

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 April 2013

Hong Kong port strike continues

Around 450 outsourced contract workers for port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd (HIT) have maintained a sit-in strike since March 28 to demand a 20 percent pay increase and resolution of other long-standing issues. Ignoring a court injunction, imposed on April 2, ordering them to leave the port terminals, 200 strikers and supporters have set up a picket in front of the headquarters of HIT's parent company Hutchison Whampoa at the Cheung Kong Centre in Central Hong Kong.

Some of the strikers, who are employed by several 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.

On Tuesday, the employers walked out during a meeting with the Union of Hong Kong Workers and the Confederation of Trade Unions without resolving any issues, and are refusing to resume negotiations. A union spokesman said workers were looking for an equivalent of a pay increase of \$100 (\$US12.80) each shift.

HIT's millionaire owner Li Ka-shing has insisted the dispute should be resolved by the contractors. The strike has diverted traffic to the neighbouring Chinese port of Shenzhen, where HIT also operates berths.

In a publicity stunt, the Maritime Union of Australia has sent eight union members to protest alongside the strikers to "show their support," but has not proposed any concrete action internationally.

India: Maharashtra auto-workers' strike in second week

Around 1,600 employees, including contract workers, of car manufacturer Mahindra and Mahindra (M&M) in

Nashik, Maharashtra have been on strike at the company's Igatpuri engine plant since April 8 to demand reinstatement of two suspended workers, one of whom is a union delegate. Workers are entering the factory for each shift but refusing to work. The strike has stopped the production of over 5,000 engines, affecting output at the company's five car assembly plants in Kandivili, Chakan, Haridwar, Faridabad and Nashik.

The union rejected M&M management's proposal that the suspended workers would be reinstated only after the strike is called off. M&M produces SUVs, saloon cars, pickups, commercial vehicles, and two-wheeled motorcycles and tractors. It owns assembly plants in China, the UK and the US.

Tamil Nadu revenue staff present demands

On April 15, about 20 members of the Tamil Nadu Revenue Officials Association demonstrated at the Krishnagiri District Collector's office in Krishnagiri to present a charter of 27 demands that included a pay rise and regularisation of revenue contract workers. Head revenue officers want their monthly salary increased from 9,300 rupees (\$US171) to 15,600 rupees and a special pay of 1,000 rupees for record clerks and office assistants, and 400 rupees for revenue assistants. Other demands included the release of the list of the deputy head revenue officers for 2012 and improved training.

Tamil Nadu salt pan workers protest

Salt workers in the Tamil Nadu port city of Tuticorin demonstrated in front of the Collector's office on April 15 to demand a wage increase, better working conditions and

entitlements. The Salt Workers Union, affiliated with Stalinist Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), wants the daily wage increased from 190 rupees for men and 180 rupees for women to 350 rupees (\$US7) for both. Other demands included basic facilities like drinking water, toilets and bathrooms at the workplace, a provident fund, employees' state insurance, gratuities and maternity leave.

Andhra Pradesh tourism workers fight for pay rise

Andhra Pradesh Department of Tourism employees have been protesting at the Haritha Berm Park in Vijayawada since April 8 to demand a pay increase. Tourism workers across the state—including 260 daily wage workers, 400 contract employees and 1,200 manpower employees—receive a meagre salary of between 3,000 and 5,000 rupees (less than \$US100) a month.

The CITU-affiliated AP Tourism Contract, Manpower, Daily Wage Employees and Workers Union ended strike action last October after the government gave a false promise to improve wages.

Bangladesh garment workers on strike

Since April 9, SQ Crystal Sweater garment workers at Teknagapara in Gazipur, 40 kilometres north of Dhaka, have been on strike. They are picketing the factory with a charter of nine demands, including a pay increase. On Thursday, they held a procession on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway and submitted a memorandum to the Gazipur deputy commissioner.

Strikers complained that the factory was not paying the correct wage rate, agreed to four years ago, and that they were forced to work 12 hours a day without overtime allowances. They also alleged that the management had been terminating workers without paying dues and other benefits.

Management locked the factory on April 15 and refused to talk to workers, claiming the factory was run according to the law.

Victorian power generator workers strike again

For the second time this month, workers at the Yallourn power station, in the Latrobe Valley, east of Melbourne, walked out on April 18. They are in an eight-month dispute with the station operator, Energy Australia, over a new enterprise agreement. Power generation at the plant was cut by 20 percent during the 48-hour strike. The action follows a 24-hour strike on April 3 and overtime bans from April 16.

Workers have been offered a pay increase of 25 percent over four years but the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) wants a consult-and-agreement clause to be added to the contract, allowing it to take part in management's operational decisions. Energy Australia has now cancelled all negotiations with the CFMEU and said it was exploring other options.

Solomon Islands teachers' union calls off strike again

Once again during its members' long running fight for a pay increase, the Solomon Islands Teachers Association (SINTA) has called off strike action. There has been another flimsy promise from the Solomon Islands government, this time to "endeavour" to resolve the dispute, but not immediately.

Over 8,000 teachers had been on strike since March 22 after the government failed to meet its own commitment to pay outstanding wages. The latest action, like a strike in February, followed repeated broken promises to implement a new salary structure.

While the government said it had always accepted the teachers' claims, it has never budgeted for the \$34 million needed for the salary increase, and to date has only paid the increase to 2,000 teachers. During their latest strike, teachers vowed that they would not return to work until they were paid their dues in full.

After talks with the government, SINTA justified calling off the strike by saying the demand for immediate payment was "unworkable and the two parties will endeavour to have all the money paid by June." To head off any future action by teachers if this promise is not kept, SINTA added that the government would work with the union to create a taskforce to address pay and other issues facing teachers.



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