

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 February 2015

Asia

South Korean shipbuilding workers accept pay deal

On February 16, more than 60 percent of 15,400 union members at South Korea's Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world's largest shipbuilder, approved a new wage agreement negotiated with the management and ending the 11-month dispute. While the union ended two months of limited strike action on December 31 after reaching a tentative agreement with HHI for a 2 percent pay rise along with other entitlements, the deal was rejected by workers who wanted a 6.5 percent pay increase.

The new agreement, however, is only slightly different from the company's previous offer. Like the last company offer, it includes a 2 percent basic pay increase, company stock worth 1.5 times the workers' base salaries, a 200,000-won gift certificate and paid leave on February 23.

Workers will also receive additional increases after a local court last week ruled that the company must treat regularly paid bonuses as regular wages, effectively increasing the baseline in calculating overtime and holiday shift pay as well as retirement pensions.

Nepalese telecom workers protest

Employees of the privately-owned United Telecom Ltd (UTL) in Kathmandu Valley have threatened industrial action if management failed to respond to workers' 14-point demand by February 18. The All Nepal Organisation of Bank, Finance Workers' Union—UTL Chapter lodged their claims in July but received no response from management.

The telecom workers want the company to increase wages, to issue appointment letters, as per Nepal labour law, to employees who have worked for more than 240 days and to withdraw management plans to cut 65 jobs,

The UTL union said action would begin with a four-hour strike next Tuesday, followed by blocking entry to the office of the CEO and the CFO on Wednesday and Thursday for four hours. If management fails to address their demands by Thursday, they have threatened an indefinite strike from Friday.

Their action follows protests last month that affected the company's telecom service outside Kathmandu Valley, international gateway service and internet service.

Pakistan: Punjab brick-kiln workers protest

Male and female brick-kiln workers on February 16 demonstrated at Gojra in Toba Tek Singh district to demand implementation of the government's minimum wage ruling. According to the government notification, kiln owners had to pay workers 888 rupees (\$US14.3) per 1,000 bricks.

The kiln workers were organised by the Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM), which has also demanded the distribution of social security cards. The LQM has threatened to escalate their protests if the minimum wage payment was not implemented by February 25.

Sri Lankan export processing zone workers strike

Shore to Shore and United Tobacco Processing employees at Sri Lanka's Katunayake Export Processing Zone (EPZ) struck on February 16 to demand a 2,500-rupees (\$US18.8) wage rise, in line with suggestions made by Sri Lanka's new finance minister in his January interim budget speech. The workers said they would remain on strike until they get the increase.

Fearful that the strike would spread to other EPZ factories, Labour Department intervened and offered workers a 1,500-rupee increase. Workers rejected this offer.

The Shore to Shore company makes and supplies tags, labels and brand packaging to apparel exporters and factories. United Tobacco Processing manufactures and exports cigar tobacco and accessories.

India: Himachal Pradesh hydropower workers protest

Around 1,300 tribal workers at Kinnanur, in Himachal Pradesh state in northern India, have been protesting for over a month at the Jaypee Hydropower to demand higher wages and better shelter and compensation.

The protest initially involved company workers but is now being supported by workers and peasants in the surrounding 18 villages. Despite being exposed to freezing cold conditions, the workers said they would maintain their protest until demands were met.

Tamil Nadu public transport workers to strike again

Following a protest in Chennai on February 14, 20 unions representing 150,000 Metropolitan Transport Corporation (MTC) workers in Chennai

have issued a strike notice to take effect on March 3 in support of 45 demands. The workers have not had a wage increase since September 2013.

Their action follows a three-day strike in December which was called off after the Tamil Nadu government agreed to form a tripartite committee to negotiate workers' demands. The unions said that although the committee was established there have been no meetings.

The major trade unions involved include the Labour Progressive Front and the Centre for Indian Trade Unions. The Anna Thozhir Sangam Peravai trade union, which is supported by the ruling All India Anna Dravidian Progress Federation, is not participating in the strike.

Australia and the Pacific

Coles supermarket workers continue strike action

Meat workers from the Coles supermarket chain in Victoria struck for 24 hours on Wednesday and picketed the Coles store in Richmond, Melbourne over the company's attacks on wages and conditions in a proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Their action follows one-day strikes on February 6 and 11 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.

The 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. Newly-recruited butchers would receive up to \$12,000 less a year, and any new meatpackers up to \$8,000 less.

Sydney construction workers strike

Construction workers at the Barangaroo building site in Sydney, New South Wales took protected industrial action on February 16 in a dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The strike prevented Boral concrete trucks entering the site. The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has been negotiating with DeMartin and Gasparini, a subsidiary of Boral, for over nine months for a new agreement.

According to the CFMEU, Boral and De Martin and Gasparini are using a draft federal Liberal government Building Code, which is not law, to force workers to give up current conditions. A union spokesman claimed that the company wanted to insert clauses into the agreement that would casualise its workforce. Workers had previously rejected a wage offer that was at least \$50–\$100 less a week in wages, including less site allowances, than their demands.

Queensland coal and freight train drivers strike

Several hundred coal and freight train drivers in Queensland's Mackay region, planned to strike for 24-hours yesterday in a 19-month pay dispute with rail operator Aurizon. Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members at the company's Bluff, Stanwell, Callemondah (Gladstone) and Pring (near Bowen) depots planned to walk out. Union members at Jilalan, and Coppabella will stop work on February 23. Their action follows 24-hour stoppages in January over the dispute.

Drivers are concerned that Aurizon is moving to terminate the current enterprise agreement and take away existing conditions and allowances which outweigh a 4 percent pay rise the company is offering. Aurizon says it wants so-called "legacy provisions" scrapped from the current agreement, including no forced redundancies, restrictive rostering practices and various allowances.

Western Australian coal miners threaten to strike over pay cut

Around 220 Griffin Coal mine workers in the south-west town of Collie in Western Australia have threatened to strike over wage-cutting moves by company management. Lanco Infratech, which purchased the mine in 2011, has responded to falling coal prices by demanding pay cuts as high as \$50,000 a year.

Lanco Infratech has presented workers with various cost-cutting options, which it claims are necessary to keep the mine "financially viable." The first option involves a 42-hour week, foregoing a 7.5 percent pay rise due to be paid this year under an existing agreement, and a 17.5 percent pay cut from current wage levels.

The second demand is a 17.5 percent pay cut, but with CPI linked increases, and an increase in working week from 42 to 56 hours.

The third demand involves a 38 percent pay cut and reduction of the working week to 35 hours on a five-day roster. This would mean workers losing weekend and overtime penalty payments, which amount to an average \$47,000 annual cut in each worker's pay.

A CFMEU representative said workers had rejected these "offers" and would strike if Lanco imposed its demands. The CFMEU, however, has already accepted the company's refusal to pay the outstanding 7.5 percent pay rise due this year.

Griffin Coal is one of the main suppliers for the state's coal fired power stations and industrial action would impact on the state's power supplies including in Perth, the Western Australian capital.

New Zealand: Wendy's fast food chain workers continue protesting

Following protests last week in Auckland, Wendy's Hamburgers workers in Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island, demonstrated outside Wendy's restaurant at Hornby on February 18 in a dispute over "zero-hours" contracts. Zero-hour contracts do not guarantee any hours of work and employees are always on call. Contract employees do not receive the same entitlements as other workers, such as a day off in lieu for any public holidays worked.

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 the Unite union, the only workers with guaranteed hours at Wendy's are those with two years' service and "open availability" for six or seven days in a week.



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