

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 November 2012

## More Bangladeshi garment workers strike over factory closures

On November 5, a week after the Hall-Mark group closed over a dozen of its factories in Savar, 200 employees of Topaz Dresses in Madhya Badda, also in the Dhaka district, demonstrated on the Badda-Kuril road over the sudden closure of their factory.

The Topaz workers defied police and refused to leave the highway demanding factory management come to the protest and directly pay their October wages. The police used water cannon to break up the demonstration. Like the Topaz workers, 15,000 Hall-Mark workers were not paid their month's wages when their plants were suddenly closed.

Hall-Mark workers began a hunger strike in Dhaka on November 5 to demand that the government honour its previous commitment to pay their dues and to re-open the Savar factories.

## India: Maruti Suzuki workers on hunger strike

On November 7, 200 dismissed workers from Maruti Suzuki India's (MSI) Manesar plant began a two-day hunger strike outside the Gurgaon district commissioner's office to demand reinstatement and release of jailed colleagues. At least 50 workers were detained by hundreds of police who prevented them joining the hunger protest.

In July, over 500 workers were dismissed by MSI and 150 jailed following the death of a plant manager during an altercation on the shop floor between workers, company goons and managers. The workers were aligned with the Maruti Suzuki Workers Union (MSWU), which was formed after a bitter struggle against the Maruti Udyog Kamgar Union (MUKU), a company-sponsored union.

MSI employees at the Manesar plant have expressed solidarity with their sacked colleagues but the MUKU has refused to join the sacked workers' protests.

## Hyundai workers in Tamil Nadu continue strike

About 500 members of the Hyundai Motor India Employees Union (HMIEU) are maintaining a strike begun on October 30 at Hyundai Motor's Sriperumbudur factory in Tamil Nadu. Hyundai refuses to recognise the Centre of Indian Trade Unions-affiliated union.

HMIEU members are striking against a pay rise accepted in October by the United Union of Hyundai Employees (UUHE). HMIEU members want the pay deal renegotiated and 27 workers dismissed during a strike in 2008 reinstated. HMIEU officials have appealed to the state government and entered talks with its labour ministry.

## Apollo tyre factory workers on strike

Close to 1,000 employees at Apollo Tyres' Waghodia plant in Gujarat have been on strike since October 23 to demand recognition of their newly-formed union, Bharatiya Majdoor Sangh (BMS).

Workers also want reinstatement of two employees suspended for alleged absenteeism and for wage rises in line with production increases.

Apollo employs over 7,000 people at two plants and claims it is maintaining production during the strike. There are three other unions recognised at the plants.

## Assam and Karnataka construction workers protest

On November 6, the Karnataka State Construction Workers Federation protested with several demands in Karnataka's Bidar district. Workers' demands include a minimum monthly wage of 10,000 rupees (\$US184), safety and social security, and provision of Below Poverty Line Cards to purchase food at subsidised rates.

Members of the Assam Construction Workers Union protested on the same day in Guwahati for the same minimum wage and other demands, including healthcare, insurance, pensions and dues.

There are over 1.5 million construction workers in Karnataka but only 200,000 are registered. In Assam there are 1.1 million construction workers and the number is growing rapidly.

## Pakistan: Lahore hospital paramedics protest

Hospital paramedics in Pakistan's eastern state of Punjab walked off the job at the Lahore Mental Hospital and the Service Hospital on October 31 and November 6 respectively. The protests were part of a series organised by the Punjab Paramedical Alliance (PPA).

According to the PPA, the provincial government has held over 20 discussions with union officials but failed to implement the service structure previously agreed to by the chief minister.

In June, the PPA called off a 33-day state-wide strike after various commitments from the government. These included approval of a 1,500-rupee monthly risk allowance (\$US30) for Grade 1 to Grade 4 paramedics and to regularise employees working at teaching hospitals and autonomous medical institutions.

The chief minister also claimed that the secretary of health would devise a strategy within three weeks to improve the service structure of Grade 5 to 17 paramedics. These promises were made after a year of state-wide industrial action and protests.

## Punjab government doctors call end to strike

Young Doctors Association (YDA) officials ended a street march on November 7 moments before doctors converged on the Punjab chief minister's office in Lahore. YDA officials told doctors that the government had agreed to 50 percent of their demands over wages and benefits. It also claimed that the government had agreed to drop trumped up charges against eight doctors for murder during the July strike.

The YDA called off a three-week strike at public hospitals in July, following a return to work order by the courts. The government mobilised Pakistan Army doctors and arrested 60 doctors on alleged criminal charges during the strike.

Under their current service structure, young resident doctors who do not share a private practice receive low wages and lower service-related benefits. According to the YDA, a commencing young doctor's salary is only 24,000 rupees (\$US253) per month. Doctors had demanded a "health professional allowance" of 10,000 rupees (\$US105).

### **Nepalese hospital workers walk out**

About 400 medical staff at the 300-bed Pokhara-based Gandaki Medical College Teaching Hospital and Research Centre Private Limited, in central Nepal walked off the job and held a sit-in protest on November 2 with a raft of 23 demands.

Workers want permanent status for employees whose service period has exceeded 240 days, the issuing of appointment letters and a 50 percent salary rise. According to the Nepal Health Workers' Union, workers are paid below the minimum salary set down in the Labour Act.

### **Burmese furniture workers on strike**

At least 300 daily-wage employees, many of them young women, from the Taw Win carpentry factory, in Rangoon's Shwepyitha Township have been on strike since October 25 after the factory owner refused to provide an employment contract. Most workers have not eaten since the strike began and at least 30 have been hospitalised due to "weak health." Six striking workers are also seriously injured after they were attacked by alleged factory goons.

According to workers, they remain daily-wage employees and receive no benefits after a decade of continuous work for the company. Strikers also complained that management forced them to work outside the factory, in the open air, after they formed a union and began making demands.

### **BlueScope Steel workers resume strike action**

Union delegates, representing 1,600 workers at BlueScope Steel in Port Kembla, south of Sydney, New South Wales voted on November 5 to resume industrial action over an enterprise deal. Union officials told the meeting that an in-principle enterprise agreement previously negotiated with the steel company contained an 8 percent pay increase over four years, not 8 percent over three years as they previously told workers. Delegates voted in favour of a 24-hour stoppage next Monday and to notify the company of possible strikes every day next week.

Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Workers Union ended several months of strikes and work bans on October 23, after union negotiators claimed they had reached an in-principle agreement.

The unions had accepted a reduced pay offer of 8 percent over three years in return for maintenance of all previous conditions. Workers previously rejected earlier company offers that attacked sick leave provisions, removed departmental agreements and scrapped a clause requiring agreement with the unions on any significant changes.

### **South Australian security workers strike**

About 40 employees in Chubb Security's armoured vehicle section in Adelaide, South Australia walked off the job for 48 hours on

November 1 and picketed their depot preventing cash deliveries to the city's banks and automatic teller machines. Chubb called in police who broke up the picket after three hours. The company threatened to lock out workers for five weeks if the strike was escalated.

Members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) want a 13 percent pay rise over three years in a new enterprise agreement. Chubb has only offered annual increases of 3.3 percent and wants to cut current conditions. The TWU claimed that Chubb workers earn just \$19.35 an hour while workers at other security companies are paid at least \$25 an hour.

### **Queensland aged care workers protest**

Aged care workers at the state-owned Farr Home Nursing Care Unit in Kingaroy, southern Queensland rallied outside a state government cabinet meeting at the Kingaroy Council Chambers on November 6 to protest the pending closure of the facility in 2014. According to the Queensland Nurses Union, 30 staff members are affected. Sixteen of the 29 residents have already been transferred to other facilities.

The government said that it would not be spending money on upgrading the facility with new fire safety standards due to take effect in 2014. Cuts in health services are also taking place at public hospitals at Gympie and the Sunshine Coast in south-east Queensland where around 110 positions are to be axed as part of the government's budget cuts.

### **New Zealand: Open Polytechnic lecturers strike**

Academic staff at New Zealand's Open Polytechnic walked off the job for half an hour on November 8 to oppose a proposal to cut their research and development time from 30 days to 15. Lecturers said research time is used for professional development and a requirement to teach a degree program. A Tertiary Education Union official said that the State Services Commission has also demanded that Open Polytechnic show it has increased productivity before it will approve any pay rises for academics.

Last year the polytechnic taught over 40,000 students from around New Zealand, making it one of the nation's most extensive tertiary education providers.

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