Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 November 2014

Asia

South Korean shipbuilding workers strike

Over 10,000 workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world's largest shipbuilder, held a two-hour strike yesterday, the first strike at the company in 18 years. The almost unanimous vote for industrial action came after negotiations broke down on September 19.

The HHI employees want a 6.5 percent raise in basic pay and a one-off bonus equal to 10 weeks' wages. The shipbuilding workers rely on bonuses and overtime but the company started cutting overtime pay and bonuses. South Korean shipbuilders have been hit by a global economic slowdown and growing competition from Chinese rivals in recent years.

South Korean public sector workers protest against pension cuts

At least 120,000 public sector workers demonstrated in Yeouido Park, western Seoul, on October 1 to oppose plans by the ruling Saenuri Party and the Korean Pension Association (KPA) to reform the public sector pension scheme. Members of around 50 government unions attended the rally.

According to the Korean Government Employees' Union, public servants' monthly pensions will be cut by 34 percent but premiums increased by 43 percent. The age at which public sector workers can receive the pension will also be lifted from 56 to 65 by 2033.

The KPA and the ruling party claim that the reforms are necessary to reduce the public sector pension fund's deficit by 43 percent by 2016. Workers fear this is a move to force them into private pension schemes.

India: Unilever factory workers walk out

Close to 450 workers and relatives of Hindustan Unilever Limited (HUL), India's largest consumer goods company, demonstrated outside the firm's headquarters in Mumbai on October 31. The workers were demanding higher wages and the reinstatement of 15 colleagues they claim were fired illegally.

HUL workers from factories in Dabra and Nagar Haveli said that their wages were less than workers from consumer goods companies such as Nestlé and Colgate. The strikers also objected to the company's "management sponsored" unions.

The strike was called by the Hindustan Lever Employees Federation, which covers over 4,000 workers at 18 Unilever facilities. HUL employs 6,500 permanent workers at its 30 facilities across the country.

Government of India Press workers down tools

Government of India Press employees downed tools in Gandhinagar, the capital of Gujarat in west India, on October 31 after learning that the government wanted to corporatise the company. Workers said that the government previously planned to shut the company but after opposition from employees decided to convert it into a corporation. The workers are members of the Government of India Press Employees' Union.

One million Indian bank workers to strike again over pay

For the third time in eleven months, the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), representing over one million government and private bank workers, has called a 24-hour national strike in opposition to planned restructuring and to demand a pay rise. The walkout, which is planned for November 12, follows a two-day strike in February and one-day strike last December.

The UFBU is demanding a 23 percent pay rise (reduced from the union's 40 percent claim last December). The Indian Banks Association has offered just 11 percent. Government bank employees, who have not received a wage increase for almost six years, were due to receive a rise in November 2012. They are also demanding improved pensions, better healthcare benefits and five-day banking. The bank workers are also opposed to plans to merge several nationalised banks and allow foreign institutions to compete with the State Bank of India.

Pakistan International Airline employees strike for pay increase

On October 27, employees of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA), Grades 1 to 4, walked out in Lahore to protest the company's failure to pay a previously agreed 20 percent wage increase. PIA pilots in Karachi struck last month to demand six months' unpaid overseas-stay allowances. About 350 pilots have not been paid the allowances, which are usually paid in foreign currencies.

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PIA is one of the many state-run entities earmarked for privatisation. The government wants to sell a 26 percent stake in the company, which is currently being assessed for restructuring. Last week, Oil and Gas Development Company Limited workers blocked the Indus Highway outside the Nashpa dehydration plant in protest against the proposed privatisation of the company.

The International Monetary Fund is demanding that the Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz government step up privatisation of the country's public sector.

Bangladeshi tea plantation workers maintain strike

Kalagool tea plantation workers in Sylhet have been on strike since July to demand a minimum daily wage increase from 69 taka ($US1) to 300 taka and for it to be revised every six months in line with inflation. Their union has offered to accept a 120-taka daily wage. The current minimum wage was increased in 2008, up from 30 taka.

Tea plantation workers also want increased wage and non-wage benefits for all seasonal workers. While about 133,000 workers—50 percent of them women—are directly employed in the tea industry, about 500,000 are indirectly employed. The workers also want proper implementation of the current labour law regulations and a qualified medical physician, gynaecologist, trained nurse and ambulance be employed at each plantation.

The strikers allege that the police and "other vested parties" have filed about 20 cases against dozens of demonstrating tea plantation leaders.

Bangladesh transport workers protest

On October 3, transport workers in Bangladesh's northern district of Kurigram rallied in front of the district commissioner's office and threatened an indefinite strike if five demands were not met by November 8. The transport workers want appointment letters from the vehicle owners, higher monthly salaries for the drivers and their assistants and two festival bonuses.

Sri Lanka: Airport workers in Colombo strike

Ground workers at the Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA) in Colombo stopped work on November 5 over several demands. Around 2,000 passengers were stranded in the terminal as baggage belts stopped and several outgoing flights were delayed. The ground workers want an immediate 10,000-rupee salary rise, a comprehensive medical insurance scheme, expedited loan schemes and removal of the airport's security chief.

The Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya employees union, which is affiliated to the ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, called off the walkout at midday. The union is claiming that the aviation minister had agreed to an 8,000-rupee wage rise and other demands.

Cambodian garment workers ordered to end strike

More than 5,000 workers from the Grand Twins International garment factory in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district returned to work on October 30, following a directive from the Phnom Penh Municipal Court. Workers walked out on October 20 over 16 demands, including 5,000 riel ($US1.25) per day for lunch, $15 per month for travel and accommodation, and an end to forced overtime.

The workers have been in dispute with the company since 2006 when it changed its name from QMI to Grand Twins without providing any guarantee that they would not lose seniority, related benefits and potential severance pay.

Huey Chuen garment workers protest in Phnom Penh

For the third time in two months over 200 workers from the Huey Chuen garment factory in Meanchey district, Phnom Penh demonstrated outside the Ministry of Labour on November 3 to demand the reinstatement of 200 sacked colleagues and for the payment of outstanding seniority benefits after the company was renamed. Demonstrating workers blocked the road outside the ministry. The road was cleared after 30 minutes when workers were told by a ministry official that he would organise negotiations with factory representatives.

Over 1,000 Huey Chuen workers and other garment workers previously walked off the job to demand the monthly minimum wage be increased from $US100 to $177. Unions representing garment workers in the Labour Advisory Committee have ignored the $177 demand, indicating that they would accept $140. Government and employers' representatives have recommended $120 and $110 respectively.

Australia and the Pacific

Public sector workers protest in Canberra

Hundreds of federal public servants held a lunchtime protest in Australia's capital Canberra on November 6 for new work agreements. The agreements would cover 160,000 public sector workers in 70 departments. According to the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), employees at several government agencies have been "offered" no pay increase, despite inflation currently running at 2.3 percent. For many public sector workers this equates to a $2,500 to $3,000 a year pay cut.

A CPSU official said several departments also want to remove the legally binding 15.4 percent employers' contribution to public service workers superannuation. "We could see a cut to superannuation, a cut to leave, a cut to other conditions that equates to a 5 or 6 percent pay cut," the official said.

The CPSU union, which has consistently refused to fight any of the federal government's previous job cuts and attacks on working conditions, wants a 12 percent pay increase over the three-year agreements.

About 15,000 public sector workers in Medicare, Centrelink and Child Support, as part of the Department of Human Services (DHS), are currently deciding whether to take industrial action ranging from bans through to a 24-hour strike.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott told the media that no public servant could expect the 1.5 percent annual increase granted this week to Australian

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Defence Force employees. Soldiers have denounced the pay rise as “insultingly low.”

The Liberal-National government plans to axe 16,500 public service positions over three years as part of its budget savings measures. Eight thousand of these jobs have been eliminated in the past year.

New South Wales Catholic school teachers to stop work

School teachers and support staff at Catholic schools across New South Wales will attend one-hour stop work meetings at their respective schools on November 10. Independent Education Union (IEU) delegates will update teachers on the long-running dispute for a new enterprise agreement.

IEU members began limited industrial action in June, after 16 months of negotiations failed to reach agreement. Teachers are concerned that a proposed agreement will increase class sizes and teaching hours. Class student numbers are capped under the current agreement. The proposed agreement increases face-to-face teaching for high school teachers by two hours per week and makes no reference to class sizes.

The IEU has lodged over 30 claims nationwide, including a pay rise, entitlements and classifications on par with government schools, and minimum 12-month contracts for all staff.

While the AEU claims that the Catholic school employers were willing to abandon some aspects of their proposed enterprise agreement, most issues, including workloads, remained unresolved. The last agreement between the IEU and the Catholic Education Office was signed in 2009.

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