

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

5 September 2015

Indonesian workers protest over layoffs and low wages

At least 25,000 workers demonstrated in Jakarta and outside the Presidential Palace on September 1 while thousands more mobilised in 20 provinces around Indonesia to demand higher minimum wages and an end to layoffs that have accompanied a sharp slowdown in the country's economy.

Labour-intensive sectors have shed thousands of jobs in recent months, while workers contend with rising food prices that made Indonesia's annual inflation, at 7.26 percent in July, the highest in the region. The Indonesian Workers Confederation, which has two million members, is predicting 100,000 layoffs this year.

The unions are calling for a minimum wage increase of 25 percent for 2016, and have rejected a government proposal to handle minimum wage adjustments through an automatic calculation without negotiation.

Indonesia has been deeply affected by the global slowdown due to a fall in demand from China for Indonesia's coal and other commodities. The rupiah has fallen to the weakest level against the dollar in 17 years and growth slipped to a six-year low in the second quarter.

South Korean shipbuilding workers to strike

An alliance of unions representing shipbuilding workers at eight of South Korea's nine shipbuilding companies, including the "big three", Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), Samsung Heavy Industries (SHI) and Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME), announced on Wednesday that they will hold joint strike action on September 9 following failed wage negotiations. Each union has been in separate negotiations for more than four months.

HHI, SHI and DSME announced a wage freeze after reporting losses totalling \$US4 billion in this year's second quarter. At Hyundai, management offered 100 percent of the monthly wage as a bonus, plus 1 million won compensation for the freeze.

The unions have asked for a 127,560-won increase in the base salary plus a 250 percent bonus increase. Some 16,000 workers at the HHI plant planned to hold a four-hour stoppage yesterday.

South Korean steel workers' union accepts pay freeze

A wage freeze has been imposed on tens of thousands of workers at South Korea's largest steel manufacturer Posco (formerly Pohang Iron and Steel Company) after the union agreed to a sell-out deal with the

company. Under the agreement, workers' salaries will be frozen and the retirement age extended to 60 years from 58, effective next year. The "peak-wage system," which is already in operation, will be modified to consider a worker's capacity and output, instead of their length of employment and position.

Under the peak-wage system workers aged 56 will receive 90 percent of their salary, 57-year-olds will get 80 percent and those between 58 and 60 will be granted 70 percent. The modified system will be expanded to the company's affiliates. Posco, which announced a second-quarter operating profit of 686.3 billion won, predicts the deal will help save it 13 billion won (\$US11 million).

The Posco wage freeze is being matched by its American competitor, US Steel and ArcelorMittal, the world's largest steelmaker. The company wants to impose a three-year pay freeze and a two-tier system with reduced pay and benefits for new hires.

Hong Kong domestic workers continue protests

Migrant Domestic Workers (MDW) demonstrated outside the Hong Kong Labour Department on Monday to demand higher wages. The rally followed talks between the government and the Asian Migrants' Coordinating Body.

Domestic workers want their monthly wage increased from \$HK4,110 (\$US530) to \$HK4,500 and to be officially recognised as workers under the labour law. They also want the monthly food allowance to be increased by \$HK600.

MDWs are excluded from the Minimum Wages Ordinance, the Mandatory Provident Fund and other social protections. The government is set to announce the results of its annual wage review this month.

There are over 320,000 domestic helpers in Hong Kong, mainly from the Philippines (48 percent) and Indonesia (49 percent). They make up around three percent of the total population.

India: Karnataka government residential school contract workers protest

Contract workers from three government-run hostels in the Kalaburagi district demonstrated in Kalaburagi city on August 28 over the non-payment of five months' salaries. The protest was organised by the Government Hostel and Residential School Employees Union.

Their action followed a demonstration by their state colleagues in Chitradurga on August 11, who said they had not been paid for seven months. Their provident fund had not been deposited, and they had not

received identity cards or promised insurance. The workers also called for a 15,000-rupee (\$US230) minimum monthly wage.

Tamil Nadu municipal workers strike

Some 3,000 permanent, contract and daily wage workers of the Madurai City Corporation have been on strike since August 31 over a 17-point charter of demands. About two-thirds or 2,000 of the municipal workers are contract employees. They want job permanency, a 15,000-rupee monthly minimum wage, time scale pay and filling of all job vacancies.

Tamil Nadu part-time teachers protest

Around 150 part-time teachers protested outside Collector offices in Dindigul and Ramanthapuram districts on August 31. They said that almost 17,000 teachers were appointed on a part-time basis throughout the state in 2011 and paid just 7,000 rupees a month. The teachers want increased wages and job permanency.

Pakistan health workers maintain protests

Employees of Pakistan's Lady Health Workers (LHW) program are maintaining protests in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province to demand four months of outstanding salaries and job permanency. In 2012, the Supreme Court ordered the government to provide permanent jobs to all LHW employees in Pakistan. The order has not been implemented.

Several protesting LHWs were hospitalised after they fainted on Monday during a demonstration outside the provincial assembly building in Peshawar. Protests were also held at the nearby press club.

LHWs ended their protests later in the day after the health minister agreed to present their grievances to the provincial minister and call on the Pakistan government to allocate 2.4 billion rupees to the provincial government to pay salary arrears of the 13,000 LHWs in the province.

Meanwhile LHWs in Sindh province have threatened to strike on October 1 if their demand for the release of five months of unpaid salaries and job permanency is not settled by then.

Sindh government school teachers demand unpaid salaries

Junior and primary schoolteachers, who recently passed their exams from the National Testing Service (NTS), demonstrated outside the Karachi Press Club on Tuesday to demand nine months' unpaid salaries.

One teacher told the media that while authorities have acknowledged their complaints there had been no response. "The orders to give us our salaries have not even been issued," the teacher said.

Sindh and Punjab province utility workers strike

Water and Power Development Authority (WAPDA) workers in Sindh and Punjab provinces stopped work on August 26 to oppose the planned privatisation of the state-owned utility. Workers locked the utility's offices in Hyderabad, Sukkur and several other cities. Employees from power distribution companies in Hyderabad and Lahore joined the WAPDA workers' protests.

The action was part of a long-running campaign by the All Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Workers Union utility workers. The union opposes any independent industrial and political action by Pakistan workers against the government. Its protests are designed to demoralise and wear down workers and create the conditions for the government to implement its International Monetary Fund dictated privatisation program.

Punjab government doctors protest

Doctors at government hospitals in Lahore held demonstrations on August 27 to oppose the government's plan to privatise health care services and to demand a pay rise and implementation of the service structure agreed by the government in 2012. The doctors also want timescale promotions and the payment of dues to 500 trainee staff in the province.

Demonstrations outside major public hospitals spilled onto roads blocking traffic for several hours. The Young Doctors Association led a march to the Punjab Provincial Assembly.

New South Wales truck drivers protest

More than 700 transport workers demonstrated on James Ruse Drive in Sydney's west against the Coles supermarket chain's cost-cutting, productivity demands on truck drivers and logistic companies. Truck drivers said they were forced to skip rest breaks, drive fast and delay maintenance in order to keep the delivery deadlines demanded by Coles.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) says that there are around 300 road deaths involving trucks each year that are usually related to drivers' being tired, stressed or speeding in unsafe trucks. A union spokesman claimed that trucking is Australia's deadliest profession with truck drivers 15 times more likely to die at work than any other profession.

The Sydney protest is part of a long running national protest by the TWU which is appealing to the major supermarket chains such as Woolworths, Coles and logistics operators to sign up to a "Safe Rates" charter. The union opposes any industrial action by the drivers.

New Zealand hardware retail workers strike

Workers at Bunnings outlet in Mount Maunganui walked off the job at 1p.m., on August 31 after learning that the company is proposing a roster change which will remove workers' rights to determine their start and finish times.

The FIRST Union claims that under the current collective agreement Bunnings can only alter start and finish times under mutual agreement with workers. The giant hardware retailer now wants to insert a clause that will allow management to change the start and finish times at will.

"This means that a worker might be guaranteed 40 hours per fortnight,

but then find that start and finish times chop and change. One week it might be Monday to Thursday and the next week it could be Thursday to Sunday,” a union official said.



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