

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 August 2017

Indonesian port workers' union closes down strike

The union covering 600 Jakarta International Container Terminal (JICT) workers at Tanjung Priok port ended a four-day strike on Monday without any gain. The JICT Labour Union had originally planned to extend the action until August 10 but suddenly ordered strikers back to work saying it was for "the greater national interests."

JICT operates the largest container terminal at Tanjung Priok, handling 70 percent of the port's exports and imports. It claimed the strike was not having any effect but twenty ships were diverted to other ports because of the strike. JICT's shareholders are the state-owned PT (Persero) Pelabuhan Indonesia II with 49 percent and Hong Kong-based Hutchison Ports Holdings (HPH) owning 51 percent.

Workers walked out on August 6 demanding JICT honor an earlier commitment to pay bonuses. JICT workers struck on April 6, claiming HPH had previously attacked workers' legal rights and cut bonuses. A strike called for May 15–20 over the same issue was called off by the union falsely claiming it had reached a "constructive agreement" with JICT.

South Korea: Hyundai Motor workers to strike

The union representing 50,000 workers at Hyundai Motor on Monday announced that its members would strike for four hours on each shift on Thursday and again on August 14. Workers have also said they will not work overtime on weekends until management agrees to grant a pay increase.

In mid-July 65 percent of unionised workers at Hyundai Motor's Ulsan plant voted for strike action, followed by 72 percent of its sister company Kia Motors' 28,200 workforce who ratified strike action. Their unions, which are affiliated to the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), want the monthly basic wage increased by 154,883 won (\$US136) and 30 percent of the company's 2016 full-year net profit as a bonus.

Of the 11,000 GM Korea workers, 79 percent voted in early July in favour of striking. The GM union, also affiliated with the KMWU, is demanding the same pay increase as Hyundai and Kia workers, plus 500 percent of their basic wages or 4.25 million won as a bonus. Other demands include the implementation of a salary system instead of hourly wages and an 8+8 shift schedule, with an eight-hour second shift.

Late last month the KMWU suspended strike action planned by its three affiliates at GM, Hyundai and Kia without any explanation.

Cambodian garment workers demand severance pay

Around 300 sacked garment workers from the Fortune Fashion factory in Por Senchey district demonstrated outside their factory on August 1 demanding severance pay. Protesters said they were forced to sign termination papers when they still had at least three months before their contracts expired. A Cambodia Union Federation representative said the company had not announced their bankruptcy and failed to pay severance, along with other owed bonuses required by law.

India's public sector bank workers call strike

Hundreds of thousands of bank employees are expected to walk off the job on August 22 after the All India Bank Employees Association (AIBEA) called for a national strike. The association, which includes nine unions, is opposed to the privatisation and merger of public sector banks. The strike will be followed by street protests on September 15 and further strike action in October and November.

Over one million public sector bank workers held a nation-wide strike in February over the same issues, halting all banking transactions and clearing house operations. Workers fear that a proposed merger of five state banks would result in the closure of a large number of branches, loss of employment opportunities and curtail banking services to common customers. Bank unions called limited strike action in 2016.

Mumbai commuter transport workers strike

Nearly 36,000 workers from BEST, Mumbai's metropolitan bus company, stopped work at midnight on Sunday. The walkout was part of a long-running dispute over unpaid wages. The union called off the strike on Monday evening after a municipal official said wages would be paid on the tenth of each month.

BEST was forced to pay overdue wages in March after workers threatened to strike. They were forced to strike again in June when the company refused to fully implement a court order directing it to pay overdue wages. According to the drivers' union, BEST only paid 50 percent of the wages. A company spokesman told the media that it had no funds to pay the wages.

Tamil Nadu film industry workers end strike

The Film Employees Federation of South India (FEFSI), representing 24

craft unions in Tamil Nadu's film industry, called off a three-day strike on August 3 in Chennai. It followed intervention from the government which demanded that both sides enter conciliatory talks.

The initial walk-out, which stopped the production of 40 movies, was sparked after the Tamil Film Producers Council (TFPC) announced it planned to recruit interstate workers. The union demanded that only members of FEFSI-affiliated organisations be employed, and that producers honour the previous wage agreements. FEFSI and TFPC were also in dispute over working hours. While the current work day is 8–9 hours, the TNPC wanted it extended to 12 hours. FEFSI claimed that it would result in reduced wages for workers.

Indian government teachers in Tripura end strike

Around 300 contract teachers employed in the Indian government's education program Sarva Siksha Abhiyan (SSA—Education for All Movement) went on strike on August 1 demanding permanent jobs. They set up a protest site in Tripura's capital Agartala with 50 teachers holding a hunger strike. The Tripura SSA Teachers' Welfare Association called off the strike on Monday after the Indian central and state governments agreed to hold tripartite talks with the association.

An association spokesman said that several state governments had already made SSA teachers permanent. There are over 5,200 SSA teachers in Tripura. Although these teachers are paid equal wages with state government teachers they do not have a Provident Fund and are not paid allowances.

The SSA was introduced in 2001 as part of the Indian government's Right of the Child to Free and Compulsory Education (RTE) Act 2009.

Pakistan: Gadani shipbreaking workers call off strike

Leaders of the Ship-Breaking Workers Union, which covers over 20,000 workers at the massive Gadani shipbreaking yard on Pakistan's coast, cancelled last Saturday's planned strike. Union leaders told workers that the Balochistan government and yard owners had agreed to grant the union's demands, including a 10 percent pay increase.

The union's original demands were for a 50 percent rise, registration with the Employees Old-Age Benefits Institution and social security, and workers given proper work contracts and identification credentials as well as improved safety and medical facilities. The union spokesman said that work on legislating a ship-breaking code would start immediately.

The government promised to improve safety and regulate the industry following the death of 20 workers from an explosion on an old oil tanker at the yard last November. The promises were never fulfilled.

Safety is the major issue facing workers. The shipbreaking yard, which runs for 10 km along the Pakistan shoreline, has 132 shipbreaking units and is extremely dangerous. Nearly 850 workers have lost their lives since the yard became operational in 1968 and more than 1,000 workers have lost limbs or suffered other serious injuries.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa health workers protest

Workers at the state-funded Qazi Hussain Ahmad Medical Complex in

Nowshera, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province stopped work on August 7 to demonstrate over non-payment of salaries for two months. The strike by nurses, paramedics, technicians and Class-IV employees closed down most medical services. Workers ended the strike after hospital authorities made a vague promise to pay the salaries.

Health workers among others are frequently affected by the government's failure to pay wages as a result of federal government budget cuts and austerity measures. In May, nursing staff at the District Headquarters Hospital in Nowshera walked off the job to protest non-payment of salaries for over three months.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa teachers demonstrate

Teachers from government schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa protested outside the district education office in Karak on August 5 demanding that the seniority list of teachers be updated to allow timely promotions. They claimed it had not been updated since 2013. Teachers also complained that payment for an "out-of-school children" survey is two months pending.

The teachers also demanded an end to political interference in the education department and establishment of a committee to investigate the transfer of teachers in the past eight months. The protest was coordinated by the Government Teachers Alliance, a conglomerate of several unions. It threatened further action if the teachers' issues were not addressed by September 30.

Striking Punjab government hospital doctors sacked

Members of the Young Doctors' Association (YDA) in government hospitals in Punjab province have been on strike since July 31 to protest against the Central Induction Policy (CIP) imposed by the government on postgraduate trainees. At least 66 doctors have been dismissed for not attending outpatient departments and the wages of other strikers cut.

Protesting doctors claimed that the CIP discriminates between post-graduate trainees who have graduated from government institutes and those who have received their education from private ones. They want inductions prioritised on a merit-based system and positions filled on a needs basis.

YDA is also engaged in a long-running struggle for the implementation of a service structure that the government had agreed to but failed to implement.

Punjab parks workers protest

Hundreds of workers from the Punjab Parks and Horticulture Authority (PHA) demonstrated in Lahore on August 4 to demand permanent jobs for contract workers. City traffic was disrupted during the protest. They also want a salary increase and the provision of basic facilities. Protesters threatened to extend their action to include the thousands of other PHA workers if authorities continued to ignore their demands.

Bangladeshi police attack striking garment workers

At least ten people were injured when police attacked a demonstration of striking garment workers in Dhaka on Monday. Around 300 workers from Meridian Fashions in Mirpur-1 had been on strike for several days demanding unpaid wages and reinstatement of 20 fellow workers who were sacked in connection with recent industrial action.

The strike ended after Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association representatives met with factory management and agreed to “consider” the workers’ demands.

Victoria: Federal Court orders Visy factory workers to end strike

Over 70 cardboard manufacturing workers at Visy’s Dandenong plant in Victoria were ordered to end their eight-day strike by the Federal Court on Tuesday.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members walked out on July 31 after one of their union delegates was sacked. Around 90 percent of the plant’s workers had refused to work compulsory overtime, which Visy claimed constituted illegal industrial action.

The company declared the strike illegal and won interim orders from the Fair Work Commission. The federal court issued injunctions against the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), its officials and the four union delegates. Visy threatened to fire workers if they failed to return work.

Newcastle port workers impose work bans

Maritime Workers Union (MUA) members at Qube Ports Newcastle, north of Sydney, imposed work bans from midnight on Wednesday in protest against a proposed enterprise agreement (EA) from the company, which includes a 10.5 percent wage cut. The bans will last for two weeks and include working only seven-hour shifts, no extensions and no overtime.

An MUA spokesman claimed that Qube intends to terminate the existing workplace agreement, which cuts wages and abolishes existing entitlements by forcing workers onto the industry award. He alleged that Qube was holding secret meetings with workers, offering them permanent positions if they accepted the 10.5 percent wage cut. If they failed to accept the “offer” they would face a 20 percent pay cut.

The MUA has said that its members had unanimously decided to strike if the company terminates their existing agreement.

Pathology workers in Victoria extend strike

Workers from 20 out of 300 facilities of Dorewitch Pathology in Gippsland, Victoria walked off the job for 24 hours on Monday in a decade-long dispute for a new work agreement. Over 500 workers from all the company’s Victorian facilities walked out for 48 hours the next day after 66 striking colleagues were stood indefinitely from 6pm Monday.

The workers are members of the Health Workers Union and include,

laboratory assistants, cleaners, couriers, maintenance and clerical staff. They have not had a pay increase since their enterprise agreement expired in 2007.

The company’s proposed agreement offered no pay increase and demanded cuts to entitlements such as sick leave. The company has refused to negotiate on workers’ demands for improvements in the old agreement.

Victorian oil workers maintain protests

Oil production workers at Esso’s onshore facilities in Victoria and offshore platforms in Bass Strait are maintaining a protest camp established in mid-June outside ExxonMobil’s Longford gas plant in Victoria. The company is attempting to impose new maintenance contracts, which could reduce wages by 30 percent and see the loss of hard-won working conditions.

On August 4, 150 workers and family members demonstrated outside Esso’s headquarters in Southbank, Melbourne. The workers are members of the Electrical Trades Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers’ Union and the Australian Workers’ Union.

Esso recently awarded a five-year maintenance contract to UGL, but according to the unions, workers were told that they had to sign up with MTCT Services, a UGL subsidiary, at significantly lower wages or risk losing their jobs. The unions claim that 200 workers face redundancy. The new contract also allows MTCT to introduce two-week fly-in, fly-out rosters as opposed to the current seven-day rosters.

Workers who have not signed up to the new contracts are not being paid. So far only 20 workers have signed up.

Victorian grain handlers take industrial action

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members in Victoria commenced “protected” industrial action on Thursday in their dispute with GrainCorp over a proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). Up to 80 permanent grain handlers at sites in the Western District, Central Victoria, the North East, the Southern Mallee and the Wimmera are refusing to work overtime or stagger their breaks.

The AWU alleged that GrainCorp management, after demanding a pay freeze, is now offering 1.8 percent increases each year combined with removal of a provision banning forced redundancies. It also wants to pay casuals and labour hire workers less than the permanent workforce.

The AWU and GrainCorp were to meet in the Fair Work Commission yesterday to discuss the EBA. Negotiations have been ongoing for four months.

Brisbane city bus drivers continue industrial action

In a long running dispute over the Brisbane City Council’s proposed new enterprise agreement the city’s bus drivers refused to collect fares from Wednesday to Friday this week. Council claimed that last time drivers refused to take fares it lost over \$500,000 in revenue. The latest action followed a series of limited strikes and fare free days in the past four weeks.

Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) members want the agreement to include improved safety, a say in shift arrangements and a better pay deal. The council has proposed a 2.5 percent pay rise each year for three years, back pay, a \$400 bonus and doubling of security guards on buses.

The RTBU wants 3.5 percent annual pay increases, replacement of the outdated pay structure and an increase in the hourly rates for lower-ranked drivers and input into rostering schedules. The current base rate for drivers is \$23 an hour.

On August 2, over 500 Brisbane City Council workers, represented by seven unions, stopped work and rallied in Brisbane to oppose the council's proposed enterprise agreements. They rejected the 2.5 percent pay offer pointing to the Reserve Bank of Australia's prediction that Australia's inflation rate for 2018-19 will be around 3 percent.

Toll Group logistics workers vote on strike action

Truck drivers across Australia employed by the multinational logistics company Toll Group are voting for industrial action over the company's proposed enterprise agreement. The action could include strikes and bans on overtime and call-backs. The ballot ends on August 30.

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) said that talks, which started in March over the proposed three-year agreement, had reached an impasse over plans by Toll to cut working hours of full time employees and hire more casual staff. Concerns were also raised about moves by Toll to end supply chain auditing, which monitors safety conditions for every worker carting for Toll, including sub-contractors.

New Zealand supermarket distribution workers strike

Chilled food distribution workers for New Zealand's supermarket giant Foodstuffs, the owner of Pak 'n Save and New World supermarkets, have been on strike since August 3 demanding permanency for hundreds of contract workers which they say are filling permanent jobs. The action involves around 70 workers at the CTD Nesdale distribution centre in South Auckland, who are picketing the centre.

Foodstuffs contract workers are employed on minimum wage through a third-party labour hire company. The FIRST union, which is seeking to boost its membership, claims to represent the company's contract workers. It is demanding guaranteed hours, more legal protections for their employment, and an end to workplace harassment from management over unavoidable absences such as calling in sick.

The union has accused the company of sacking seven temporary workers brought in to break the strike after they spoke with union representatives.



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