

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 March 2017

South Korea: HHI shipbuilding workers strike

Around 1,500 unionised workers, out of 15,000 at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) in Ulsan, one of South Korea's three largest shipbuilders, walked out for eight hours on February 23, and 800 the following day, over failed wage negotiations and a proposed split of the firm's non-shipbuilding business. The major issue is the company restructure over which workers held several limited strikes in July and August.

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. According to the union, at least 2,000 workers will be forced to relocate from Ulsan to Seoul.

The failed negotiations on wages, which entered its 82nd round on Wednesday, also triggered strike action. Management wants the base wages frozen at 100 percent of a month's salary and has offered 1.5 million won (\$US1,320) as an incentive.

The union rejected the "incentive," claiming it included employees returning 20 percent of their annual salary for a year.

Filipino jeepney drivers and owners hold second strike

Jeepney drivers and owners of transport groups PISTON, Stop and Go Coalition, and No to Jeepney Phase-out Coalition struck in most major cities across the Philippines on Monday over government plans to phase out passenger jeepneys 15 or more years old. The government ordered schools to close for the day in an attempt to minimise the effect of the strike. Metro Manila and cities in the three major island groups of Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao were affected. Their action followed a national stoppage on February 6 over the issue.

The Duterte government claims it wants to modernise transport vehicles and make them environmentally friendly. The union groups allege 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. A meeting last week with the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board and unions failed to reach agreement.

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.

Burmese garment workers locked out

Around 500 workers at the Chinese owned Hundred Tex garment factory in the Shwe Lin Ban industrial zone, Yangon, were locked out last week, following demonstrations over the sacking of their union leader. Management claimed the factory was closed to repair equipment damaged during the protest action.

Workers initially walked out on January 30 when their union leader was fired upon returning to work after two weeks of certified sick leave. Management claimed the leave had not been approved but workers said he was sacked for organising protest action in December forcing an agreement from Hundred Tex to pay correct wages and entitlements, costing the company around 70 million kyat (\$US51,300). Management has not honoured the agreement.

Workers complained that they have been paid less than the daily minimum wage of 3,600 kyat (\$2.65), have not received overtime payments according to the law, and the customary skills bonus has also been withheld.

Burmese wood factory workers protest wage cut

About 60 workers at the Kan Kaung Chin Yadanar wood products factory in Mandalay region downed tools on Wednesday and held a sit-in protest to demand reinstatement of piece-job rates and benefits. They complained that factory management cut these after the introduction of the 3,600 kyat daily minimum wage law in 2015.

A protesting worker said the piece-job rate had been halved while benefits for regular attendance, annual increments and overtime bonuses have been reduced. Workers also want a rest area and medical benefits. They threatened to hold more sit-in protests if management and the authorities continued to ignore their demands.

Indian bank workers hold national strike

All banking transactions and clearing house operations came to a halt

across India on Tuesday as over one million bank employees from the public sector, private, foreign, co-operative and regional rural banks walked out on a raft of demands. The strike was coordinated by the United Forum of Bank Unions, representing nine unions, mainly to protest against the government's decision to merge five associate banks with the State Bank of India (SBI)

Workers fear that the merger would result in the closure of a large number of branches, loss of employment opportunities and curtail banking services to common customers. They termed the move as "denationalisation reform."

Other grievances were for compensation to employees for unpaid overtime work done as a result of the government's demonetisation program and the end to outsourcing of permanent jobs due to labour reform in the banking sector.

SBI-affiliated bank workers have been holding limited strike action for over 12 months over the merger proposals. However, the action has been mostly sporadic and kept within individual state boundaries.

East Delhi sanitation workers strike again

Sanitation workers from the East Delhi Municipal Corporation (EDMC) stopped work on February 23 to protest salaries that have not been paid for a month. Their action follows a strike in January over delayed wages.

Over 16,000 EDMC sanitation workers and other employees walked out on January 6 over the non-payment of three months' salaries. They ended the strike after 11 days when the EDMC paid their wages in full but falsely assured them that wages would in future be paid on time. Sanitation workers now have not been paid for one month and other workers for two months.

For over 50 days a group of workers has been holding a protest hunger strike outside the EDMC headquarters in Patparganj demanding timely payment of salaries. They said the delay in salary payments has been ongoing for two years.

Pakistan: Hyderabad sanitary workers shut down services

Following February 7 protests, Hyderabad Development Authority (HDA) workers shut down sewerage pumping stations and water supply systems on Tuesday causing sewerage to flood parts of the city. Workers said 850 employees and 560 retired HDA workers have not received wages or pensions for over four months, while over 1,300 non-permanent workers have not been paid for six months. Provident and gratuity funds also have not been paid.

Tuesday's sewerage shutdown lasted for six hours. Workers have threatened to take further action if authorities continued to ignore their demands.

Karachi prosecution department workers strike

Prosecution Department workers in Karachi struck on Monday to demand seven years of unpaid medical and utility allowances and long-delayed promotions. The walkout followed 11 days of two-hour rolling stoppages.

Striking workers lodged a petition in the Sindh High Court and warned that they would extend the strike indefinitely if their demands were not met.

Abbottabad sanitary workers end strike

Sanitary and water workers at the Abbottabad Tehsil Municipal Administration (TMA) ended a two-day strike on Tuesday, after talks with city authorities. The workers walked out on Monday to protest the Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa government's decision to form the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA). Workers fear that around 350 will lose their jobs when WASA takes over sanitation responsibility from the TMA.

Garbage collection in Abbottabad and Havelian was affected. Workers threatened to interrupt the city's water supply if their fears were not addressed.

Strikers accepted the assurance from the TMA that their demands would be discussed in the Tehsil Council, and that they would not be transferred to the WASA until it becomes fully functional.

Sri Lankan paramedics and nurses demonstrate

Following protests last week, public sector paramedics demonstrated again outside the Colombo National Hospital on Monday with several demands. They want a suitable pay scale for graduates, the creation of a director's post in the health ministry for paramedics and a suitable method to measure language skills.

On Wednesday, the All Island Nurses Union demonstrated outside the health ministry in central Colombo over various demands, including salary arrears and systematic promotions.

Sri Lankan government education employees strike

All administrative officers, including school principals and education directors in Sri Lanka's public education service, launched a sick-note campaign on Tuesday against the education minister's arbitrary decisions on administrative policies. Functioning of related institutions, including ministry of education, department of education, zonal education offices and schools, was paralysed by the industrial action.

Victoria: Parmalat workers remain locked out

Following failed negotiations over a proposed enterprise agreement (EA) in the Fair Work Commission (FWC), locked out Parmalat dairy processing workers in Echuca in northern Victoria voted yesterday on a previously rejected management-proposed enterprise agreement (EA). The ballot was to be supervised by the Fair Work Commission (FWC) at the plant.

Sixty maintenance and production workers at the plant have been locked out since January 18. 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. Parmalat has tried pressure the workers into accepting the new agreement by applying to the FWC to have the existing EA terminated and then forcing them onto the inferior industry award.

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.

New Zealand supermarket workers protest

A group of FIRST union members demonstrated outside the New World Centre City in Dunedin, on New Zealand's South Island, on February 25 against the wage gap between North Island and South Island Foodstuffs employees. The store management and the union are currently negotiating a new collective agreement. New World stores are owned by the Foodstuffs Co-operative.

Foodstuffs workers on the South Island have been campaigning for over a year to gain wage parity with their North Island colleagues. A union spokesman said Foodstuffs South Island workers were paid up to \$2 less an hour than Foodstuffs North Island workers.

Papua New Guinea civil registry office staff strike

National Civil Registry office workers in Port Moresby stopped work and locked the premises on Tuesday demanding wages. Workers alleged that they had not been paid for over two years. At least 50 recipients of the National Identity project and others who were attempting to register were turned away by angry staff. A witness told media that clients, realising the workers' desperate situation, would sometimes buy them lunch.

Solomon Islands: Malaita government workers protest

Around 50 employees from the provincial government of Malaita, an island of the Solomon Islands group, demonstrated outside the Premier's office on Monday to demand delayed wages. The workers were met by the provincial secretary who told them the government was in a "money-strapped situation." He had earlier promised to sort out their salary payments by February 24.



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