

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 February 2015

Chinese electronics manufacturing workers on strike

More than 3,000 employees at networking equipment manufacturer H3C Technologies, in eastern China's Zhejiang province, have been on strike for over three weeks against Hewlett-Packard (HP) plans to restructure the company. HP plans to merge with H3C and then sell part of the new company to a new owner.

Employees fear that new management will "clean out" employees in the sales and marketing departments. Workers are demanding reinstatement of a sales manager fired last month. They also want HP representatives excluded from workers' talks with H3C management.

South Korea: McDonald's workers protest

Part-time employees of McDonald's fast food outlets in Seoul have been holding protests outside and inside various McDonald's restaurants since last November over low wages and working conditions. On February 7, part-time workers, led by the Arbeit Workers Union (AWU) demonstrated at McDonald's outlets in Sinchon neighbourhood and at Yonsei University to demand higher wages, fair working conditions and union rights.

The protests erupted after the unfair termination of Lee Ga-hyun, 21, a part-time worker at McDonald's Yeokgok branch in Bucheon last November. The AWU claimed that the company arbitrarily adjusted rosters to save money and often failed to pay wages on time. Most McDonald's workers in Korea earn a minimum hourly wage of 5,580 won (\$US5.10). The protesting workers want their wages increased to 10,000 won an hour.

Ssangyong auto workers ordered to end protest

Two former employees of Chinese-owned auto manufacturer Ssangyong Motor have been protesting on a 70-metre chimney at the company's plant in Pyeongtaek since December 14 to demand reinstatement.

Kim Jeong-wook and Lee Chang-geun are among more than 2,000 workers who were laid off in 2009, following a drop in car sales. The chimney protesters are supported by 150 former workers who are also demanding reinstatement. This week, Suwon District Court ordered Kim and Lee to end their protest by February 19 or each face 500,000 won (\$US451) per day.

India's public sector bank employees to strike

Following failed wage negotiations with the Indian Banks' Association (IBA), the United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) has called a national three-day strike, starting on February 25. The UFBU represents over 800,000 bank sector workers organised in 12 unions and associations.

Last week the IBA offered to increase its wage offer from 12.5 percent to 13 percent. This is far short of workers' original demand for a 40 percent pay rise. Bank employees, who have not received an increase for almost six years, were due for a pay rise in November 2012. The UFBU has progressively reduced its wage claim during negotiations over the past year, down to 19.5 percent.

Bank workers also want improved pensions, better healthcare benefits, five-day banking and voiced opposition to plans to merge several nationalised banks and allow foreign institutions to compete with the State Bank of India. The UFBU has threatened hold an indefinite strike from March 16 in negotiations fail.

West Bengal tea estate workers protest

Over 350,000 workers from 300 tea estates at Darjeeling and Dooars Hills in India's northern state of West Bengal held a one-day strike on February 9 to demand a wage rise. The walkout, which followed limited strikes last year, was called by a joint forum of 27 unions led by the United Trade Union Congress.

The tea unions, the state government and the planters hold talks to negotiate the minimum wage every three years. The tea workers were due for a wage rise last April. There have been six failed meetings this time round with the next meeting scheduled for February 24.

While the state minimum daily wage for unskilled agricultural workers is 206 rupees (\$US3.40), tea estate workers are only paid 95 rupees. The United Tea Workers Forum wants the minimum daily wage set at 322 rupees. The government has offered a 40-rupee rise, phased in over three years, but the plantation owners want it limited to 21 rupees, phased in over three years.

Uttarakhand workers protest against police brutalisation

Workers from various labor unions and social organisations in Haridwar city protested on February 8 against police attacks on 100 striking battery manufacturing workers the day before in the Integrated Industrial Estate at Roshanabad.

Eveready Battery Company workers had been protesting outside the District Magistrates office over the dismissal of 122 workers during a two-month wage dispute. Police assaulted the striking workers with canes.

Pakistani database workers end strike

National Database and Registration Authority (Nadra) workers ended a five-day protest outside the Karachi Press Club on February 7. The demonstration was part of a nationwide strike over working conditions and allowances. The All Pakistan Nadra Employees Union said that if the government failed to grant their demands within a week there would be protests at the Nadra headquarters in Islamabad on March 9 and a pending strike and office closures in April.

Nadra workers have been campaigning for a year to demand a service structure, medical facilities and payment of a medical allowance in line with other government employees.

Punjab government doctors protest

Doctors from several teaching hospitals in Lahore stopped work and demonstrated in the city on February 10 over delays in the implementation of a proposed service structure promised by the Punjab government three years ago. The protest spilled onto Ferozepur Road, a main traffic route in the city, disrupting transport for several hours. The doctors' action followed street demonstrations in Faisalabad on February 7 and several protests last year.

According to the Young Doctors Association's Punjab chapter, the government failed to honour an agreement reached in 2012 that ended a mass doctors' protest. In the draft agreement, 4,000 doctors with five or more years' experience were to be promoted to grade 18. Other demands included pay rises for medical officers, postgraduate doctors and house officers.

Qantas unions accept 18-month pay freeze

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) and the Australian Federation of Air Pilots (AFAP), representing ground crews in Qantas and Jetstar pilots respectively, have imposed an 18-month pay freeze in return for maintaining current conditions and vague job security promises during the four-year work agreements.

About 70 percent of the 2,600 TWU members at Qantas endorsed the wage-freeze deal, which covers baggage handlers, catering staff, cleaners and ramp workers. Although the agreement has a clause that "maintains the prohibition on compulsory redundancies," more than half the Qantas workforce is part time and not covered by the clause.

Last December, about 90 percent of AFAP pilots at Qantas' subsidiary Jetstar rejected an 18-month pay freeze. This week the AFAP announced that it had called off a ballot for proposed strike action and entered negotiations with the company on an 18-month pay freeze in return for 3 percent annual increases in the final two and a half years of the deal.

Jetstar pilots have not received a pay rise for three years and, according to their union, are paid significantly less than their counterparts at Tigerair, Virgin and Qantas. Jetstar's wage freeze demand is part of

management plans to axe 5,000 airline jobs and cut \$2 billion from operating costs over the next three years. Most of the targeted jobs will be eliminated by the middle of this year.

Victorian train driver mentors resign position over lost wages

Suburban train drivers employed by Metro Trains in Melbourne, Victoria have resigned from their position as mentor drivers following the company's refusal to pay outstanding wages to trainee drivers. The mentor drivers also reject plans for repair staff to drive trains inside maintenance facilities. The boycott has forced the company to suspend much of its trainee program leaving the rail system short of drivers.

Sixty-six of the 103 mentor drivers have resigned from their positions. The Rail Tram and Bus, Union (RTBU) claims that more than \$2 million is owed to trainees who have had their wages frozen despite being on the job for more than a year. An RTBU spokesperson said members are concerned that Metro wants to create a new, less-skilled and lower-paid driver group.

Victorian supermarket workers strike

Meat workers employed by the Coles supermarket chain in Victoria struck for 24 hours on Wednesday over the company's attack on wages and conditions in a proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Their action follows a one-day strike on February 6 over the issue.

Australian Meat Industry Employees Union (AMIEU) members are concerned that a workplace agreement between a rival union—the Shop Distribution and Allied Employees Association (SDA)—and Coles could reduce their existing wages and conditions. Under the SDA agreement all new supermarket meat department workers will be on lower wages and conditions than AMIEU members. Workers are concerned that Coles intends to use the SDA agreement to do away with skilled meat workers.

Under the proposed SDA agreement, which would cover all Coles' meat workers and truck drivers, penalty rates would be reduced or eliminated, weekend work made mandatory, sick pay reduced, rostered days off axed and cuts made to adult rates for young meat packers and cabinet attendants.

New South Wales power workers vote for strike/subhead

Workers at state-owned electricity network companies Ausgrid and Endeavour Energy in New South Wales have overwhelmingly voted in support of industrial action, including strikes and work bans, in a dispute for a new work agreement. The Electrical Trade Union (ETU) said the companies want to cut working conditions and entitlements. The union wants improved job security, protection of existing conditions, and a wage increase that keeps them on par with comparable companies interstate.

The companies operate and maintain the electricity network in Sydney, Newcastle, the Hunter Valley, Central Coast, Blue Mountains, parts of the Central West, Southern Highlands and the Illawarra. According to the ETU, the state government intends to eliminate 4,600 jobs from the network.

New Zealand fast food chain workers strike

Wendy's Hamburgers workers in Auckland walked off the job on February 10 and picketed the company's Royal Park restaurant in a dispute over public holidays. Workers insist that they are entitled to a day off in lieu for any public holidays worked.

The company claims that because the workers are on "zero-hour" contracts public holiday conditions do not apply. Zero-hour contracts do not guarantee any hours of work and employees are always on call.

McDonald's, KFC, Pizza Hut, Starbucks and Burger King also employ staff on these contracts with workers rostered anywhere from 3 to 40 hours a week. According to a Massey University study, two-thirds of employment in New Zealand is classed as casual, part-time or contract.

Papua New Guinea pilots' union accepts pay cut

At least 50 Air Niugini pilots have resigned after refusing to sign a new employment contract. The contract with Papua New Guinea's national flagship requires pilots to accept a 20 percent cut to their base pay or lose their jobs. While the National Airline Pilots Union claimed it had not been consulted over the contracts, which came into force on January 1, the union has not mobilised its membership to oppose the pay cut and defend the jobs.

Air Niugini said the contract was part of a cost-cutting restructure program and that management was reviewing the employment terms and conditions of all its workers.



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