

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 October 2011

Korean shipyard protesters arrested

Over 50 protesters at a 4,000-strong demonstration over the destruction of 400 jobs at the Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction (HHIC) shipyard were arrested on October 9. Police also attacked the rally with water cannons.

The demonstrators were supporting Kim Jin-suk, a local Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) official, who has been occupying a 35-metre crane at the HHIC shipyard. The rally was the fifth in a long-running campaign called "Hope Buses for a World without Layoffs and Temporary Work."

Kim Jin-suk has gained national support over her defiance of a KCTU directive for local members to end their dispute over the sackings. KCTU officials concluded a secret deal with the shipyard's management and the courts in June to end a 190-day strike by the shipyard construction workers. The shipyard has not been fully operational since last December when industrial action over the layoffs began.

Fearing the dispute could lead to further industrial unrest, the Korean government has called the KCTU and HHIC into talks to discuss a proposal to reinstate the sacked employees and continue talks on the company's proposed restructure. Employees claim that the company is planning to transfer work to its shipyard in the Philippines where wages are one-tenth of Korean pay.

Korean bus drivers strike

After two months of failed negotiations for a pay increase, over 400 Samwha Express Company bus drivers in Incheon (40km west of Seoul) walked off the job on Tuesday. The walkout affected 50,000 daily commuters between Incheon and Seoul. The union wants a 20 percent pay rise to make up for 10 years without an increase, 20 percent of regular workers to be regularised, and cuts in working hours. The company has offered a pay rise of just 3.5 percent and a reduction in daily working hours from 21 to 18 hours.

Drivers ended a two-day strike in July after the company agreed to pay two months of dues and enter into negotiations for a pay rise and improved conditions. Workers claim they are paid 4,727 won (\$US4.38) per hour, 30 percent less than bus drivers at other companies.

India: Coal workers strike

On Monday, over 300,000 employees (nearly 75 percent of the total

work force) of eight coal producing subsidiaries of Coal India Ltd (CIL) struck work for 24 hours to demand an increase in bonus pay.

According to the All-India Coal Workers' Federation, management has offered a bonus of 13 percent of gross profits, compared to the 39 percent dividend distributed to its shareholders. Workers want an annual 23,500-rupee (\$US481) bonus payment. They currently receive 17,000 rupees and said they would intensify industrial action after CIL management refused to grant their demand.

Coal India is the world's largest producer of coal and India's largest employer with almost 400,000 workers. Last financial year, it posted a 12.9 percent (\$US2.4 billion) jump in net profit.

Bosch strike continues as talks fail

Strike action by 4,000 employees at Bosch's Adugodi auto parts plant in Bangalore is continuing as a second round of talks with the company failed on Monday. MICO Employees' Association (MEA) members downed tools on September 28 and began a relay hunger strike to protest the outsourcing of "non-core" manufacturing processes. While the Karnataka state government declared the strike illegal workers claim that the planned outsourcing violates a wage agreement that does not expire until December 2013.

Bosch has refused to meet with the MEA, stating that it will not change its planned outsourcing. The MEA has appealed to the government to force the dispute into arbitration.

Dunlop workers in West Bengal locked out

At least 900 workers at Dunlop's tyre manufacturing plant in Sahaganj, West Bengal have been locked out after they refused to allow the transfer of raw materials to other Dunlop plants.

The tyre workers, who have not been paid for two months and are currently demonstrating outside the factory, have accused the company of preparing to close the plant and sell the land to developers.

The Centre of Trade Unions of India and the Indian National Trade Union Congress have not called on other Dunlop workers to support the locked out Sahaganj employees. Instead, the unions are calling on the government to declare the lockout illegal under the Industrial Dispute Act.

Punjab sanitation workers on strike

Thousands of tonnes of uncollected garbage have piled up in residential and commercial areas throughout Punjab, following a state-wide walkout on October 6 by Amritsar Municipal Corporation sanitation workers. The Punjab Municipal Workers Union wants permanent jobs for sanitation and clerical staff, drivers, firemen, gardeners and others who have been put in temporary jobs or employed on contracts in Punjab municipal councils.

Australian customs officers strike again

For the fourth time in three months, 3,000 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) customs, quarantine and border protection officers across Australia held stop-work meetings on Thursday over a pay dispute. The four-hour stoppages caused delays at international airports, shipping ports, international mail centres and other customs sites. Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members held rallies outside customs headquarters and facilities in all states.

The walkouts were part of ongoing industrial action by 120,000 commonwealth public servants whose enterprise agreements expired this year. Commonwealth public sector workers have rejected the Gillard Labor government's 3 percent annual pay cap and are angered over attempts to slash leave, flexitime and overtime payments, and other conditions. The CPSU, which covers most government employees, wants annual pay increases above 4 percent over three years to compensate for cost of living increases.

Queensland health workers protest

Hundreds of Queensland Health (QH) employees rallied at Parliament House in Brisbane on Thursday to oppose the state Labor government's 2.5 percent cap on future wage increases—1.3 percent below the official cost of living. A public sector union spokesman said that QH had demanded extensive savings to fund pay rises above the wage cap and which slash health sector jobs.

Thursday's protest followed a rally by 150 QH employees in Townsville and Toowoomba the day before and a two-hour stop-work meeting on Tuesday at the Bundaberg Hospital by 35 Australian Workers Union (AWU) members. Over 100 QH administrative staff rallied in Bundaberg last week to oppose the 2.5 percent cap.

The AWU wants 4 percent annual pay rises over three years to keep pace with Queensland's 3.8 percent inflation rate. The Queensland Nurses Union is due to commence enterprise bargaining negotiations with QH next week.

Queensland local government workers stop work

One hundred and fifty Toowoomba Regional Council administrative staff walked off the job for several hours on Wednesday to protest the council's latest pay offer. It is the first time in 40 years that Queensland Services Union (QSU) members at the council have taken strike action.

According to the QSU, the council's offer includes pay increases below the inflation rate and some workers will not receive any increase. The council has also demanded cuts to some long-standing work conditions and entitlements.

A QSU official said members want an equitable percentage wage offer across all salary levels and in line with pay rises management recently offered outdoor workers. The protesting workers voted to take industrial action every week until the council made a satisfactory offer.

Mermaid Marine workers in Western Australia escalate industrial action

In a long-running pay dispute with Mermaid Marine Australia, 30 dock workers at the company's Dampier Supply Base in the Pilbara, this week notified the company that they would strike for four days, beginning Friday. Last week, the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) called off overtime bans, claiming progress had been made with management. MUA members first walked off the job on July 15, after six months of negotiations for a new four-year work agreement reached deadlock. Major stumbling points were accommodation allowances and increased workforce casualisation. The union wanted the accommodation allowance lifted from \$670 per week to \$1,200, to cover high rents in Dampier, and casual numbers reduced at the Dampier base and on Mermaid's vessels. Workers are also demanding a \$90 daily allowance, in line with that paid to 3,500 construction workers on the massive Gorgon LNG project off the Pilbara coast.

Jetstar airline check-in staff implement bans

Jetstar check-in staff at six major airports in Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland implemented a 24-hour ban on excess baggage charges on Friday in a dispute over a wage increase.

According to the Australian Services Union, which represents frontline customer service staff at the Qantas-owned airline, Jetstar has refused to negotiate a "reasonable" pay increase in a new work agreement. The action is expected to cost Jetstar at least \$50,000 in daily revenue that the company raises from excess baggage fees.

Tasmanian health workers demonstrate

On Tuesday, over 100 nurses, health workers and union representatives rallied in Hobart, the state capital, to demand the Tasmanian Labor government reverse its decision to slash \$150 million from the health budget over the next four years. At least \$9 million will be cut from the mental health budget in the next nine months.

Nurses claimed mental health treatment would be relegated to emergencies only, spilling over onto hospital, police and ambulance services and struggling family members. "Front-line nursing and allied positions are being targeted to be removed from the service," one mental health nurse told the media.

Health Minister Michelle O'Byrne told protesters that cuts were necessary and that the entire health system must be made more efficient. The Tasmanian Labor government's budget, which was announced in June, will slash \$1.4 billion in state spending or 10 percent in real terms during the next four years. As well as cuts to the health sector, it will result in the closure of 20 public schools and the destruction of at least 1,700 full-time positions or 7 percent of state sector employment.



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