

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 February 2017

## South Korean shipbuilding workers protest against restructure

Around 4,000 metalworkers demonstrated outside Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) in Ulsan, one of South Korea's three largest shipbuilders, on February 15 opposing plans to restructure the company. HHI workers held several limited strikes in July and August against government and industry efforts to "reshape" the nation's yards.

In June, South Korean President Park Geun-Hye called for "bone-crushing" overhauls of the three shipbuilding companies, HHI, Samsung Heavy Industries (SHI) and Daewoo Shipbuilding & Marine Engineering (DSME). The proposed restructure includes massive cuts to wages, jobs and conditions. Samsung plans to reduce its workforce by 40 percent by the end of 2018. DSME wants to slash wages by 20 percent, sell two of its five floating dry-docks and reduce its workforce to 10,000 positions.

HHI announced last October that it would split into six units: Robotics, Global Services, Electric & Energy Systems, Construction Machinery, Green Energy, and Heavy Industries. HHI is putting the restructuring plans on the agenda of a shareholders' meeting scheduled for February 27.

## Philippines: Cebu jeepney drivers to strike

Drivers and operators in Cebu city aligned with the transport union PISTON (Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Opereytor Nationwide) have announced they will take action on Monday to protest government plans to phase out passenger jeepneys 15 or more years old. While the type of action has not been decided, it comes after a national strike by jeepney drivers and owners aligned with the Stop and Go Coalition early this month.

The Duterte government claims it wants to modernise transport vehicles and make them environmentally friendly. Stop and Go says that only big companies can afford the vehicle replacements demanded and have suggested an upgrade of their jeepneys and improved enforcement of road-worthiness rules.

Under the draft plan, a jeepney operator was required to have 7 million pesos (\$US140,393) to get a franchise. The operator must have 20 units by 2018 and increase the fleet to 40 units in 2019. Operators were to install GPS and Wi-Fi into the jeepneys.

The jeepney phase-out will affect more than 600,000 drivers and 250,000 operators.

## Cambodian court orders equipment sale to pay wages

The Phnom Penh Municipal Court has issued a warrant for the temporary seizure of equipment from the shuttered Top World Garment Cambodia plant in order to force the employer to pay workers outstanding salaries. The owner suddenly shut the factory and disappeared in January without paying December salaries.

Around 200 workers from the factory, which is in Kien Svay district, near Phnom Penh, have been holding demonstrations and demanding the government intervene in the issue. The court has temporarily seized the factory building, office supplies, machinery and vehicles.

## More fainting at Cambodian garment factory

On Tuesday, 80 workers at the Ly Quiang Corp garment factory in Kampong Cham's Batheay district were hospitalised after inhaling pesticide used at a nearby farm. Workers said they smelt the chemical odour then suddenly lost their strength and became unconscious. In November, 40 workers from the same factory were hospitalised after allegedly inhaling pesticide sprayed on a nearby field.

A local government spokesman defended the use of pesticides by the area's farmers, saying it was legal and the spraying would continue.

According to a National Social Security Fund report, nearly 2,000 workers in 32 Cambodian garment and footwear factories fainted during 2015, the figure consistent with 2014 figures. The report said several factors caused the fainting, including excessive overtime worked, poor health and chemicals used in production and pest control.

## Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa health workers strike over physical attacks

Paramedical staff and class-IV workers of the Health Department in Upper Dir, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, walked out on February 18 to protest against physical attacks on health workers. They have demanded an inquiry into an incident at the Tehsil Headquarters Hospital where two colleagues were beaten by elite force military personnel. No reason was given for the assault. The workers also accused the police of not registering their complaints about the attack.

The strike was ended on the second day following the intervention of a local tribal council which assured workers that a committee had been formed to probe the incident. The strikers gave a 10-day deadline for action against the attackers or they would resume their walkout.

While assaults on workers by the military are uncommon, hospital workers are regularly attacked by suffering patients and families. Patients falsely blame the health staff for the poor quality of medical care and run-down conditions.

## Rawalpindi teachers protest against transfers

On Wednesday, 38 female primary school teachers and their families demonstrated against the Punjab Education Department in Rawalpindi district over their sudden transfer to remote rural schools. The teachers demanded a reversal of the transfers, which were suddenly imposed, and have decided to challenge the decision in court.

### **India: Vadodara municipal workers demonstrate**

Several hundred contract workers from the Vadodara Municipal Corporation (VMC) in Gujarat protested in the city on February 16 to demand permanent jobs. Planned strike action this week was called off by the unions after a vague assurance by the VMC administration that it would look into workers' demands.

Over 200 contract employees from the VMC vehicle pool struck on January 27 over their outstanding demands for permanency. A spokesman from the Gujarat Mazdoor Sena union said about 250 drivers have been employed on contract for 10 to 15 years but had never been made permanent because the contractor was changed every two years. Contract workers, he added, are not paid minimum wages or given identity cards and do not receive a bonus, leave, a medical allowance or employee state insurance.

### **Tamil Nadu liquor retail workers protest**

Around 500 Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) employees demonstrated outside the Government Guest House in Chennai on Wednesday after the government ordered the closure of 500 liquor shops. Workers said they would continue their action until they were guaranteed jobs in other government departments.

According to the TASMAC Employees' Association, the closures will leave more than 2,000 employees without a job. A union spokesman said that many TASMAC employees were graduates and could be employed in most government departments.

### **Tamil Nadu aluminium alloy workers locked out**

Nineteen striking permanent workers from the CMR Toyotsu aluminium plant in Sriperumbudur were locked out this week immediately after they ended their two-month strike. The workers were protesting the transfer of two colleagues who were punished for forming a union. The union president and vice-president were given transfer orders to a distant factory soon after the union was established.

The union was set up to fight for higher wages than the current 10,000 rupees (\$US150) monthly pay. Union members also demanded safety equipment to protect them from high levels of dust and other pollutants at the plant.

CMR Toyotsu is a joint venture between Century Metal Recycling and Toyota Tsushu Corporation in Japan. The company produces aluminium alloy for various companies, including automobile manufacturers and parts suppliers.

### **Sri Lanka: Public hospital paramedics protest**

Several hundred paramedics from Sri Lanka's public hospitals demonstrated outside the health ministry in Colombo on Wednesday over a range of demands.

These included suitable salary scales for graduates, establishment of a director's position for paramedics in the health ministry and suitable language-skills testing. The workers have threatened an indefinite strike if their demands are not met soon.

### **South Australian shipbuilding workers strike**

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at ASC, the state-owned Adelaide-based ship and submarine builder, are taking industrial action in a two-year dispute for a new work agreement.

The walkout follows strike action in November. About 25 night shift workers have been on strike since Sunday and another 200 submarine workers stopped work for 72 hours on Wednesday. Another 400 workers from the company's ship building arm struck for an hour on Thursday morning in support of their submarine colleagues.

The shipbuilding workers oppose the federal government's public-sector wage policy which caps annual pay increases at 1.5 percent in any new agreement and demands cuts to long-standing conditions.

According to the AMWU, hard-won rights, such as the workforce being consulted on hours of work and changes to shift patterns, are under threat. The union claims that 98 percent of members have rejected ASC management's proposed new agreement. A union spokesman told media that the government was demanding unrealistic productivity gains.

### **Victoria: Parmalat lockout in fifth week**

Management at the Parmalat dairy processing plant in Echuca in northern Victoria attempted to close down a picket of locked out workers this week by cutting water supplies during heatwave temperatures.

Sixty maintenance and production workers at the plant have been locked out since January 18 in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The workers, who are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU), are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant.

Negotiations for a new work agreement began in August. Parmalat offered a 3 percent pay rise in exchange for major cuts in the hourly pay of all new employees. The unions claim the company wants to reduce new employees' wages by \$8 an hour or 20 to 30 percent less than the existing hourly rate. Production workers are paid around \$30 an hour.



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