

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 January 2010

Around 10,000 workers at United Win (China) Technology in the Suzhou Industrial Park, Jiangsu province walked off the job on January 8 over a pay cut and poor work safety. The strike began after workers heard that the company decided to cancel annual year-end bonuses for the second year in a row.

Some employees occupied the factory while others began protesting in the factory compound and in adjacent streets. Hundreds of riot police charged and beat demonstrators, including female workers. According to the Hong Kong-based Information Center for Human Rights and Democracy, more than 100 workers were injured during the clashes. The protest ended after the company promised to pay the bonuses.

The company, which still refuses to consider other outstanding issues, is a subsidiary of Taiwan-based Wintek Corporation, one of the world's leading producers of mobile phone panels and touch screens. Workers have accused the company of exposing them to toxic chemicals. One demonstrating worker said: "There are people dying from long-term exposure to the toxicant used in the factory but no one is paying attention to that."

According to one media report, 200 employees have shown signs of chemical poisoning since July and at least 40 of them are still in hospital. The health problems are compounded by poor pay, long working hours and bad food at the company canteen. Strike action involving up to 7,000 workers erupted over similar issues at another Wintek subsidiary in Dongguan in April last year. Management responded in that case by sacking 19 of the protesting employees.

South Korea: Kia workers walk out

Workers at Kia Motors, South Korea's third largest auto-maker and an affiliate of Hyundai Motors, stepped up industrial action on Monday over a management wage offer. Employees have downed tools for eight hours each day at the company's three plants. The union has threatened that if the dispute is not resolved by the end of the week stoppages will increase to 12 hours each day.

Kia workers last week rejected a company bonus offer of three months' pay and a one-time payout of about 4.8 million won (\$US4,000) in exchange for a wage freeze for 2010. The union is demanding incentives and bonuses equal to those received last year at Hyundai but has not opposed the wage freeze. The Hyundai deal is slightly above Kia's current offer.

In December, the Hyundai union convinced its members to accept a wage freeze and a one-time 5 million won payout for each worker, a bonus equivalent to three months' pay and 40 company shares.

Cambodian shoe workers on strike

Around 900 employees at the Tage shoe factory in Choam Chao district walked off the job on January 8 over the sacking of union leaders. One striking worker told the media that the company had violated 30 articles of Labour Law: "Our factories had a union that served the factory owner rather than the workers, but when we tried to create a new union, the factory owner fired three of the leaders."

The shoe workers have been holding daily protests at the factory gates and declared that they will continue their action until management recognises the union and reinstates their elected union officials. Tage management has been meeting with labour authorities but refused to enter into mediation talks with workers.

Indonesian seaport truckers strike

Hundreds of seaport truck drivers protested on January 10 at the Jakarta International Container Terminal complex to oppose excessive and "illegal" levies at the port. A spokesman for the truckers said drivers sometimes have to pay 30,000 rupiah (\$US3.20) in terminal levies. The drivers also want improvements to facilities, such as rest rooms and canteens.

Jakarta workers protest minimum wage increase

Hundreds of Jakarta workers rallied outside City Hall on January 5 to demand an increase in the provincial minimum monthly wage of 1,118,009 rupiah (US\$115.25). They want the 2010 minimum wage set at 1,317,710 rupiah in line with increased standard of living costs.

The protest is the second since October when authorities set the new minimum wage. Thousands of workers demonstrated in Central Java in November over the even lower minimum wage—on average 734,874 rupiah (\$US75)—in surrounding municipalities. Rallying workers demanded that regency and municipality wages in these districts be increased to at least 801,201 rupiah. This is the KHL, or decent living standards level, as calculated by the Central Java remuneration council.

Indian brick kiln union suspends strike

The Int Bhatta Majdoor Union called off strike action by 50,000 brick kiln employees in Gujarat, two days after workers walked out on January 17. The Gujarat Brick Manufacturers Association has refused to meet union representatives. Union officials have threatened to call for a resumption of the strike if workers' demands are not settled.

Kiln workers want their wages doubled because they are labouring for 12–14 hours a day for less than the stipulated minimum wage of 140 rupees. Their other demands include the provision of safety shoes, helmets, gloves and goggles, better facilities, such as water, electricity, and child-care and schools for their children.

The majority of Gujarat's 35,000 brick kiln employees are from Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra and are virtually bonded for six months. They are paid basic living expenses and not paid their total wage until after they've been employed for six months.

Gujarat government employees walk out

Gujarat state government employees struck on January 16 to demand implementation of the Sixth Central Pay Commission recommendations and payment of outstanding arrears, including the Dearness Allowance outstanding since April 1, 2004. The workers said they would remain on strike until the government fulfilled their 14-point charter of demands.

New South Wales coal miners locked out

Xstrata's Bulga open-cut mine workers in the Hunter Valley established a protest picket outside the mine after management locked them out for 24 hours on January 18. The 250 Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members had just returned to work after a 48-hour strike in protest against Xstrata's last pay rise offer of 15 percent over three years.

The company said the lockout was in response to threats of rolling stoppages and bans by union members over a new enterprise agreement. Xstrata spokesman James Rickards said the company was not prepared to meet the union's demands for significant changes to the company's proposed new work agreement, including the inclusion of a drug and alcohol policy and annual leave improvements.

Australian public school teachers vote for bans

Australian Education Union (AEU) federal conference delegates voted on January 19 to boycott the next round of National Assessment Program—Literacy and Numeracy assessments, which are scheduled for May. The AEU represents 180,000 public school teachers.

Teachers are concerned that the “assessment” results will be made public and used in “league tables” to make school-by-school comparisons that will damage the standing of schools whose students do not perform well in the Literacy and Numeracy tests.

Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard has refused to rule out taking legal action against teachers, telling the media this week that industrial action taken outside the enterprise bargaining period was not lawful. Teachers covered by federal laws in Victoria, the ACT and the Northern Territory could have their pay docked by a minimum of four hours if Fair Work Australia deemed the boycott unlawful. Teachers in other state jurisdictions could also face penalties.

AEU federal president Angelo Gavrielatos said the union was ready to discuss options with Ms Gillard to avert a boycott.

New Zealand Ministry of Justice workers protest

Around 100 Public Service Association (PSA) members from the Ministry of Justice protested at the opening of Wellington's new Supreme Court building on January 18. Rallies were also held outside courthouses in other New Zealand towns and cities over management's latest pay offer. Justice staff are paid on average 6.3 percent below the pay median for the public service, while the ministry's 1,200 courts registry officers receive 9.25 percent below the median.

Some 1,730 PSA members at the Ministry of Justice have held several strikes and rallies since last October over a government-imposed pay freeze. While calling for an end to the pay freeze, PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff has previously said the union would be prepared to work with the Ministry to “reduce their costs” by “identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity.”



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