

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 December 2014

South Korea shipbuilding workers continue strike action

For the third time in as many weeks, workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world's largest shipbuilder, walked off the job at the Ulsan plant for four hours on Thursday in a dispute for a pay increase. HHI and the 18,000-member union have had 58 rounds of talks since June.

HHI management sent letters to all workers prior to last week's strike declaring that the company had made its final offer and there would be no further negotiations.

The union wants the monthly base pay increased by 6.5 percent (132,000 won) and a one-off bonus equal to 10 weeks' wages. The company has only offered a 37,000-won raise, a 5 million-won (\$US4,500) bonus, and to extend the retirement age from 58 to 60. The union has also called on HHI to drop a performance-based annual salary system, which pays bonuses according to employees' performance ratings. The bonuses were previously paid to all workers.

School teachers in China strike over low wages

There have been at least 30 strikes and protests by school teachers in China over the last three months, predominately over low pay, social security, pension irregularities and wages in arrears. At least 12 cities and provinces have been affected by strikes. Most of the protests have been in smaller provincial cities and the poorer inland areas of China.

In the north-eastern province of Heilongjiang, 20,000 teachers walked out in cities and districts around the capital Harbin last month complaining of low pay and pension irregularities. A teacher from Shuangcheng told the media that after teaching for 25 years, his monthly salary was just 2,498 yuan (\$US406) compared to junior teachers in Guangzhou and Shanghai who earn around 6,000 yuan a month. The Shuangcheng teachers want their salaries increased to around 4,000 yuan and a living allowance and food and transport costs with an additional subsidy for class teachers.

In nearby Zhaodong city, a strike by teachers forced authorities to increase monthly pay by an average \$125.

The increase in the number of teachers' strikes this semester reflects growing desperation felt by many teachers over stagnant wages and uncertainty about their pensions.

Cathay Pacific pilots begin work-to-rule

In a dispute for a wage increase, around 1,700 pilots of Cathay Pacific Airways in Hong Kong, New Zealand and the United States are refusing to work on rostered days off and will not report for duty 30 minutes to one hour prior to commencing a shift, which is the norm.

Hong Kong Aircrew Officers Association members at Cathay Pacific rejected an offer from the airline last month for a 4 percent pay increase this year, 3 percent in 2015 and 3 percent in 2016. Ninety-two percent of the union's 2,100 pilots voted in favour of work-to-rule action this month. Their action follows a year of failed negotiations.

In an attempt to head off industrial action during the Christmas holiday period, the airline on November 26 suddenly announced a 4 percent salary hike retroactive from January 1 and running through to April 30 next year. Cathay Pacific has offered 90 percent of its Hong Kong-based staff, including ground and cabin crew, pay rises averaging 4.5 percent.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Some 1,600 employees at the Now Corp garment factory in Kandal province in Cambodia's south walked out on December 1 and are maintaining a protest outside the factory with several demands. Workers want \$15 for accommodation or transportation, \$26 per month for lunch and for pregnant workers to leave 15 minutes before the workday ends.

Meanwhile, around 100 employees of UDS Garment in Phnom Penh protested outside the factory on Monday following the firing of three Free Trade Union (FTU) representatives. Management gave no reasons for the dismissal of the workers. The factory employs 255 people.

In addition to reinstating the FTU representatives, the striking workers demanded 4,000 riel (\$1) per day for lunch and full payment of the newly-approved \$128 monthly minimum wage. The FTU persuaded strikers to end the walkout after it said it would send a letter containing their demands to the ministry of labour.

Indonesia: Workers in Central Java protest factory closures

Hundreds of workers from 22 factories in Semarang, Central Java converged on the Semarang municipal office on Monday to oppose a local bylaw that will force the closure of their factories. The local authority wants to clear the land to allow for other developments.

According to the Simongan Workers Communication Forum (FPKS), at least 12,000 workers will lose their jobs. The factories' operating permits are to be terminated at the end of December.

India: Public sector bank workers resume strike action

Public sector bank workers across India walked off the job on relay one-day stoppages from December 2 through to December 5. The strike was in protest against planned restructuring and for a pay rise. According to the All India Bank Employees' Association, at least 22,000 branches were affected on the first day of the strikes. The United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU), representing nine unions, is coordinating the action.

The UFBU wants a 23 percent pay rise for public and private sector bank employees—a reduction in the union's 40 percent claim last December—and a revision of pay scales. 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.

Contract teachers in Punjab protest

Contract teachers employed at several education schemes in India's north-west state of Punjab demonstrated in Ludhiana on November 30 to demand permanent employment, payment of three months' unpaid wages and the withdrawal of First Information Reports (FIRs) issued against them by the police. A teachers' spokesman told the media, "We are more than 14,000 teachers across Punjab and some have been employed for six years but without regularisation."

Teachers' demands also include six months' maternity leave for female teachers, up from the current three months, and remuneration for extra work, such as updating electoral voters' lists and other associated duties.

Pakistan: College teachers in Punjab province on strike

Contract lecturers and other staff at three government commerce colleges in Punjab's Toba Tek Singh district have been on strike since November 25 to demand permanent employment and an increase in salaries and allowances. They have not had a wage rise in over two years. The strikers said that their services had been shifted from the Punjab Technical Department to the Punjab Higher Education Department, which had affected their salaries and allowances. They vowed to remain on strike until their demands were met.

Sindh health professionals in state-run hospitals protest privatisation

Doctors, paramedics and nurses at government hospitals in Pakistan's Sindh province boycotted duties at outpatient departments on December 1 in protest against the government's plan to privatise health services. In Karachi, where the boycott was observed in all major hospitals for two hours, a demonstration was held outside the Press Club.

Protesters alleged that the provincial government is planning to privatise all state-run health facilities, from basic health units to hospitals. The

Sindh Health Employees Action Committee said it would be holding a meeting on December 3 to discuss further action.

Bangladeshi stevedores on strike

Stevedore workers at 16 private jetties on the Karnaphuli River in Chittagong began indefinite strike action on November 30 over nine demands, including a 50 percent wage increase. Loading and unloading of lighter vessels at the jetties has stopped.

A spokesman from their union, the Chittagong Ghat Gudam Sramik Sangram Parishad, alleged that labour contractors had failed to honour an agreement reached in January 2012 to increase wages by 20 percent each year. The union sent letters with workers' demands to the Lighterage Contractor Association and Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry but they failed to respond.

Department of Veterans' Affairs workers vote for strike

At least 95 percent of the 2,000 staff at Australia's Department of Veterans' Affairs, which oversees support and payments for military veterans, has endorsed future industrial action over pay and conditions. They are the latest group of federal public servants who have signalled their willingness to strike over stalled enterprise agreement negotiations with the Liberal-National federal government. In mid-November, close to 80 percent of the 15,000 workers at Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency voted in favour of future action.

Workplace agreements covering 160,000 public sector workers in over 70 departments are up for renewal. 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–\$3,000 a year pay cut.

Several departments want to reduce entitlements such as superannuation, leave and other conditions, which would equate to a 5 or 6 percent pay cut, according to the CPSU. The union, which has systematically imposed job cuts and management productivity demands made by all previous Labor and Liberal-National governments, has called for a 12 percent pay increase over the three-year life of the enterprise agreements.

New Zealand port workers vote for strike

Over 200 workers at Lyttelton Port of Christchurch (LPC), on New Zealand's South Island, have voted to begin industrial action on December 17, following four months of failed negotiations for a new work agreement. Members of the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU), making up half of the front-line workers at the port, will not perform overtime and begin a series of limited rolling stoppages.

An RMTU representative said the main unresolved issues were productivity and equity. The union is trying to bring cargo handlers at LPC's inland port at Woolston into the collective agreement. Woolston workers are currently paid \$6 per hour less than their colleagues at Lyttelton.

New Zealand hospital kitchen workers protest

Food preparation workers from public hospitals in Auckland, North Shore, Waitakere, Middlemore and Greenlane picketed the Auckland City Hospital, on New Zealand's North Island, for two hours on Tuesday to oppose a proposal to outsource food preparation to a private company, with meals prepared off site. The protesting workers are members of the Service and Food Workers Union and fear that they will lose their jobs if food preparation is privatised.



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