

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 July 2011

Korean police attack shipyard occupation supporters

Hundreds of protesters were injured and 50 arrested when police, using teargas and water cannon, attacked a procession of around 10,000 protesters on July 9. The demonstrators were on their way to Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction's (HHIC) Yeongdo shipyard to support 12 union members and a union official occupying a 35-metre crane in the yard in defiance of a return to work order. The demonstrators, who came from around Korea, planned to meet up with around 100 HHIC workers holding a 24-hour vigil outside the shipyard.

Workers are protesting against Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) officials who concluded a secret deal with company management and the courts to end a 190-day strike by shipyard construction workers on June 27. The strike, which had been attracting mass support from workers in and around Seoul, began last December over the axing of more than 400 jobs.

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 dropped. There will be no withdrawal of the layoffs.

Korean bank employees' strike in third week

Up to 3,000 unionised workers at Standard Chartered (SC) First Bank, or half its workforce, are maintaining a strike begun on June 27 to oppose a new performance-based pay scheme and restructure. The bank was forced to close 43 of its 400 branches on Monday due to the strike.

According to the union, the planned restructure and new pay scheme would cut salaries by up to 46 percent and close 27 branches. Workers have rejected the company's offer to establish a performance management taskforce, withdraw the labour restructuring, and increase the union members' average base pay by 5 percent.

SC First Bank is the first lender in South Korea seeking to introduce a performance-based pay system. Employees held a nationwide stoppage on May 30 protesting over the issue.

Korean bus drivers end strike

Samwha Express bus drivers in Incheon, 40km west of Seoul, ended a three-day strike on Monday after management agreed to pay dues and enter negotiations for a wage increase. Management also said it was willing to negotiate workers' demands that 20 percent of temporary

workers be regularised. The snap strike affected over 50,000 commuters on 20 routes between Incheon and Seoul.

India: Pune rural child health workers demonstrate

Hundreds of rural child health (anganwadi) workers rallied at the Pune district municipal offices on July 13 over unpaid enhanced benefits approved last month by the federal cabinet committee on economic affairs.

Under the new rates, anganwadi workers' monthly honorarium increased by 100 percent to 3,000 rupees (\$US62) while payments to workers and helpers at smaller rural child health facilities increased to 1,500. Around 2,700 anganwadis are employed in Pune district.

Pharmaceutical workers in Hyderabad protest

On Sunday, 5,000 contract workers of pharmaceutical manufacturer Aurobindo Pharma picketed the company's head office in Hyderabad to protest over low wages, lack of medical facilities and workplace harassment. The international company has 12 manufacturing plants in India.

Sri Lankan garment workers strike

Around 250 employees of the Bianca garment factory in Kahagolla, Bandarawela struck for five days from July 3 to protest over non-payment of wages due on June 15. Although management paid the wages of the machine workers when they returned to work on July 8, clerical employees were offered only a portion of their dues, which they rejected.

Management responded by transferring them to the company's head office in Colombo, 200km away, which workers claim is the equivalent to being sacked because their low wage is not sufficient for food and lodging in the Sri Lankan capital. The normal daily wage of these workers is 450 rupees (\$US4.5).

Sri Lankan technology teachers protest

Over 150 academic staff of the Sri Lanka Advanced Technological Institute (ATI) in Dehiwala, on the outskirts of Colombo, protested outside the institute on July 11 to demand resolution of long-standing grievances. Lecturers claim that they have not received any salary increase or promotions since 2000 and are not paid university lecturer's allowances. The academics threatened to mount a national campaign if the government continues to ignore their demands.

Indonesia: Freeport mine workers return to work

Over 10,000 striking workers at the US-owned Freeport-McMoran Grasberg mine in the Indonesian province of West Irian Jaya (West Papua) returned to work on Wednesday, ending a nine-day strike over a pay dispute. Workers walked off the job on July 4 to demand that wages be increased to \$3 an hour. The average pay for Freeport mine workers around the world is \$15 an hour.

The union called off the strike when management agreed to the pay increase and CEO Armando Mahler said he would meet representatives of the Freeport Indonesia's Labor Union to resolve issues over mistreatment by some managers. No meeting date has been set.

Production at Grasberg, one of the world's largest open-cut gold and copper mines, had come to a standstill, forcing the global price of copper to a two-month high. Freeport claimed the strike had cost over \$23 million a day. In the first quarter of this year the mine made a \$1.5 billion profit.

Adidas shoe workers end strike in Vietnam

Up to 90,000 employees of the Taiwan-owned shoe manufacturer Pou Yuen, an Adidas contractor with several factories in Saigon, ended a seven-day strike on June 28 after management agreed to increase wages. Workers wanted a raise in the basic wage of 500,000 dong (\$US26) a month. The company agreed to raise the basic wage by 300,000 dong and increase supplement payments by 200,000 dong. Workers told the media that when they next get their pay they will know whether the company will again break its promises on supplements, as it has done previously.

New South Wales public sector workers protest

At least 250 nurses, firefighters, teachers, police officers and other public sector workers marched through Penrith, west of Sydney, on July 12 to protest the state Liberal government's wages and industrial relations policies. Protesters rallied outside state Liberal politician Stuart Ayres' electoral office and delivered a letter on behalf of 12,000 public sector workers who live in the Penrith area. A similar protest was held in Terrigal (70km north of Sydney) on Thursday.

Under the new legislation, wage rises for 400,000 public servants will be capped at 2.5 percent and an additional 1.5 percent "productivity" increase only paid after 12 months if it is financed from "employee-related savings" such as job losses and increased workloads. The legislation will also allow the state government to impose wage cuts, along with reductions in core conditions, such as penalty rates, sick and long-service leave entitlements and holidays.

Western Australian owner-driver protest

Forty owner-drivers drove a convoy of trucks into Western Australia's capital Perth and rallied at Parliament House last week to protest low pay rates and increased taxes. According to the Transport Workers Union, the state Liberal government and developers are utilising a slowdown in civil construction in Perth to drive down costs and tender prices. A union official claimed five owner-drivers closed their businesses last week due to low contract rates. The union said more protests are planned.

New Zealanders rally to save rail jobs

Over 1,000 people joined Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) members at a rally in Dunedin last Saturday to protest government plans to axe up to 40 jobs at the city's Hillside Railway Workshops. According to the RMTU, the Hillside jobs and another 30 at KiwiRail's Lower Hutt workshops in Wellington are under threat as a consequence of the government's decision to buy rolling stock that is made overseas. The Hillside workshop is one of Dunedin's largest employers, with 172 staff, and the redundancies are expected to have a substantial impact on the local economy. The RMTU set up a picket on Friday at the Port of Tauranga, where the first shipment of 120 rail wagons is being unloaded.

The overseas purchase of rolling stock is part of the Key government's 2010 budget plan "designed to see the company's rail freight become sustainable" by cutting costs and closing minor "unprofitable" lines.

New Zealand teachers protest

On July 9, several hundred members of the New Zealand Education Institute (NZEI) and parents held a procession in Auckland to protest cuts to early childhood education. Protesters demanded that the target of fully staffing early childhood centres with qualified teachers be restored, and that the government commit to investing 1 percent of GDP on early childhood education.

Papua New Guinea sugar cane harvesters issue strike notice

At least 1,300 workers from the harvesting and transport section of Ramu-Agri Industries Ltd (RAIL) sugar plantation in Gusap, on Papua New Guinea's north coast, have issued a seven-day notice to strike over demands that the company restore shift, overtime and weekend payments. Workers claim that since the inception of Ramu Sugar in 1982 and up to 2008, they were paid overtime and double time on weekends. The entitlements were scrapped in 2009. They have given RAIL until July 20 to respond to their demands.



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