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Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 November 2014

South Korean shipbuilding workers walk out

Workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), the world's largest shipbuilder, refused to work the normal one hour of overtime at the end of their shifts on Thursday at Ulsan and demonstrated outside the company's headquarters in Seoul in a dispute over wages. HHI and the union have had 50 rounds of talks in the past six months. The company has refused to continue negotiations following a final offer on November 5.

The union wants the monthly base pay increased by 6.5 percent (132,000 won) and a one-off bonus equal to 10 weeks' wages. The company offered only a 37,000 won raise, a 5 million won (\$US4,500) bonus, and to extend the retirement age from 58 to 60. The union also wants HHI to abandon a performance-based annual salary system, which pays bonuses according to employees' performance ratings. The bonuses were previously paid to all workers.

HHI has already started cutting overtime pay and bonuses in an attempt to deal with falling shipbuilding orders and growing competition from Chinese rivals in recent years.

South Korean temporary school workers strike

Around 20,000 temporary workers in schools across South Korea struck for two days on November 20 to demand paid lunchbreaks and paid vacations, which would bring them in line

with permanent employees. Led by the Korean School Temporary Workers' Union (KSTWU), hundreds of strikers protested at Seoul railway station on Thursday.

There are almost 300,000 temporary workers, including cleaning and cooking staff as well as specialised English teachers, in South Korean schools. They are paid 1.44 million won (\$US1,300) on average per month and are required to pay for their own lunches. A recent rule change also means these workers are not paid when the school is closed for holidays.

South Korean public sector workers vote against pension cuts

Nearly 99 percent of 576,800 public sector workers have rejected a proposal by the ruling Saenuri Party and the Korean Pension Association (KPA) to "reform" the public sector pension scheme. The vote, which was organised by the unions, followed a demonstration by 120,000 public sector workers in Yeouido Park, western Seoul, on October 1.

According to the Korean Government Employees' Union, public servants' monthly pensions will be cut by 34 percent but premiums increased by 43 percent. The age at which public sector workers can receive the pension will also be lifted from 56 to 65 by 2033.

The KPA and the ruling party claim that the reforms are necessary to reduce the public sector pension fund's deficit by 43 percent by 2016. Government workers complained that they have tolerated low pay for the promise of high returns after retirement. They fear that the "reform" is to force them into expensive private pension schemes.

The Confederation of Korean Government Employees' Unions has backed away from previous threats to take strike action and fight to oust the Park Geun-hye administration if the planned bill is not withdrawn. The union is promoting illusions in the main opposition party, the New Politics Alliance for Democracy (NPAD), claiming that it might block the legislation in parliament.

India: Tamil Nadu government workers march

On November 16, hundreds of state government employees marched in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu to demand better wages and conditions. Led by the Tamil Nadu Government Employees Union, workers' demands included merging the 50 percent Dearness Allowance with basic pay, reintroduction of the old pension scheme, and introduction of time-scale pay for contract and other similar categories of workers.

Andhra Pradesh municipal workers protest

Warangal municipal sanitation workers marched through the city on November 15 and demonstrated outside the Collectorate to demand job permanency and correction of salary anomalies. The workers allege that the municipal corporation has deducted 100 million rupees from employees' salaries towards Employee State Insurance (ESI) and the Provident Fund (PF) but not credited the amount to workers' accounts. As a result, the employees were unable to receive medical services from ESI hospitals.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) said that since the merger of 42 villages into Greater Warangal, many workers joined the corporation but were not receiving minimum wages. The CITU demanded that all contract employees be made permanent and paid at least 12,500 rupees (\$US202) per month; and that ESI and PF facilities be provided to all employees along with tools and municipal identity cards.

Former fertilizer factory workers in Kerala protest

About 100 former employees of state-owned Fertilizers and Chemicals Travancore Limited (FACT) protested outside the company's headquarters in Kochi, Kerala on November 18 to demand the reopening of the factory. Their action followed a 249-day hunger protest, which was called off in June by the Save FACT Action Committee after the government said it would revive the plant. Further protests are planned in the state capital Thiruvananthapuram in December.

Pakistan: Water utility workers protest in Hyderabad

Water and Sanitation Authority (Wasa) workers in Hyderabad rallied at Haider Chowk and marched to the local press club on November 18 to demand job permanency and to protest against non-payment of their salaries, pensions and other allowances.

According to the HDA Mehran Workers Union Hyderabad, there are about 2,000 contract employees who have been working for up to 15 years, are still awaiting job permanency and have not been paid for the past six months. Five hundred regular employees and 500 pensioners have also not been paid wages or entitlements since August.

Government employees protest in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

National Database and Registration Authority workers in Pakistan's northern province Khyber Pakhtunkhwa demonstrated outside the Peshawar Press Club on November 16 to demand a wage rise.

A total of 30 demands were presented to the government by the local chapter of the All Pakistan Nadra Employees Union. This includes overtime to be paid in full and for the provision of other benefits to the families of employees, such as scholarships to their children.

Workers also want the government to honour its promise to implement a service structure and timescale promotions. They complained that many employees have reached retirement without a promotion. Union officials warned that employees would take further action if their demands are not addressed.

Indonesian workers protest over new minimum wage

Thousands of workers rallied in Indonesian cities on November 14 to oppose the latest increase in the minimum wage. Workers in Batam blocked access to a number of industrial areas while 1,000 demonstrated at Batam City Hall. Protesters denounced the mayor for not meeting their

demand for a 3.3 million-rupiah (\$271) minimum wage in 2015. The mayor had declared that the 2015 minimum monthly wage would only be \$US219.

Meanwhile, the Central Java governor has accepted Central Java Struggling Workers' Movement demands to lift the minimum wage of the province's 35 regencies/municipalities by 10 percent to the poverty level of 1.3 million rupees (\$107) a month. The Central Java minimum wage, however, falls far short of the workers' demand for a 22.9 percent increase. Unions are demanding that the governor resumes negotiations and set the minimum wage at \$247 for 2015.

Cambodian garment unions accept poverty minimum wage

The Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers' Democratic Union (C.CAWDU) and the Collective Union of Movement of Workers (CUMW), representing the majority of Cambodia's 600,000 garment workers, have accepted a new minimum wage announced last week by the government. The wage increase from \$100 a month to \$128 is just \$8 a month above the official poverty line and well below the garment workers' demand for \$177.

A government spokesman declared that demonstrations against the decision would not be tolerated and referred to last year's arrests of hundreds of garment workers and the death of at least four workers.

A garment workers' normal shift is 10 hours a day, five days a week. To earn above the minimum wage many employees work weekends or double shifts. Overtime is compulsory in nearly all Cambodian garment factories.

Australia and the Pacific

Maritime workers servicing Western Australia's natural gas industry strike

Around 300 maritime workers, manning 25 vessels operated by Farstad, one of the 22 companies servicing the offshore Chevron controlled Wheatstone LNG project on the north-west coast of Western Australia, walked off the job for 24 hours on November 18. The 18-month dispute between the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) and Farstad is over a new enterprise agreement.

Workers are demanding "family friendly" rosters following a spate of suicides by offshore resource workers. They want the current five-week on, five-week off roster changed to four weeks on, four weeks off. Farstad has publicly declared that it will not change the roster arrangements.

The MUA has told Farstad that its members were willing to accept a pay increase of 13.5 percent over 4 years, just above the current inflation rate, in exchange for abolishing the old roster which the union leadership helped impose in the first place. MUA members received their last pay increase in July 2012.

Port Hedland tugboat engineers reject pay offer

Tugboat engineers at Port Hedland in Western Australia have rejected the latest pay offer in a ballot run by their employer Teekay Shipping. The Australian Institute of Marine Power Engineers has served a notice of strike on the company and engineers were expected to walk out for four hours on November 20.

Eighty-five percent of engineers voted against Teekay's proposed agreement. Workers want daily work shifts to be capped at 12 hours and are concerned about fatigue and safety conditions. Many engineers are working longer than the 12 hours, with some reportedly working shifts of up to 20 hours.

BHP Billiton and Fortescue Metals Group export iron ore from their massive Pilbara operations through Port Hedland. The companies have responded to falling ore prices by driving up production and boosting shipping movements at the port, putting pressure on tugboat crews to work dangerously long hours.

Centrelink and Medicare workers vote for strike

Close to 80 percent of the 15,000 staff at Centrelink, Medicare and the Child Support Agency have voted in favour of taking industrial action over stalled enterprise agreement negotiations with the Liberal-National federal government. The workers are part of the Department of Human Services (DHS). A similar workplace ballot is expected to be held shortly for staff at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Workplace agreements covering 160,000 public sector workers in 70 departments are up for renewal. According to the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), employees at several government agencies have been "offered" no pay increase, despite inflation currently running at 2.3 percent. For many public sector workers this equates to a \$2,500–\$3,000 a year pay cut.

A CPSU official said several departments also want to remove the legally binding 15.4 percent employers' contribution to public service workers superannuation. "We could see a cut to superannuation, a cut to leave, a cut to other conditions that equates to a 5 or 6 percent pay cut," the official said. The CPSU wants a 12 percent pay rise over the three-year life of the agreements.

Prime Minister Tony Abbott told the media that no public servant could expect the 1.5 percent annual increase recently granted to Australian Defence Force employees. Soldiers have denounced the pay rise as "insultingly low."

Victorian elevator workers locked out

Some 160 maintenance and construction workers at Otis Elevators in Victoria's capital Melbourne have been locked out for three weeks. The lockout was the company's response to authorised stoppages and work bans in October by members of the Australian Manufacturing Union and the Electrical Trades Union in an enterprise agreement dispute. Workers and supporters are picketing the company's headquarters in South Melbourne.

Otis workers are opposed to the company's attempt to scrap an existing agreement clause limiting casual employment to 12 weeks. The company wants to increase its use of casual workers and is demanding current employees be available on any five days out of seven. It also wants to extend the working week by two hours. The company has offered a pay increase of only 1 percent in the first year of the new agreement.

Medical imaging workers in Tasmania stop work

Regional Imaging Limited employees held stop work meetings in the Tasmanian cities of Burnie, Launceston and Hobart on November 18, 19 and 20 respectively over the company's "non-negotiable" enterprise agreement offer. Management wants increased working hours to include weekends but without penalty rates payments.

The industrial action follows a year of failed enterprise agreement negotiations between the company and the Health and Community Services Union.

New Zealand supermarket workers protest

Workers at the supermarket chain PAK'nSAVE's Porirua store on New Zealand's North Island picketed the premises on November 15 and 16 in a dispute for a pay rise. Members of FIRST Union complained that the company's latest pay offer for a checkout operator was one dollar an hour less than competitors and 55 cents an hour less than other PAK'nSAVE stores.

Instead of organising concrete industrial action, FIRST Union is calling on customers to shop at competing stores until the store owner "decides it is time to pay his workers a decent wage."

Staff at Papua New Guinea's parliament strike over pay anomalies

National parliament employees in Port Moresby stopped worked on November 14 and demanded an explanation over back payment of salaries under the new salary structure, including their new grade levels and salary rates. A letter containing all grievances was handed to the parliamentary clerk. According to workers, their salaries were not adjusted in January when the new structure was implemented.