

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

7 December 2013

Asia

Cambodia: Ten-week strike at SL Garment Processing ends

A ten-week strike by around 4,000 employees at the Singapore-owned SL Garment Processing factory in Phnom Penh ended on December 4 after the employer reluctantly agreed to follow a court order, which it had been ignoring, and reinstate 19 sacked union leaders. The order to rehire the workers—all members of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU)—came just days after riot police fired live bullets into a crowd of 1,000 SL Garment workers demonstrating in Phnom Penh. A bystander was killed and eight workers hospitalised with gunshot wounds.

In an agreement signed by SL Garment, the government and C.CAWDU, the company will only pay workers half the wages they would have earned during the strike. It will return employees to their previous work schedule, drop all lawsuits filed against C.CAWDU in relation to the strike and keep shareholder Meas Sotha from having contact with workers.

SL workers were locked out on September 20 after protesting the sacking of 700 workers accused of leading an 18-day strike of C.CAWDU members in August. Workers had demanded that their monthly wage be increased to \$US150 and protested the order by Meas Sotha, a key shareholder, to station military police at the factory.

Despite the jubilation of workers that the strike has ended, the agreement signed by the union has not resolved their original grievance over low pay.

India: Odisha coal mine workers protest

At least seven open cut mines operated by a contract company for state-owned Coal India Limited at the Talcher coalfields in India's eastern state of Odisha were forced to close on November 29 when more than 1,000 workers downed tools and ransacked the manager's office to protest the sacking of over 100 workers, who were replaced by non-union workers. About 40 mining vehicles were set on fire and railway tracks damaged to prevent the transportation of coal. Several hundred police were called to the village.

The strike was sparked when police arrested 49 workers who had been protesting at a local train station that services the mine. Clashes then ensued between workers and management goons, resulting in over 100 arrests. More than 100 workers were arrested in similar clashes in October when the contractor initially announced its plan to not renew the contracts of hundreds of local workers. Dozens remain in prison on charges resulting from the incident, and many are currently on a hunger strike.

Bihar university teachers strike

Teachers at the Bupendra Narayan Mandal University in India's northeastern state of Bihar have been on strike since November 26 to protest against a 20 percent salary cut. They are holding a sit-in protest at the university and have demanded the resignation of the vice chancellor.

Teachers are also protesting the vice chancellor's "illegal" promotion of selected teachers and the doubling of their salaries.

Jharkhand teacher's aides protest

On December 1, Jharkhand teacher's aides or para teachers marched in the state capital Ranchi to protest the government's abrogation of promises given over one year ago to resolve long-standing grievances. At least six teachers launched a "fast unto death."

The Jharkhand Para Teachers Association (JPTA) ended a strike in April 2012 after the government agreed to increase teachers' honorariums to 10,000 rupees from 6,000 rupees, provide female teachers with maternity leave and set up a three-member committee, including teachers, to look into their problems. However the government failed to keep its commitment and offered just a 700-rupee a month pay increase.

In response, in August 2012, 85,000 para teachers at 40,000 government schools walked off the job to demand job regularisation and better wages. The JPTA called off the strike after two months, following a High Court order for the government to pay the 700-rupee increase. Teachers who failed to return to work were to be sacked.

In their latest protest, teachers have maintained their demand for job regularisation and better pay, as well as payment of salaries deducted during the August-October 2012 strike.

Karnataka rural health workers protest

On November 30, anganwadi (rural health care) workers and assistants rallied in the city of Mysore, Karnataka to demand regularisation of work for Group C and D workers and a wage increase from 5,000 rupees a month to 12,500 rupees (\$US202). In addition, the Karnataka Rural Health Workers and Assistants Federation demanded that anganwadi workers not be assigned with work in departments other than those coming under the Integrated Child Development Services and facilities.

On a related issue, last month, anganwadi workers from across Karnataka rallied in Bangalore to demand that their working hours be rolled back to four-and-a-half hours a day. In 2011, unions representing anganwadi workers convinced them to accept the state government's request that their daily working hours be increased to seven hours, with no increase in salary, on the vague promise that their services would eventually be regularised. This never happened.

Sri Lankan health workers strike

Government health workers, including nurses and paramedics, struck work for two days on November 27 to demand increased allowances. These include a 10,000-rupee (\$US75) disturbance, availability and transport allowance (DAT), incorporating an overtime payment increase of 200 rupees for starting salaries, as well as a 1,000-rupee transport allowance, a 4,000-rupee communication allowance for grade one and special grade nursing, PSM and paramedic health professionals, and a duty-free vehicle permit.

The strike went ahead in defiance of a District Court order against the

walkout. The action was called by the Joint Council of Nursing, Professions Supplementary to Medicine and Paramedics, which consists of 16 trade unions.

Australia and the Pacific

Police kill “illegal” gold miners in Papua New Guinea

On December 4, at least six so-called illegal miners were shot dead and others wounded when company security guards and Papua New Guinea (PNG) police fired live rounds at 300 protesters at the Canadian-based Barrick Gold’s Porgera Joint Venture (PJV) mine, 600km northwest of Port Moresby in Enga Province.

Another worker was shot dead in the afternoon when police attempted to stop a procession heading toward the nearby town of Paiam to demonstrate. It appears that the protest was triggered when two local miners—branded as “illegal trespassers” by the company—died in a mine pit.

The PNG government holds a 5 percent share in the mine, and the police repression was clearly backed in ruling circles. Enga Province Governor Peter Ipatas told reporters that illegal mining was becoming an increasing problem at the site.

Local miners and villagers stage regular protests over inhumane working and living conditions, as well as pollution issues. Allegations of rapes, beatings and killings of community members by PJV security forces have been prevalent for at least a decade. The mine is one of the most controversial in PNG. It empties millions of tons of tailings and mountains of waste rock directly into a nearby 800 km-long river system.

Striking Queensland building workers threatened with huge fines

The Abbott government’s Fair Work Building and Construction (FWBC) watchdog has written to more than 130 workers taking industrial action on two Brisbane construction projects, warning them they could face fines of more than \$10,000 each for alleged strike action. Newly-appointed FWBC director Nigel Hadgkiss said two John Holland projects, at Gallipoli Barracks (Enoggera) and the Queensland University of Technology Creative Industries Precinct, had been affected by work stoppages since October 28. Hadgkiss claimed that up to 220 workers had withdrawn their labour following a dispute over enterprise agreements between John Holland and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU).

In his announcement, Hadgkiss alleged the workers were defying an October 29 Fair Work Commission order to return to work. Under the Fair Work Act, imposed by the previous federal Labor government, the workers can be fined up to \$10,200.

CFMEU construction division national secretary Dave Noonan told the *Australian* that Hadgkiss’s threat was “reminiscent of a police state” with “workers being threatened with fines by the government.” But the CFMEU has isolated the dispute, and told workers not to speak to anyone about it.

The trade union, together with the rest of the union movement, has enforced Labor’s anti-strike Fair Work laws for the past six years, which has already led the imposition of huge fines on workers. Hadgkiss’s media statement boasted that in September, the Federal Court ordered 117 workers who participated in “unlawful” industrial action on a West Australian building site to pay penalties of up to \$10,000 each.

Northern Territory teachers ordered to suspend action

Australia’s Fair Work Commission (FWC) has ordered Northern Territory teachers to end all industrial action in their dispute with the territory’s Liberal Country government for a new work agreement. Although the FWC found that only one of the work-to-rule bans implemented by teachers in November was not “protected” industrial action, it ordered the Australian Education Union (AEU) to suspend all

industrial action until March 3. The AEU said it would comply with the ruling. The AEU began limited industrial action in November, including short strikes, after teachers rejected the government’s offer of 3 percent annual pay increases over four years—the current inflation rate for the territory is 3.9 percent. Teachers also demanded clauses in the new agreement to protect jobs. The territory government plans to cut at least 420 teaching positions within three years from the current 2,500, and close to 1,000 contract teaching and ancillary positions from the present 4,000.

The government has put its offer to a formal vote of both union members and non-union members, being held from December 2 to December 20. The AEU recommended a no vote, but has now called off the industrial action.

Victorian adult education workers maintain strike

Some 80 teachers and administrative staff at the Centre for Adult Education (CAE) in Melbourne have been on strike since November 18 and are picketing the centre in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Management has offered a pay rise of only 5 percent over four years, which amounts to a real wage cut.

CAE session teachers are paid 20 percent less than teachers at Training and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, even though TAFE took over the CAE in 2012. Staff are also opposed to management’s proposal to cut at least 30 employment conditions, including personal leave, provisions around the prevention of bullying in the workplace, consultation, redundancy and other long-held conditions.

The strikers are members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which has called no nationwide action to support them.

West Australian school and hospital workers protest

Hundreds of public education and hospital support workers demonstrated at Parliament House in Perth, Western Australia on December 5 to oppose new industrial legislation being introduced by the Barnett state Liberal government. The legislation will allow forced redundancies and the sacking of public sector workers, whose jobs are already being cut through so-called voluntary redundancies. The government announced in August that it would axe 500 jobs in the public education sector in 2014, including those of 350 education assistants.

The new legislation could override clauses in enterprise bargaining agreements that supposedly guarantee no privatisations of school and hospital support services, as well as clauses requiring retraining and redeployment for government workers. The United Voice trade union has largely limited opposition to the proposed laws to petitioning Liberal members of parliament.

Tasmanian ambulance workers impose bans

Tasmanian ambulance paramedics and communications officers started industrial action on November 25 in a dispute over a new work agreement. Health and Community Service Union (HACSU) members implemented bans on some administrative tasks after rejecting the state Labor government’s latest pay offer.

Paramedics have demanded that a four-year long dispute for extra penalty rates on missed meal breaks and extended work rosters be resolved in the agreement. On a 14-hour night shift, workers are meant to have two 20-minute meal breaks which they rarely get. As well, the HACSU wants a roster projection for more than 28 days, claiming it would provide a better work-life balance.

New Zealand Transport Agency workers strike

On December 2, workers at the New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA) call centre in Palmerston North walked off the job for several hours in a dispute over stalled negotiations for a new collective

agreement. The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), which represents 250 workers at the call centre, said the agency refused to consider any across-the-board pay rise and instead wants to continue using a performance pay system which workers have rejected, saying it is neither fair nor transparent.

Public Service Association (PSA) members at the NZTA have voted to take industrial action over the same issues.

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