

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 May 2014

Cambodian garment workers return to work

At least 30,000 striking garment workers from 37 factories in four Cambodian special economic zones (SEZ) in Bavet city, Svay Rieng returned to work on May 3 following a court directive. The court order was handed down after employers gave a non-binding commitment to “find a solution” to the dispute. The Collective Union of Movement of Workers, which has a large number of members in Bavet City, did not oppose the return-to-work order.

The mass walkout began at the Tai Seng and Manhattan economic zones when employees returned to work on April 18, following scheduled national industrial action that extended the Khmer New Year holiday by an extra day. The workers discovered that some companies had paid their employees a \$50 bonus for ignoring the unions’ directive, which was part of a campaign for a \$160 minimum monthly wage.

As the industrial action spread to include factories in the Shandon and Tai Sen SEZs the government ordered the closure of all factories in Bavet on April 29 and 30. Workers refused to return to work when the factories reopened, demanding that they be paid in full for the lockout, 50 percent pay for the extra day they took off after the Khmer New Year holiday, and the \$50 bonus for not participating in the \$160 minimum wage campaign.

Cambodian shoe factory workers resume strike action

Around 7,000 workers at the Wing Star Shoe factory in Kampong Speu province, in Cambodia’s south, resumed strike action on April 25. They have refused to return to work until management honours commitments made that ended a week-long strike in March. Workers first struck on March 17 over a charter of 11 demands, including an increase in the monthly bonus, from \$US10 to \$15, and meal and lunch allowances lifted to \$15.

Strikers had decided to return after the company said they would not cut their monthly wage during the walkout and would increase their bonus and allowance by \$1 each. Talks were to continue on the remaining issues, including an end to compulsory overtime and the removal of male security guards from outside the factory’s female restrooms.

Strikers claim that management has yet to implement its promises of 2,000 riel (\$US0.49) per day for meals, a \$5 health bonus, and other previously settled issues.

Tibetan contract teachers protest

Around 160 ethnic Tibetan and Han Chinese contract (or substitute) teachers protested on April 30 outside the government offices of the Malho prefecture, in north-western China’s Qinghai province, to call for benefits and higher pay. The contract teachers, mainly from rural areas, said that they are getting only up to one-sixth the salaries of full-time employees.

In the Rebgong-area, central Qinghai, full-time substitute teachers claim that they are paid just 500 to 1,000 yuan (\$US160) per month, compared to full-time teachers who are paid up to 5,000 yuan a month. They are not entitled to receive any kind of benefits or compensation for their full-time work as teachers.

India: Retail workers in Kerala protest

Female employees from various textile showrooms in Kozhikode city in Kerala, who are not allowed to sit-down during working hours, protested outside their places of work on May Day. They are demanding the right to sit occasionally during their eight-hour workday. Protesters were joined by people passing by in a procession carrying plastic chairs along the Mithai Theruvu in the city’s business district.

Pakistan: Teachers in Gilgit-Baltistan protest

At least 50 teachers, representing over 1,400 colleagues at schools operating under the Social Action Programme (SAP) in Pakistan’s northern province of Gilgit-Baltistan have been protesting outside the government assembly building in Gilgit since May 6 to demand regularisation of their schools. An SAP Teachers Association official said that the Gilgit-Baltistan education department had established community schools under the SAP in 1994 in rural areas. The education department promised to regularise the schools and bring them under the department within three years. This has not happened.

The association claimed that SAP teachers continue to earn a pittance compared to their public school counterparts. One protester said he earned a monthly salary of just 4,000 rupees (\$US67). The government has opposed the teachers’ demands, claiming that it lacks the 234 million rupees (\$3.9 million) required annually to adjust SAP

teachers' salaries to permanent status.

Hazara University non-teaching staff strike over transfers

Clerical and janitorial staff at Hazara University's Havelian campus in Pakistan's north-west province of Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa walked out for two days on April 30 in protest against the "politically motivated" transfer order of their colleagues.

Under orders from the acting vice chancellor around 18 out of 120 janitorial staff were directed to transfer to Hazara University campus in nearby Manshera. The workers were asked to report to their new destination in two days. Non-compliance to the order would result in halting of salaries, it further stated.

Following a threat from the Hazara University Employees Association to include teachers in the strike the university administration cancelled the transfer order but said it would be reviewed after May 2.

New South Wales food safety workers strike against privatisation

About 100 employees at the New South Wales Food Authority walked off the job for 24 hours on April 29 in protest of moves by its food testing branch Forensic Analytical Science Services (FASS) to further privatise food testing. Workers fear that subcontracting the work out to private laboratories will cost the jobs of 17 scientists and technical officers, and reduce quality of testing.

The NSW Food Authority works with a range of commercial food testing laboratories.

"I've worked in private laboratories and I'm aware of the push to get the work through. There was no consideration for quality," a lab worker told the media. The workers are covered by the Health Services Union.

Queensland construction workers protest

Around 10,000 construction workers from 11 building sites in the Brisbane CBD walked off the job on May 5 to protest over safety and the Newman Liberal National Party state government transferring the Labour Day public holiday from May to October. The workers, mostly members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), rallied outside government offices in George Street for an hour before dispersing.

Under Australia's Fair Work Act, anyone who rallies during work hours without permission from their employer could be taking part in unlawful industrial action. The Fair Work Building Commission director threatened the workers with a \$10,200 fine if it was proven that they had breached the law.

New Zealand port workers end strike

Eleven logistics officers who oversee the loading and unloading of trucks, trains and ships at the Lyttelton Port, Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island ended five days of limited strike action on May 7. The strike ended after the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) and the port authority accepted a new pay agreement.

Logistics officers stopped working overnight shifts on May 1 when negotiations for a pay rise of 4 percent over 12 months stalled. The port authority offered just 2.85 percent, which was rejected by workers.

The compromise settlement, which the union claims represents a 5.78 percent increase in total, is far inferior to the members' original demand. The union settled for the company's original offer of a 2.85 percent pay increase over 12 months, backdated to January 19, with a 2.85 percent increase from January 19, 2015. There are still many unresolved issues, such as staffing, succession planning, training, rostering and job content, which the union agreed to discuss in working groups. RMTU members are yet to ratify the deal.

New Zealand petrol tanker drivers on strike

Six truck drivers employed by Toll Carriers, which is owned by the Australian Toll Group and contracted to deliver petrol to BP service stations in Northland, have been on strike since May 1 to demand pay parity with other drivers in the industry. The drivers, who are members of FIRST Union, have been bargaining unsuccessfully since January with Toll.

According to the union, Toll Carrier drivers were paid between \$20 and \$25 an hour compared to the industry average of \$30 an hour and not paid overtime. FIRST Union, however, is not seeking full pay parity but demanded a 2 percent pay rise, to an average of \$26 an hour. Toll offered the \$26 an hour rate but only if workers moved to individual contracts.



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