

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

2 July 2011

Korean shipbuilders' union ends six-month strike without resolution

Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) officials ended a 190-day strike by construction workers at the Hanjin Heavy Industries' (HHIC) Yeongdo shipyard in Busan following a sell-out deal with the company on June 27. The strike began last December over the axing of more than 400 jobs.

Fearing that they would lose control of the strike, which had been winning wide national support, the KCTU hurriedly stitched together a deal with the company and shut down the dispute, declaring that they did not want the shipyard to "remain a dead factory anymore."

Under the deal, 170 terminated workers will receive redundancy payouts, HHIC will "minimise" legal claims for damages incurred during the walkout, and all other charges and accusations against the strikers will be withdrawn.

But with no withdrawal of the layoffs, many strikers rejected the deal and maintained their occupation of the shipyard grounds. Up to 60 workers shouting "save us" chained themselves to a shipyard crane that a KCTU official has been occupying since January 6. The workers later continued their protest outside the shipyard after being forcibly removed by Busan District Court security officers.

Korean auto workers protest lock out

At least 100 workers were injured when 1,100 locked out Yoosung Enterprise auto-parts employees tried to re-enter the factory in Asan, 90 kilometres southwest of Seoul, on June 22. Up to 1,500 security guards armed with a variety of riot gear, including shields, batons and water cannon, blocked the protesting workers.

Yoosung Enterprise employees have been locked out since May 24 when 3,000 riot police, backed up by water cannons and helicopters, smashed a seven-day wildcat strike and factory occupation by 500 workers protesting over failed negotiations for improved shift schedules and a salary rise.

Korean President Lee Myung-bak personally ordered riot police to end the occupation, after complaints from Hyundai, Kia, GM Korea, Renault Samsung and Ssangyong Motors, who claimed the industrial action had cost 150 billion won (\$US133 million). Yoosung supplies 70 percent of the engine parts for South Korea's auto manufacturers.

The sacked workers have been trying to enter the plant en masse, demanding that they be reemployed all together. Yoosung management is insisting that workers return on an individual basis in order to screen out union militants and officials.

Korean bank employees on strike

Up to 3,000 unionised employees of Standard Chartered (SC) First Bank—half its workforce—walked off the job on Monday in a dispute over a new performance pay scheme and restructure that includes the closure of 27 branches. Services at 409 branches across the country are severely affected by the strike. The union rejected a last minute offer from the bank to establish a performance management task force, withdraw labor restructuring, and increase the average base pay of union members by 5 percent.

SC First Bank employees also struck for 24 hours on May 30 in opposition to the bank's move to overhaul the seniority-based pay system. A union spokesman claimed that a performance-based pay scheme could cut salaries by as much as 46 percent. He said members would remain on strike until the scheme was withdrawn.

Bangladeshi garment workers strike

At least 20 workers were seriously injured when 1,500 protesting garment workers in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone in Ashulia were baton-charged by police. Deniar Fashion factory workers downed tools this week to demand a salary increase.

The walkout began after talks with management broke down. The striking workers were joined by employees from two neighbouring factories. The protesting garment workers dispersed after being forced out of the factory grounds by police.

India: Cochin Shipyard contract workers end strike

Around 2,000 contract workers at the state-owned Cochin Shipyard Ltd (CSL) in Kochi on India's west coast ended a 23-day strike last week after the Cochin Shipyard Contractors Federation proposed a new work agreement. The current agreement, negotiated by the Cochin Shipyard Workers Union, expired on January 1, 2010.

The contractors' federation has offered to review wages over the next 15 days, extend gratuity payment to around 300 workers who were not receiving it and make payments to a welfare fund.

The strike hit export orders for platform supply vessels, ship repairs and ship building. CSL management claimed that it had lost over 80 billion rupees (\$US1.72 billion) during the strike.

Indian tyre manufacturer lifts lockout

On June 24, tyre manufacturer MRF lifted a two-day lockout at its Kottayam plant in Kerala following a tripartite meeting between state labour department officials, the management and the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC). Over 1,300 workers downed tools on June 20 in protest over the suspension of a trainee accused of taking unauthorised leave. Management responded by suspending three union officials for stopping production.

Under a return to work deal agreed by the union, three INTUC representatives will be reinstated but the future of the sacked trainee remains unresolved, pending further meetings.

Rolling stoppages continue at BHP mines in Queensland

For the third time in three weeks, 3,000 workers at six coal mines of BHP Billiton Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA) in the Bowen Basin, central Queensland, will hold three days of rolling stoppages and overtime bans in a dispute for a new work agreement. Members of the Construction Forestry Manufacturing and Energy Union (CFMEU), the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, and the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union planned to stop work for the 12-hour night shifts on Friday, Saturday and Sunday.

The unions claim that six months of negotiations were deadlocked because BHP wants radical work changes, including “family unfriendly” rosters, unrestricted use of contract and part-time workers, increased flexibility of operators’ jobs and an increase in fly-in-fly-out employees. The unions want enhanced training opportunities and contractors to receive the same pay and conditions as BHP workers.

BHP has offered 5 percent annual pay increases for three years but a spokesman for the unions’ Single Bargaining Unit claims that the company is failing to listen to the workers’ main concerns. The unions have not yet made a pay claim, insisting on resolution of the other issues first.

Queensland power station workers strike

Up to 100 employees from the Stanwell Power Station, near Rockhampton, Queensland stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday. The power workers rallied outside the power station’s head office while the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union (AMWU), Electrical Trades Union and Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia delegates met with management in a dispute over a new work agreement. The strike followed a four-hour stoppage the day before.

According to the AMWU, Stanwell offered workers 3.5 percent annual wage increases over three years in exchange for employees giving up rostered days off and the union suggesting millions of dollars in cost-cutting measures. The state Labor government is demanding that all public sector wage rises be capped at 2.5 percent with trade-offs for any increases above the cap.

Queensland public health workers protest over pay errors

As part of a statewide campaign, 20 staff at the Toowoomba Hospital, Queensland rallied outside the hospital on June 23 to protest ongoing pay errors. Over 22,000 employees have complained of pay errors, including underpayments, overpayments or no pay at all, after Queensland Health installed a new computer payroll system in March last year. Many workers were forced to seek assistance from charities after several weeks without pay.

The Australian Services Union (ASU) wants payroll staff numbers increased and higher salaries for staff forced to work above their current job classifications in dealing with the troubled pay system.

Victorian briquette factory workers on strike

On Tuesday, 31 workers at briquette (compressed coal dust) production company Mecrus in the Latrobe Valley, Victoria walked off the job and established a picket at the factory gate. The Construction Forestry Manufacturing and Energy Union (CFMEU) says it has been trying to negotiate a new enterprise agreement with Mecrus for two years. Workers walked out for 24 hours in December over the same issue.

Mecrus has offered a 4 percent pay rise but this has been rejected by the union, which is calling for improvements to long-service leave and redundancy provisions, and the introduction of WorkCover “top-up pay” for injured workers. Mecrus claims that these demands constitute a 30 percent pay increase. The striking workers are maintaining a 24-hour picket during the negotiations.

Salvation Army social workers in Victoria stop work

Around 50 employees of the Salvation Army’s Westcare facility in Sunshine, Melbourne walked off the job and picketed the organisation’s head office in Blackburn on Wednesday to demand improved pay and entitlements in a new work agreement. Westcare employs more than 100 staff and is a major provider of placement and support services for children and young people.

Australian Services Union (ASU) members walked off the job for two hours in March. Westcare had refused to negotiate on the work agreement for more than two-and-a-half years, defying industrial court directives. Management has since offered a 3 percent annual pay increase but only if employees agree to work unpaid overtime.

The Westcare workers want 5 percent annual pay increases and improved maternity and long-service leave entitlements. They claim that employees in comparative positions with other organisations receive up to \$20,000 more per annum. Westcare workers currently earn between \$38,000 and \$45,000 per year.

While negotiations have resumed, ASU members are maintaining bans on providing data to the Department of Human Services and attending Westcare meetings.



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