

Hundreds of Korean shipyard workers strike against wage and job cuts

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 March 2018

## Asia

### South Korean shipyard workers launch indefinite strike

Around 700 workers from STX Offshore & Shipbuilding's Jinhae shipyard, in the south-eastern city of Changwon, began an indefinite walkout on Monday against company plans to slash labour costs by 75 percent and the axing of 40 percent of its workforce.

The company restructure is part of a "self-rescue plan" demanded by the company's shareholders, including the state-run Export-Import Bank of Korea and Korea Development Bank, and the government. Workers were told they had until April 9 to accept the cuts or the company will go into receivership and its shipyards closed.

The union which covers the site claims to oppose the sackings but has indicated it is willing to enforce reductions in wages and benefits. Once the world's fourth-biggest shipbuilder, STX Offshore & Shipbuilding has been drastically down-sized since 2013 in an attempt stave off escalating economic problems caused, in part, by increased competition from Chinese shipbuilders.

### India: Rural Bank workers in West Bengal strike for three days

Rural Bank workers in West Bengal walked out on strike for three days, starting on March 26, in protest against the government's plans to privatise the state-owned enterprise. The workers also demanded equal wages and pensions with national bank employees.

The strike was organised by the United Forum of Regional Rural Bank Employees Association, which said 110,000 workers—15,000 casual and 95,000 permanent employees—were involved in the action. The bank has 22,000 branches across the country and is reportedly making large profits.

### Indian power workers oppose privatisation

Uttar Pradesh power workers struck on March 27 against government plans to begin privatising the power industry in Lucknow, Varanasi, Gorakhpur, Meerut and Moradabad in July. The walkout, which involved 100,000 workers and engineers, was organised by the Power Employees' Joint Action Committee.

The committee denounced the government plans, telling the media that while profits were privatised, losses were nationalised, meaning that profits were distributed to the corporations while the power company debts were imposed onto taxpayers.

### Manipur municipal workers plan strike action

Municipal workers in the north Indian state of Manipur are preparing to strike on April 2 to demand better pay. The All Manipur Municipality Employees and Workers Union has given state government authorities until April 1 to pay wage rises owed to workers and pensioners in 27 local councils since last November.

If the increase is not paid by then workers will strike for two days on April 2 and follow this with an indefinite walkout on April 8.

### Indian taxi drivers end the strike

Strike action by nearly 1.5 million Uber and Ola drivers for higher pay was called off on March 22 after one day following meetings between the drivers' unions and the companies and a series of vague promises. While the transport wing of the Maharashtra Navnirman Sena (MNS) claimed it had won written commitments from Uber and Ola managements to look into the drivers' claims, the union provided no details or a time-frame for resolution of workers' demands.

### Pakistan: USAID funded program workers demand unpaid wages

Over 60 Maternal Newborn and Child Health (MNCH) workers who are funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) have threatened protest action over 13 months of unpaid wages

and dues. The workers are employed in the Bajaur Agency of Federally Administered Tribal Areas.

Addressing a media conference on Monday at the Bajaur Press Club, the workers said they would organise demonstrations and other action unless they were paid all outstanding money before the end of this month. Employed by MNCH since March 2016 they have never been paid on time. In February 2017, however, all payments stopped.

### **Punjab health workers protest in Pakistan**

About 250 employees of the government-run Lady Health Workers (LHW) program demonstrated outside the Punjab provincial parliament in Lahore on Tuesday to demand five months' outstanding pay. Overnight the protesters were joined by workers from all parts of the province, blocking traffic in the city's main road.

The workers, some of whom only receive 7,000 rupees a month (\$60.48), also want a substantial pay increase, timely promotions and implementation of a service structure. Hundreds of LHWs are employed on a contract basis but only a handful given permanent positions.

### **Month-long university non-academic workers' strike continues in Sri Lanka**

About 15,000 non-academic university workers remain on strike for a 20 percent wage rise, a language-proficiency allowance, increased concessionary loans and the introduction of medical insurance and a pension scheme. The ongoing walkout has brought universities across Sri Lanka to a standstill.

On Tuesday about 2,000 university students from all over the country demonstrated in Kandy in support of the strikers. The protest was organised by the Inter-University Student Federation.

While the establishment media is stepping up its denunciations of the non-academic workers, the University Trade Union Joint Committee (UTUJC) continues to promote illusions that it will be able to open talks with government ministers and negotiate a deal.

### **Bangladesh garment workers attacked by police**

Police baton-charged protesting female garment workers from Saad-Musa group on March 21 in Chittagong city. At least 20 workers were injured after they protested on the Chittagong-Hathazari Road to demand unpaid wages and other outstanding dues. Two workers were hospitalised.

The Saad-Musa group and its HomeTextile, Woven and Knit exports to the US, Canada, Europe and Australia.

### **Vietnamese workers strike against proposed pay cuts**

Last Saturday thousands of workers at the Taiwanese-owned Pouchen Vietnam footwear factory in Dong Nai province walked out on strike over company plans to impose a new pay system. The unofficial action blocked

part of National Highway 1K, which links Dong Nai to the neighbouring Saigon province, causing major traffic congestion.

The company responded to the industrial action by quickly announcing that it would retain the current payment system. Workers, however, continued to block the highway for an extended period even after a provincial labour union official informed them of the company's back-down.

According to the General Confederation of Labor, there were 314 unofficial or "wildcat" strikes in Vietnam in 2017, a 10 percent increase on the previous year. The walkouts were over calls for better pay, working conditions and in protest against company demands for more overtime.

## **Australia and the Pacific**

### **Australia: Port Kembla coal terminal workers locked out**

Port Kembla Coal Terminal (PKCT) in New South Wales locked out around 60 workers on March 22 in a 12-month dispute over a new enterprise work agreement. PKCT is owned and operated by mining companies South 32, Glencore, Peabody Energy, Centennial Coal and Wollongong Coal. The previous work agreement expired in 2015.

The lockout remained in force until the following Monday morning. It was third time the company had locked out the workforce this year in its bid to push through major cuts to wages and conditions.

The latest lockout is in response to limited work bans imposed by the Construction Forest Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU). These included bans on the ship-loading of coal from nominated companies, paperwork, computer use and computer-based communications.

Throughout the dispute the CFMEU has worked to isolate PKCT employees, opposing calls for unified industrial action by other terminal workers or its thousands of members in the coal mining industry. It has also offered to negotiate various productivity increases demanded by PKCT.

### **Early education childcare workers strike across Australia**

Around 6,500 early education workers at hundreds of childcare centres across the country walked off the job on Tuesday to demand a 30 percent pay rise. It is the third stoppage by childcare workers in the past 12 months.

Early education workers are among the lowest paid workers in Australia receiving as little as \$21 per hour, almost half the average wage for full time workers. Strike action in March and September last year attracted 1,000 and 3,000 participants respectively, indicating growing discontent over stalled pay negotiations.

The Fair Work Commission industrial tribunal has blocked any pay increase for childcare workers, rejecting an earlier application by the United Voice union to have workers' pay brought in line with the average wage.

### **Queensland brewery workers stop work**

About 70 Castlemaine Perkins Brewery workers walked off the job in Milton, Queensland on Monday in an enterprise agreement dispute. The company wants to lower conditions and increase its use of contract labour. Casuals are paid 25 percent less than full-time workers.

Castlemaine Perkins, which brews XXXX beer, is owned by Japanese-based brewing giant Lion. Management has threatened to shut down its Brisbane facility if workers do not accept its demands. The brewery's workforce has been slashed by about one third or around 40 jobs in recent years.

While the Brisbane workers had earlier voted for a campaign of industrial action the United Voice union limited Monday's stoppage to just one hour. It has not organised unified industrial action by the hundreds workers employed in Lion's other Australian breweries but issued various parochial calls to support the brewery workers and "protect the Queensland way of life."

### **Gold Coast council workers strike**

Up to 3,500 council workers on Queensland's Gold Coast held a one-day strike on March 15. It was part of an ongoing dispute for a new enterprise agreement.

Workers have denounced council management for only offering meagre wage increases and no ongoing employment guarantees in their enterprise agreement "offer."

The council workers fear the prospect of mass sackings and oppose the imposition of a council strike ban from March 19–April 27 during the forthcoming Commonwealth Games. The unions covering the workers, including the Electrical Trades Union, made clear they want to negotiate a sell-out deal and prevent any "disruption" to the Games.

### **Lyttleton Port workers vote for more strikes in New Zealand**

Lyttleton Port workers in New Zealand, South Island have voted in favour of a three-week strike, starting April 8, if their wage demands are not granted. The decision was taken during the recent five-day walkout. The striking workers demonstrated on March 22, blockading rail and road tunnels connecting Lyttleton port to Christchurch.

Around 200 workers covered by the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) want the same pay as Maritime Union NZ (MUNZ) members, who accepted a 3 percent annual increase a year ago.

Lyttleton Port Company (LPC) management has said it will only pay RMTU members the same wages if they accept the sort of flexible work hours MUNZ members previously accepted. The company wants the port to operate on a 24/7 basis.

The RMTU has done everything it could to prevent extended industrial action, holding over 22 negotiation meetings with management, reducing or deferring the strike action and conducting various publicity stunts, such as leafleting outside the home of LPC chief executive, Peter Davie. The union has also kept the port workers' disputes separate from hundreds of rail workers they represent in Auckland and Wellington, who also face job cuts and attacks on wages and working conditions.





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