

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 April 2013

Hong Kong port strike in third week

Around 450 outsourced contract workers for port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd (HIT) have been on a sit-in strike since March 28 to demand a 20 percent pay increase and resolution of other long-standing issues. The strikers are ignoring a court injunction, imposed on April 2, ordering them to leave the port terminals.

Some of the strikers, who are employed by several different contractors, have not had a pay increase for 17 years. Other issues include health and safety, degrading and unhygienic conditions, and pay parity with directly employed workers. Workers are forced to work 24-hour shifts without breaks, no fixed holidays and no formal meal periods. The employers walked out during a meeting with the Union of Hong Kong Workers and the Confederation of Trade Unions on Wednesday without resolving any issues.

Hong Kong, which serves as the gateway to mainland China's manufacturing heartland, ranks as the world's third-busiest port, after Shanghai and Singapore. Despite media speculation that HIT is losing \$640,000 a day, its millionaire owner Li Ka-shing has distanced HIT from the dispute, saying it should be resolved by the contractors. The strike has diverted traffic to the neighbouring Chinese port of Shenzhen, where HIT also operates berths.

Bangladesh: Chittagong port workers on strike

As part of a nationwide campaign, lighter vessel workers at Bangladesh's main seaport of Chittagong have been on strike since April 5 over a wage dispute. Loading and offloading activities at the outer anchorage of the port, as well as the water transportation of goods to 16 destinations across the country, remain suspended. An estimated 1.4 million tonnes of cargo is stranded at the port, along with 20 foreign vessels. At least 320 ships are waiting to unload 320,000 tonnes of goods elsewhere.

The Lighter Vessel Workers Union has called for increases in pay and allowances, and improved safety. The strike was sparked after vessel owners failed to honour a commitment they made in January to increase salaries and allowances by 20 percent.

Locked-out garment workers in Chittagong protest

About 400 locked-out garment workers from Global Specialised Garments, owned by the Azim Group, protested in Chittagong on April 7 to demand salary increases and payment of overdue wages. Demands included a wage increase to between 400 taka and 500 taka per day to reflect actual hours worked, as against the current salary of 270 taka (\$US3.21) a day. They also demanded 30 taka, instead of 10 taka, for their daily refreshments.

The company suddenly closed the factory on April 4 without informing workers. Following the protest, management representatives agreed to pay March salaries and said the other demands would be discussed with workers' representatives later.

India: Goa contract English teachers on strike

Some 325 contract English teachers have been protesting outside the customs house in Panaji, the capital of Goa, on India's west coast, since March 18 to demand regularisation. Around 70 of the teachers began a hunger strike on April 8.

The teachers' action was sparked when the state government advertised vacant positions without offering them to the contract teachers. The teachers had been told, when recruited on a contract basis, that they would be given regular posts and absorbed as full-time employees within a few months.

Karnataka school meal workers continue protests

For the third time in six months, midday meal workers at Karnataka state schools have staged protests to demand better wages, payments for summer vacations, regularisation and other benefits. Processions were held in Madya and Bidar on April 8 and 5 respectively. Workers complained that their workload has steadily increased without compensation.

Midday meal workers had protested in Bangalore in October to demand that their poverty wages be increased from 1,000 rupees (\$US20) a month to 10,000 rupees. The workers are covered by

the Karnataka State Midday Meal Workers Union, which is affiliated with the Stalinist Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

Striking Sri Lankan health workers sacked

The Sri Lankan government has begun sacking “substitute” health (non-medical) workers who have been on strike since April 1 at the Colombo National Hospital. Management called in police to remove strikers from the premises.

Around 3,000 All Island Health Services Union members walked out to protest the sudden transfer of a union representative. A union official told the media that the worker was served with a transfer letter without warning or reason. Workers said the transfer was the result of political victimisation and vowed to strike until it was cancelled. Military personnel have been deployed to the hospital to cover their duties.

Vietnamese cosmetic brush workers on strike

Close to 1,000 employees of the Hanoi cosmetics brush manufacturer Doojung Vietnam walked off the job on April 8 and are protesting outside the factory against alleged mistreatment by the Korean-based company. The factory is located in the Phu Nghia Industrial Park of Hanoi’s Chuong My District. Workers said they had been forced to work up to 120 extra hours per month, with no vacations or breaks.

Workers told media: “We are all so exhausted from the job, but whenever somebody asked for a reduction in overtime they were fired.” They added that any employee who requested time off for weddings, family issues or sickness was also terminated. Other grievances include denial of maternity leave rights and the non-payment to authorities of salary deductions for social insurance.

Management has locked the factory and refused to talk to workers. Doojung also has factories in China, and exports brushes around the world.

Tasmanian bus union accepts two-tier wage increase

After two months of limited industrial action, that included a one-day lockout, the union representing 300 drivers at the Tasmanian government-owned Metro bus company has imposed increased workloads and a two-tier wage increase. The outcome will particularly disadvantage new starters and drivers with less than 10 years’ employment.

Under the deal brokered by the Rail Tram and Bus Union and former premier and union bureaucrat Paul Lennon, drivers who have been with the company for more than nine years will get a

2.5 percent annual pay rise for the next three years, while newer employees will get annual increases of just 2 percent.

In addition, drivers will be forced to work longer shifts and must agree to open satellite bus yards around Hobart on weekends. This is a major cut to the union’s original demand for 3 percent annual pay increases in return for opening the satellite depots. The drivers were due to vote on April 12 on whether to accept the union’s sell-out deal.

Solomon Islands teachers’ strike enters fourth week

Over 8,000 teachers have been on strike since March 22 after the Solomon Islands government failed to meet its own commitment to pay outstanding wages. The latest action, like a strike in February, follows repeated broken promises to implement a new salary structure. One teacher told the media that under the old structure some teachers received only \$200 (\$US27) a week, while less experienced teachers were paid just \$200 a month.

While the government claimed it had always accepted the teachers’ claims, it has never budgeted for the \$34 million needed for the increase in salaries, and to date has only paid the increase to 2,000 teachers. The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association this week called off a street protest in Honiara after a request from the Commissioner of Police.

Papua New Guinea health workers strike

Staff at the St John hospital in Gerehu, a northern suburb of Port Moresby, ended a three-day strike on April 10 after the health department made funds available to the hospital for wages that were one week overdue. According to workers, the delay in the payment of salaries has been an ongoing issue between the management and the health department. The hospital treats between 500 and 600 patients a day.

Meanwhile, lecturers at the Mendi School of Nursing in the Southern Highlands launched an indefinite strike on April 8 over the government’s failure to pay overtime allowances. At least 175 students are affected. The school is affiliated to the University of PNG.



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