increase in leave allowances during typhoons. They distributed flyers urging people to boycott products from stores that compelled employees to attend work during the dangerous storms.

Taiwan is especially susceptible to typhoons during the summer months. Around 70 percent of sales clerks were forced to work during the last four major typhoons. Most were not offered any bonuses for doing so. Injuries, and in some cases deaths, have occurred as a result of travelling to and from work in typhoons.

## Alappuzha coir factory workers on strike in India

Up to 30,000 coir workers in Alappuzha, Kerala state walked out strike on July 10 to demand an 8.18 percent pay rise. The increase was supposed to be paid on June 1. Coir is a natural fibre extracted from the husks of coconuts and is used in products such as floor mats, doormats, brushes

and mattresses.

The coir factory workers are members of Chetrala Taluk Coir Factory Thozhilali Union, Muhamma Coir Factory Workers Union, Alleppey Coir Factory Thozhilali Union of Ambalappuzha and Cherthala Taluks.

Indian coir industry workers generate about 6 billion rupees in export revenue per year. India coastal regions, mainly in Pollachi and Kerala state, produce 60 percent of the total world supply of white coir fibre.

## India: Rural health care workers protest in Punjab

Rural health care centre or anganwadi workers and helpers protested in Bathinda on July 10 to demand higher wages and for pre-nursery school children to be returned and cared for in their centres. The media reported that over 54,000 workers and helpers were involved in the protest.

Anganwadi workers, who are members of the Anganwadi Mulazam Union, are currently paid 5,600 rupees (\$US81) per month and helpers receive 2,800 rupees. The workers want 11,400 rupees and 5,700 rupees for helpers.

## Bangladesh garment workers demonstrated over factory closure

Hundreds of Gold Star Design garment workers in Dhaka demonstrated on Tuesday over the sudden closure of the company's factory. The protesters blocked Kazi Nazrul Islam Avenue for around 45 minutes to demand outstanding wages and the annual Eid religious festival bonus.

They claim that factory management suddenly closed the plant and then hung a notice on its main gate declaring that it was moving production to Tongi, Gazipur. On April 16 workers demonstrated outside the plant to demand outstanding wages and other dues.

## Non-MPO Educational Institutions teachers and employees union ends protest

Union officials representing demonstrating teachers and employees from non-governmental schools and madrassahs called off a month-long protest

and hunger strike outside National Press Club, Dhaka on Wednesday. The educators, who have been campaigning since June 10, were demanding the Bangladesh government provide funding for Non-Monthly Pay Order Educational Institutions teachers and staff.

According to press reports, the protest ended after a delegation of “eminent citizens” told the demonstrations that they should have faith in Bangladesh Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina’s promises to grant their demands.

Non-MPO Educational Institutions’ Teachers and Employees Federation senior vice president had also informed the government that the union would accept a 50 percent reduction in the monthly pay for a year if the government extended MPO benefits to union members. The union covers 80,000 teachers at about 5,000 non-government schools, colleges and technical institutions in Bangladesh.

### **Sri Lankan teachers and education administrative officers strike**

Sri Lankan teachers and education administrative officers, including principals, walked out on strike across the country on July 4 to demand the cancelation of a politically biased recruitment system for administrative staff. Unions allege that the government is planning to create 1,200 positions under the recruitment system.

Over a thousand education administrative officers and teachers protested outside the ministry of education in Colombo. Police officers refused to intervene to prevent violent attacks on the demonstrators by thugs allegedly organised by Minister of Education Akila Viraj Kariawasam. Later that day Kariawasam threatened to take strict actions against teachers and staff who participated in the protest.

An alliance of unions, including the Ceylon Teachers Union, All Ceylon Teachers Educationist Union and Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service Union, were involved in the demonstration.

### **Sri Lankan state executive officers take industrial action**

Inland Revenue officers, accountants and auditors, surveyors, ayurvedic medical doctors and many other state sector executive officers walked out on strike on July 11 to demand increased salaries and allowances. The industrial action involved members of 19 different unions including the Sri Lanka Audit Service Union, Sri Lanka Accountants’ Service Association and Inland Revenue Staff Officers’ Union.

Over a thousand workers held a protest march in central Colombo on July 11 chanting slogans such as “Don’t create anomalies between parallel services” and “Don’t violate state salary system.” It followed a demonstration on July 9 outside the Inland Revenue department. The marchers were blocked by police barricades near the Ministry of Finance on both days.

### **Australian meteorology workers narrowly accept new work agreement**

Bureau of Meteorology (BOM) staff last week narrowly endorsed a new enterprise agreement. Only 51 percent of the 1,430 workers eligible to vote supported the deal.

The BOM workers have been without a pay rise since the previous agreement expired five years ago. The current increase will not be backdated.

The workers rejected three previous offers negotiated between BOM management and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU). The new deal consists of a 6 percent pay rise over 18 months, barely covering cost of living increases and retains cuts to travel allowances, salary progressions and benefits for staff working in remote areas.

The CPSU officially called for a rejection of BOM’s latest offer. However it has worked to undermine workers’ opposition by isolating the dispute and containing industrial action to limited stoppages and work bans. The union used similar methods to impose regressive agreements covering tens of thousands of workers across the federal public sector, including in the Australian Tax Office and the Department of Human Resources.

### **New South Wales meat workers strike over roster changes**

Dozens of meat workers at a JBS plant in the rural New South Wales town of Scone walked off the job for two hours last week and imposed an overtime ban until the end of July.

The two-hour stoppage was in opposition to company demands for changes to the work roster that would force employees to work overtime on Saturday at least 13 times a year. Employees at the plant currently work ten-hour days, Monday to Friday, on a minimum wage. Saturday overtime is voluntary.

The Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union admits the Scone workers “are some of the lowest paid JBS workers in the country.” The union told the media, however, that in negotiations for a new enterprise agreement, the union was “not arguing about money.”

JBS, a global meat processing company that employs around 260,000 people in 17 countries, purchased the Scone processing facility from Primo Smallgoods in 2015.

### **Industrial tribunal ends industrial action at Brisbane brewery**

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) last week ordered an end to all industrial action by members of the United Voice union in a long-running dispute over a new enterprise agreement at the XXXX brewery in the Brisbane suburb of Milton.

Lion, which owns the Milton plant, wants an enterprise agreement that would allow it to cover the leave of permanent employees with casual and contract labour. Workers suspect the move could be a first step in plans for a broader casualisation of the workforce and are concerned that Lion may shut the plant altogether and locate production elsewhere.

The FWC order, which came into force on Monday, was issued after United Voice revealed that workers would stop work to join a rally with supporters outside the final State of Origin rugby league game. The planned action at Suncorp Stadium is part of a campaign of limited, sporadic stoppages and protests. The union is calling for a meagre pay rise of just three percent per year, well below the rapidly rising cost of living.

### **New Zealand: Hoyts cinema workers reject pay offer**

Workers at Hoyts, one of New Zealand's biggest cinema chains, have rejected a "pay offer" from the company. Unite union has been negotiating with the company for the past three months. Hoyts has offered a deal that reduces pay rates for those not on the base rate down to the minimum wage.

The cinema chain has threatened to lock out staff members who take strike action. Unite union responded to these threats with protests last weekend. The dispute follows strikes by workers at Event Cinemas, New Zealand's largest cinema chain.

While Unite has decried Hoyts for proposing a drop in wages below the "living wage," calculated at \$20.55, the union has imposed a sell-out deal with Event Cinemas that barely sees wages rise above the minimum of \$16.50. The deal will see hourly wages go up only 25c after 350 hours and 50c after 18 months.



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