

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 May 2013

Hong Kong port strike enters second month

Around 450 outsourced contract workers for port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd (HIT) have been on strike since March 28, to demand a pay increase and resolution of other long-standing issues. On May Day, over 3,000 protesters marched to the headquarters of HIT's parent company Hutchison Whampoa at the Cheung Kong Centre in Central Hong Kong to support 200 HIT strikers picketing the building.

Despite some workers not having had a pay increase for over a decade, the Union of Hong Kong Dockers, affiliated with the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions, told the media this week it was willing to accept a "single digit" pay increase with "fringe benefits". Workers had already rejected an offer from the subcontract companies of a 7 percent pay increase with 2 percent benefits. Even if the workers' original demand for a 23 percent pay increase were granted, they would still earn less than in 1995 after inflation was taken into account.

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 terminal has restored operations to 90 percent capacity after hiring scab labour. The HIT Group Employees General Union, which covers 300 dock workers directly hired by HIT, has not opposed the use of scab labour.

Laid-off workers in Taiwan maintain protest

Over 200 workers laid-off by four bankrupt companies 16 years ago are maintaining a sit-in protest, begun on February 7, at the Council of Labor Affairs (COA) in Taipei. They are protesting COA's demand that they repay compensation received from the government when they lost their jobs. COA added interest and fines to the repayments. In desperation, the protesters launched a hunger strike on April 28.

In early February, the laid-off workers occupied Platform 3 at the Taipei Railway Station to publicise their grievance. Forty of the 200 protesters lay on the tracks, delaying 15 trains, before over 200 police were called in to evict them.

Many factories in the textile or electronics industries closed in 1996, leaving hundreds of laid-off workers without retirement payouts or months of unpaid wages. After a series of demonstrations, that included a hunger strike, the COA gave the laid-off workers retirement payouts as loans, and promised that it would ask the workers' employers to repay the debts. However, beginning last year, all workers who accepted the loans were asked to repay them, and those unable to repay them were sued.

South Korea: Hyundai workers end overtime ban

Around 45,000 members of the Hyundai workers union will end an eight-week ban on weekend overtime work on May 4, after management agreed to increase the overtime rate by 42 percent. The ban cost the company more than \$US900 million in production losses.

However, Hyundai agreed to the overtime rate increase on the basis that the new system would boost Hyundai's weekend productivity by 46 percent by increasing work hours by three hours per weekend. Following ongoing demands from workers, Hyundai had introduced a new shift system for its South Korean plants in March, ending decades-old overnight work.

The company still refuses to convert contract workers into full-time employees. Hyundai has about 8,000 temporary workers and promised to offer 3,500 of them permanent jobs until 2016, but workers are demanding that all should be permanent workers.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

More than 2,000 striking workers at the Hung Wah I garment factory in Por Sen Chey, Phnom Penh protested outside the plant on April 26 over allegations the company had refused to pay termination entitlements to outgoing workers. The Free Trade Union demanded a \$US150 termination bonus for each year of service but management refused to offer above \$20. Strikers have also complained that management had failed to issue many workers with employment contracts, which would deny their legal right to termination bonuses.

Phnom Penh clothing workers protest over sacked union leader

On April 29, 300 D&L Ultimate garment workers walked off the job and protested outside the factory in Phnom Penh to demand the reinstatement of a worker who was sacked after the company learned he had been elected as the leader of a newly formed union in the factory.

According to a Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union spokesman, the worker was sacked after he presented the factory's management with an 18-point charter of demands. Strikers said they would remain outside the factory until the worker was reinstated and the charter of demands accepted.

India: Andhra Pradesh tourism workers maintain strike

Andhra Pradesh Tourism Development Corporation (APTDC) employees are maintaining strike action begun on April 8 to demand regularisation and pay parity with state government employees. Tourism workers across the state—including 260 daily wage workers, 400 contract employees and 1,200 manpower employees—receive meagre salaries of between 3,000 and 5,000 rupees (less than \$US100) a month.

After terminating 580 strikers last week, the APTDC divisional manager was sacked because he failed to enforce a government order to sack all striking workers. 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 steel plant workers protest

The workers of state-owned Visakhapatnam Steel Plant in Andhra Pradesh downed tools and protested inside the plant on April 29 to demand wage revision and introduction of a pension scheme. An official of the Steel Progressive Employees Union, affiliated with the Centre for Indian Trade Unions, said management had failed to implement the wage revision that had been due for 16 months.

Indonesian mine workers in West Papua on strike

Over 1,100 construction workers employed by three contract companies building extensions to the giant Grasberg gold and copper mine, operated by US-based Freeport-McMoRan, in the Indonesian province of West Papua have been on strike since April 30 to demand better pay. They have threatened a month-long strike. An official of the Mamika union said many workers earned just 7,000 rupiah (\$US0.72) an hour.

As of 2012, Freeport employed just over 24,000 workers at its Grasberg mine, about half of whom were contractors. A three-month strike over wages by 9,000 workers directly employed by Freeport crippled production at the mine in 2011 and only ended once the firm agreed to increase wages from \$1.50 an hour to \$7.80 an hour. However, the settlement fell far short of the workers' original demand for pay parity—\$17.50 an hour—with other Freeport mines around the world.

Australian shipbuilding workers down tools

Some 600 workers of the heavy engineering and shipbuilding firm Forgas, with plants in Newcastle, Sydney and Brisbane, walked off the job for four hours on May 2 in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The action followed a deadlock in negotiations with the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union since the old agreement expired in March.

A union spokesman told the media that the main sticking points in negotiations were the addition of a dispute settlement clause and the consultation process. Workers gave management until May 8 to make an improved offer before further stoppages were called.

Forgas is building \$8 billion Hobart Class Air Warfare Destroyers for

the Australian military. The company operates 7 facilities throughout New South Wales and Queensland, including three strategic portside facilities.

Victorian construction workers protest

Up to 10,000 construction workers marched through central Melbourne on April 30 in a rally over the safety record of building company Grocon and inaction by the state government authority Worksafe over recent deaths. Contingents attended from building sites around the city as well as provincial centres such as Bendigo.

The demonstration marked the death of crane operator Bill Ramsay on a Grocon site in February and of three pedestrians when a wall collapsed on another Grocon site in March. A minute's silence was observed at each location.

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has been involved in a dispute with the company since August, demanding the appointment of CFMEU organisers as health and safety representatives on Grocon sites.

McDonald's workers in New Zealand strike

On April 30, as part of a nationwide campaign, Unite union members at the fast food giant McDonald's in Auckland walked off the job and picketed the Queen Street branch to demand higher wages in a new enterprise agreement. One hour into the protest, 20 police officers arrived and used force in an attempt to break the picket.

The action followed workers' rejection of McDonald's offer of a 25 cents an hour pay increase. Unite, representing 1,500 McDonald's employees, has merely demanded pay parity with workers at the restaurant chain KFC. KFC workers get a \$1 pay rise six months into the job, as opposed to the 25-cent pay rise after six months working at McDonald's.

Foodstuffs workers protest youth wage cuts

Employees at Foodstuffs distribution centres and the associated supermarket chain Pak'nSave held stopwork meetings on May 1 to discuss the National Party government's decision to reintroduce youth wages. One group of workers, represented by the FIRST union, held a picket outside the Pak'nSave store in Royal Oak, Auckland.

Under the youth wage scheme, employers can pay 16- and 17-year-olds just 20 percent of the official minimum wage for their first six months. New Zealand's minimum wage is only \$13.75 per hour.



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