

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 April 2016

Asia

Philippines workers strike over victimisation and poor conditions

Workers at South Korean-owned electronics subcontractor Seung Yeun Technology Industries Corp (SYTIC) in the Philippines Cavite Export Processing Zone Authority (EPZA) went on strike on Monday. They are demanding reinstatement of 20 workers fired for carrying out union activities and are opposing company breaches of labour standards on working conditions and wage payments.

The SYTIC strikers claim that deductions are made from their wages for meals and to fund various company events. The company has also organised work schedules in order to avoid paying overtime and failed to provide a doctor and nurse on site as required by law.

The strike erupted after two mediation sessions before the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) failed to resolve the issues. The strikers are picketing the plant and held marches in the economic zone calling on other workers to support their struggle. The Cavite EPZA has 60,000 workers and is the largest economic zone in the Philippines.

SYTIC manufactures plastic products used to ship integrated circuits and electronic components. It supplies these to local subsidiaries of big US electronics companies such as ON Semiconductor, a Motorola spinoff, Texas Instruments and Analog Devices.

Vietnam: Electronics workers strike for better wages and conditions

Nearly 1,000 workers at the South Korean-owned Bluecom Vina electronics company in Vietnam's northern city of Haiphong began an indefinite strike on April 11 to demand improved wages and working hours and the right to form a union. They also want two Saturdays off each month.

The workers claim that the company, which produces TV speakers and earphones, does not operate official working hours. Employees are expected to start at 8 a.m. and continue until management allows them to finish. This is usually at 9 or 10 p.m., including Saturdays. Workers are only paid \$US165 per month and a total of just \$4.50 per month for extra hours worked.

Sri Lankan electricity meter readers' protest enters second week

Striking workers employed on contract by the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) to read household meters are continuing a fasting protest opposite the Power and Renewable Energy Ministry. The protest, which involves 800 of the workers and family members, entered its second week on April 11.

About 1,400 contract meter readers service 5.5 million households across Sri Lanka. Many of them have worked at CEB for more than ten years. They are demanding that the government honour an election promise made by President Maithripala Sirisena to make them permanent.

Protestors told the media that they had to read meters at 150 residences per day in order to reach the company target of over 3,000 meters within 25 days. The contract meter readers are not provided with motor cycles to do their rounds and have no medical coverage for work accidents or dog bites. A spokesman for the Billing Officers' Union said the workers would maintain their protests until they were given a written assurance from the government that they will be made permanent employees.

Unions end Colombo port work-to-rule

Unions have called off a work-to-rule campaign by Sri Lanka Ports Authority workers at Colombo, claiming that Prime Minister Ranil Wickremesinghe had agreed to pay a full New Year (Sri Lankan) bonus.

The port workers, who had been promised a special New Year bonus and productivity payments from December 2015, began their work-to-rule on April 6 with a demonstration and picket outside the port.

After meeting with Wickremesinghe and Ports Minister Arjuna Ranatunga, officials from the 17-union Port Trade Unions Collective said that the government had agreed to establish a committee to organise payment of the special allowances.

Union officials also claimed that Wickremesinghe would investigate workers' other demands, including removal of recruitment anomalies and stopping the privatisation of port assets after April 22. The unions have also called for dismissal of the ports minister and the Sri Lanka Ports Authority chairman, and for action against corrupt port officials.

Pakistan railway workers strike

Pakistan Railways loco-shed workers at Karachi Cantonment Station went on strike on April 11 over several issues, including promotions and the lack of basic safety conditions and facilities, such as clean water.

While most of the workers have over 25 years of service they have not been promoted to higher pay grades. According to workers, management has ignored the results of a January investigation to determine a scale-

upgrade. The All Pakistan Railways' Shed Technical Staff Union called off the strike shortly after meeting with the management.

Police attack Pakistan doctors' protest

Police in Quetta in Pakistan's Balochistan province attacked a Young Doctors' Association protest on April 7 on the orders of the provincial government. The doctors were demanding a pay rise, job permanency, positions for unemployed doctors and for the provision of basic facilities in the hospitals.

Police used batons, tear gas and fired warning shots into the air to break up the demonstration which was being held outside the Quetta Provincial Assembly. Ten doctors were arrested and at least eight others badly injured, including one who may have been blinded.

Young Doctors' Association members began boycotting duties on April 8 in hospital outpatient departments and imposed bans on the government's vaccination campaign in protest against the police attack. The government has responded by deploying large numbers of police to hospitals in a bid to intimidate the doctors.

Indian contract teachers protest job losses

Contract teachers protested outside the deputy chief minister's residence in New Delhi on April 9 over job losses and to call for permanency. Over 1,900 teachers employed under the federal Indian government's Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan Scheme lost their jobs on March 31 when the Human Resource Development ministry refused to renew their contracts.

The scheme was introduced in 2001 and is operated in conjunction with Indian state governments. It was designed to provide extra teachers to understaffed schools and legally mandates a 1:40 student teacher ratio in schools. Teachers' contracts are normally renewed between March and May each year.

In a separate dispute, lecturers from two private colleges in Palayamkottai, Tamil Nadu, held a sit-down protest outside the joint director of education's office on April 12 over unpaid wages. The 42 lecturers were not paid because the director of collegiate education had delayed approving their appointments.

Karnataka: Textile workers' strike continues

Close to 3,500 workers at the Gokak textile mill in the Indian state of Karnataka are maintaining strike action which began on March 8 over harassment by mill management and the suspension of 16 employees. Mill management responded to the walkout by locking out workers on March 17.

Ramesh Jarkiholi, who is a legislative assembly member for Gokak and a union official, has held "reconciliation" talks with the mill management but failed to get any agreement on workers' demands. Further negotiations are scheduled for April 18.

Tamil Nadu council and ambulance workers walk out

Contract sanitary workers in the Anakaputhur Municipality near Chennai went on strike on April 11 over their exclusion from the Provident Funds scheme. The workers were excluded from the scheme after the municipal authority outsourced waste collection to Srinivasa Waste Management. The strike was called off after municipal officials agreed to address the issue.

In Madurai 108 division ambulance and paramedics demonstrated on April 11 to oppose the GVK Emergency Management and Research Institute's employee-appraisal system.

Workers claim that the system is being used to avoid paying correct salary levels and allowances. They are also protesting the lack of any mechanism to register grievances and want the institute to stop targeting workers involved in union activities.

Australia and the Pacific

Port workers in Sydney strike for 48 hours

Waterside workers at the Asciano-owned Patrick Stevedores container terminal at Port Botany, Sydney, went on strike for 48 hours on April 13 as part of a national dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The stoppage follows two 72-hour strikes at the company's terminal in Fremantle, Western Australia earlier this month. A 48-hour strike is planned for the Brisbane terminal on April 20. Senior Patrick Stevedores' executive Alex Badenoch threatened "to consider all the options available to us under the present system, including the possibility of a lockout."

Year-long negotiations between the company and the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) have failed to resolve differences over a new rostering system. The MUA has agreed to allow its members to work more midnight and weekend shifts and forgo higher penalty rates in exchange for the reduction of the working week—from 35 to 32 hours—with no loss of pay. The union also wants curbs on further casualisation of work.

MUA Sydney branch secretary Paul McAleer told media that the union "saved \$1.5 million on our previous proposal and made it cost-neutral. It's incredibly disingenuous of them (the company) to reject it."

Over the past two years the union has collaborated with Patrick's to introduce remotely controlled cranes and other technology, slashing the company's Port Botany workforce from 440 to 260.

The MUA has also endorsed the axing of jobs at DP World's and Hutchison's Australian port facilities. Last November they negotiated a deal with Hutchison to eliminate 65 jobs, extend the working week from 30 to 32 hours and expand the number of casuals. The MUA claimed it was a "victory."

Solomon Islands nurses' union calls off strike

The Solomon Islands Nurses Association (SINA) last week called off a strike planned for April 8 and extended its "strike notice" by a further 30 days. The initial 28-day notice of industrial action lapsed on April 7.

SINA claimed it cancelled the strike to give the government "more time" to address an outstanding pay issue. A union spokesperson said that multi-allowances and special-duty allowances had not been paid to a large number of nurses since 2013.



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