

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 May 2013

Hong Kong dockworkers' union shuts down strike

Twenty-four hours after 450 striking outsourced contract workers for port operator Hongkong International Terminals Ltd (HIT) rejected a 9.8 percent pay rise offer and vowed to maintain their 40-day strike, leaders of the Union of Hong Kong Dock Workers (UHKD) over turned the workers' decision and accepted the employers offer. The union claimed that 66 percent of dockworkers surveyed agreed with the offer. The survey, however, included workers not involved in the walk out.

Dock workers, crane operators and stevedores downed tools and occupied the HIT berths on March 28, to demand a 23 percent pay increase, resolution of other long-standing issues and a collective bargaining agreement. Other issues included health and safety, degrading and unhygienic conditions, and pay parity with directly employed workers. Contract employees are forced to work 24-hour shifts without breaks, no fixed holidays and no formal meal periods. Many have not had a pay rise for over a decade.

Under the deal negotiated between the UHKD, the four contract companies and the government, workers' basic wage will increase to \$US7.70 an hour, effective from May 1. The four contractors gave written commitments to improve safety as well as providing crane operators the right to stop for lunch and toilet breaks. Ignoring widespread opposition by its members, UHKD stated that the outcome was a "real" victory, claiming it "laid the basis for the union to further engage the contractors and HIT in good faith in the future."

South Korea: Hyundai workers reject union deal

A significant number of workers involved in a dispute over weekend work at Hyundai Motor have rejected a deal between the union and the company to end an eight-week ban on weekend overtime. Workers condemned the union negotiators for accepting an overtime rate 17,000 won (\$US15) below their original demand of 450,000 won (\$US400) for a total of 17 hours worked.

Hyundai previously introduced a new shift system for its South Korean plants in March, ending decades-old overnight work, but management increased the weekend work hours from 14 to 17 hours and refused to pay overtime rates for the additional hours. Hyundai claimed that the ban on weekend work stopped the production of 63,000 vehicles, costing \$1.81 billion.

Laid-off workers in Taiwan continue hunger strike

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 (CLA) in Taipei. Several protesters have been on hunger strike since April 28. They are protesting CLA's demand that they repay compensation received from the government when they lost their jobs. CLA added interest and fines to the repayments.

Scores of textile and electronics plants closed in 1996, leaving hundreds of laid-off workers without retirement payouts or months of unpaid wages. The CLA gave the laid-off workers retirement payouts as loans, and promised that it would ask the workers' employers to repay the debts. Last year, however, workers who accepted the loans were asked to repay them and those unable to do so were sued.

Government officials have refused to meet the protesters, stating they have no intentions of changing policy.

Bangladeshi garment workers from collapsed Rana Plaza demand dues

Almost 1,000 survivors of the five garment factories in the collapsed building Rana Plaza in Savar staged a sit down demonstration on the Dhaka-Aricha highway on May 7 to demand four months' outstanding salaries promised by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA). Protesters accused factory authorities of trying to pay just two months.

Workers ended the demonstration when Dhaka district deputy commissioner and a BGMEA claimed they would be paid the full amount. Bangladeshi garment workers earn just \$US38 a month.

New Delhi teachers demand job regularisation

On May 6, teachers of Academic for Action and Development at the Delhi University demonstrated outside the Vice Regal Lodge to demand job regularisation of around 4,000 teachers. The issue is a long-standing one and many teachers would lose their jobs as a result of a proposed new four year programme.

Tamil Nadu: Part-time teachers rally for job regularisation

Thousands of part-time special teachers in government middle, high and higher secondary schools, appointed to villages throughout Tamil Nadu under a government scheme called Universalisation of Elementary Education, marched in Tiruchy on May 6 to demand job regularisation and better pay and conditions. The teachers complained that they are only paid 5,000 rupees (\$US100) a month because this meagre amount is determined by the individual village education committees. The teachers want the central government to deposit salaries direct into their bank accounts and preference for future vacancies that arise for regular postings.

Punjab teachers demand salary

Around 150 teachers employed in Punjab state under one of many Centre [government] Sponsored Schemes (CSS) rallied in Bathinda on May 5 to demand 13 weeks of unpaid salaries. Police detained all the demonstrators entering government premises. The rally followed a protest three days earlier in which 50 teachers were detained by police. An estimated 500 CSS teachers have been teaching at government schools across the state without regular salaries.

Sri Lankan doctors on national strike

Some 1,500 Registered Medical Officers and Assistant Medical Officers began a national strike on May 6, affecting 1,000 government hospitals, including peripheral, district and rural hospitals. The action followed a work-to-rule campaign which began on April 8 to demand improved allowances. Doctors ended a 24-hour national stoppage last October after the government falsely promised to negotiate pay and allowances. The latest strike was sparked after the government failed to honour a previous commitment to pay a monthly communication allowance by April. According to doctors, issues over allowance payments have been in dispute for six years.

New South Wales coal loader workers to strike

More than 200 members of five unions at Australia's largest coal export terminal at Port Waratah Coal Services (PWCS) in Newcastle, north of Sydney, have voted to strike on May 12 after nine months of negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. The industrial action will also include an unlimited number of bans associated with shift changeover and overtime.

The PWCS plans to widen the use of contractor labour at its terminals. Unions involved in the dispute are the Australian Manufacturing Workers' Union, Australian Workers' Union, CEPU for communications and electrical staff, the Maritime Union of Australia and the Transport Workers' Union.

Thermal and coking coal from Anglo American, BHP Billiton, Idemitsu Australia Resources, Rio Tinto, Xstrata and Yancoal is exported from the PWCS.

Melbourne taxi drivers protest

Taxi drivers held mass blockades at Melbourne airport for two hours on May 3 and again on May 6 over an airport management decision to end the "short fare queue." This system allowed taxis to bypass the taxi holding yard and go directly to the terminal taxi rank if they had only received a short fare to a nearby suburb.

Drivers are routinely forced to queue for two to three hours in the yard with poor toilet and other facilities, often earn just \$2.50 an hour on short fares. Airport authorities responded to the protest by proposing a ticketing system for short fares.

Papua New Guinea LNG truck drivers strike

Drivers of contract trucking companies at the Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas (PNG LNG) project site in Hela province walked off the job for 24 hours on May 5 to protest dangerous and poorly maintained roads leading to the site. More than 60 semi-trailers sat idle at the Curtain Brothers camp in Tari during the walk out.

The industrial action began after two drivers were badly bashed and an escort vehicle was reportedly seized in the Southern Highlands province last weekend. The strikers want project developers—ExxonMobil and the national government—to immediately repair the roads because drivers have to slow down or stop on the Highlands Highway and face the danger of assault, robbery and looting.



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