

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 April 2013

Hong Kong port workers maintain strike action

Around 450 outsourced contract workers for port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd (HIT) are continuing a sit-in strike, begun on March 28, to demand a 20 percent pay increase and resolution of other long-standing issues. Over 200 strikers and 400 supporters are picketing the headquarters of HIT's parent company Hutchison Whampoa at the Cheung Kong Centre in Central Hong Kong.

However, the Union of Hong Kong Dockers is preparing to sell out the workers. On Tuesday, a union spokesman told the media it was willing to "adjust" the pay demand if employers put their promise to improve working conditions in black and white. 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.

HIT's millionaire owner Li Ka-shing has insisted that the dispute be resolved by the contractors. The Hong Kong Shippers Council is diverting traffic to ports on mainland China, where HIT also operates berths.

Bangladesh: Union shuts down Chittagong Port strike

The Lighter Vessel Workers Union called an end to a 16-day strike by workers on lighter vessels at Bangladesh's main sea port in Chittagong on April 20, forcing workers to accept a reduced pay claim and no resolution of other issues. Workers walked off the job on April 5 after vessel owners failed to honour a commitment they had made in January to increase salaries and allowances by 20 percent. More than 300 ships were stranded at the port waiting to unload about 1.4 million tonnes of cargo.

At a meeting with vessel owners and the shipping minister, union leaders settled for their offer of a 14 percent pay increase effective from January.

India: Maharashtra auto workers end strike

The 1,600 striking employees of car manufacturer Mahindra and Mahindra (M&M) in Nashik, Maharashtra returned to work on April 22. Their 14-day strike had stopped the production of 1,100 engines per day, affecting five M&M vehicle assembly plants in Kandivili, Chakan, Haridwar, Faridabad and Nashik.

Workers downed tools at the company's Igatpuri engine plant on April 8 to demand the reinstatement of two suspended workers, one of whom was a union delegate. The union rejected M&M management's proposal that the suspended workers would be reinstated only after the strike was called off. Following talks with the union on April 21, Mahindra Group management agreed to reinstate the sacked workers and drop charges against them.

Andhra Pradesh tourism strike in third week

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.

In response, the state government has terminated at least 580 strikers. In frustration, 70 workers moved their protest onto the streets of Vijayawada on April 22.

Last October, the AP Tourism Contract, Manpower, Daily Wage Employees and Workers Union, affiliated with the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), ended strike action after the government gave a false promise to improve wages.

Andhra Pradesh hospital workers strike

Close to 1,200 housekeeping workers at the Nizam's Institute of Medical Sciences (NIMS), in Andhra Pradesh's capital Hyderabad, stopped work for the day on April 22 in a pay dispute. The strike followed 48 days of protests to demand permanent jobs and promotions that would increase wages from 6,700 rupees (\$US134) a month to 10,000 rupees. Strikers held a procession from the NIMS Millennium Block to the hospital's entrance, where effigies of the hospital management were burnt.

Indian insurance workers oppose privatisation

As part of a nationwide campaign, workers from four public sector general insurance companies held a lunchtime protest at the United India Insurance Company office in Hyderabad on April 22. They demanded that the Indian government withdraw the Insurance Bill 2008, which allows for the sale of the insurance companies. Life Insurance Corporation (LIC) employees held a similar protest in Pudukottai, Tamil Nadu.

The protests were organised by the All India Insurance Employees Association and the Hyderabad Region General Insurance Employees Association.

Karnataka transport workers protest over dismissals

Workers sacked by the Karnataka State Road Transport Corporation (KSRTC) staged a protest outside its office in Bangalore on April 22. They demanded a halt to the dismissal of conductors when a passenger was found without a ticket or for other minor mistakes. The labour courts have passed judgment in "favour" of many of the sacked workers, yet around 2,000 KSRTC employees are dismissed every year.

One protesting conductor said he had been unemployed since being dismissed in 2004. Protesters said that they had approached several government ministers, seeking their intervention, but they had been turned away.

Sri Lankan graphite mine workers end strike

On April 18, 40 workers at the state-owned Kahatagaha Graphite Lanka mine ended a 24-hour hunger strike inside the 1,200-foot deep mine after the government agreed to demands that included permanent employment, an improved recruitment system, and a 1,000-rupee new year festival bonus.

The mine employs around 100 miners on a daily wage of just 638 rupees (\$US5), while new recruits get 498 rupees. They get 20 grams of milk powder, sugar and tea leaves per day. If working deep inside the mine, they receive a daily 10-rupee allowance. The mine produces around 100 metric tonnes per month, worth 275,000 rupees per tonne.

Philippines communications workers protest

Around 80 Philippine Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) workers, formerly employed by Digital Telecommunications Philippines (Digitel), have been picketing the PLDT main office in Davao since April 11. They are demanding the reinstatement of 13 workers and the negotiation of a new collective bargaining agreement (CBA), as per a Supreme Court order last October.

PLDT recently acquired full ownership of Digitel, which was a

PLDT subsidiary, then shut it down and integrated its operation into PLDT's. According to the Digitel Employees Union (DEU), more than 300 Digitel employees were retrenched and replaced with contract workers, but 87 DEU members rejected the redundancy offers.

South Australian paramedics take industrial action

In a dispute spanning nearly two years, ambulance paramedics delivering patients to the Flinders Medical Centre emergency ward in Adelaide have placed bans on completing patients' billing paperwork, beginning April 22. The paramedics say too many patients are being delayed in ambulances at the hospital.

Last May, paramedics implemented a 24-hour ban on paperwork after a seriously ill patient with internal bleeding was left in an ambulance for over 40 minutes. The Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) had called off proposed industrial action in September 2011 after the state Labor government's health minister promised that new hospital renovations would end the delays that sometimes caused eight ambulances to "ramp" outside the hospital.

In July 2012, the government agreed to implement all 52 recommendations of an inquiry into the running of the Flinders facility, but the problem has persisted.

New Zealand steel plant workers walk out

On April 23, workers at Mercer Stainless steel production plants in Christchurch and New Plymouth walked off the job for 24 hours to protest management's plans to slash redundancy and annual leave entitlements in a new work agreement. According to the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), an agreement was earlier reached in mediation talks but the company reneged on the deal. Workers have implemented a ban on overtime and threatened further strike action.

Rockgas drivers plan to strike

Drivers for Rockgas, the consumer natural gas arm of Contact Energy, planned to strike in Auckland for an indefinite period on April 25 to demand pay rates comparable to other drivers in their industry. In addition, drivers complained that under their work agreement the company can dismiss an injured worker after six weeks. The FIRST Union has proposed changing this to three months.



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