

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 August 2015

South Korean shipbuilding workers to strike

Unions representing 28,000 workers at three shipbuilding companies in South Korea have announced strike action for September 9 after all three firms said they would freeze wages for twelve months. Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI), Samsung Heavy Industries (SHI) and Daewoo Shipping & Marine Engineering (DSME) announced the freeze after reporting losses totalling \$US4 billion in this year's second quarter.

Each of the shipyards failed to reach agreements with unions on salary negotiations in July. At Hyundai, management offered 100 percent of the monthly wage as a bonus plus 1 million won compensation for the freeze. But unions demanded a 127,560 won increase in the base salary plus a 250 percent bonus increase.

More South Korean tyre workers to strike

Following an August 17 wage strike by Kumho Tire Company workers, some 4,700 workers at Hankook Tire, South Korea's largest tyre manufacturer, voted this week for strike action in their dispute for a pay rise. The strike vote, the first-ever by the company's workers, came after 15 days of failed mediation talks in the National Labor Relations Commission.

Hankook has proposed an annual pay rise of 1 percent. The tyre workers' union wants a 6.7 percent increase plus improved welfare benefits. No date has been set for the walkout.

Meanwhile, workers at Kumho's three production plants are maintaining strike action against management demands for a "wage-peak system." The peak system allows employees to accept reduced salaries in exchange for working until the extended retirement age set by the company.

Kumho has proposed a three million-won (\$US2,537) one-off bonus and a one-year extension of the retirement age if the wage-peak system is adopted. The union has called for an unconditional 8.3 percent salary rise and performance-based pay for 2014. It also wants compensation for salary and bonus cuts when Kumho was under debt reconstruction from 2009 to 2012.

Philippines public school teachers protest

Public school teachers demonstrated at the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) office in Manila on August 19 in their long-running dispute for an overdue salary increase. Teachers said that their salaries have been stagnant for five years. According to the Salary Standardization Law, their pay should be reviewed every three years. Their action followed nationwide one-day strikes in November and February over the issue.

The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) wants teachers paid 25,000 pesos (\$US557) per month, up from the current 18,549 pesos, and 15,000 pesos per month for non-teaching personnel, up from 9,000 pesos. Philippines President Benigno S. Aquino is delaying signing House Bill 245, which provides for salary increases for teaching and non-teaching personnel, falsely claiming that the government does not have enough

funds.

The ACT has also called for the immediate implementation of Republic Act 4670, or the Magna Carta of Public School Teachers, which mandates that public school teachers' salaries "shall compare favourably with those paid in other occupations requiring equivalent or similar qualifications, trainings and abilities."

Filipino fast food workers protest

Young employees of fast food restaurants in the Philippines demonstrated outside their work places on August 12, International Youth Day, to protest low wages and poor working conditions. McDonald's workers protested against the restaurant's "turnover work" policy that requires employees to work an average unpaid 41 minutes at the end of each shift. The lost wages are equivalent to about 10 percent of their pay.

In February, McDonald's workers and their supporters demonstrated outside the company's restaurants in Quezon City to oppose "zero-hours" contracts, which are used worldwide by fast food outlets. These contracts do not guarantee any hours of work, workers are always on call and they do not receive the same entitlements as other employees.

Jollibee, the Philippines' leading fast food chain, is notorious for its low wages and routine use of "end-of-contract" workers. These employees are on short-term unprotected work contracts, also known as "5-5-5", and are hired and fired every five months to deny them permanent status.

Cambodian curtain factory workers end strike

More than 400 employees at the Chinese-owned Beautiful Windows factory in Bavet City, Svay Rieng province, in Cambodia's southeast, ended a 12-day strike on Monday after the Arbitration Council agreed to hear their case.

The curtain-making workers walked out on August 12 demanding better working conditions, such as fresh air in the building and bonus pay. They have threatened to strike again if the council's verdict next week does not result in better conditions.

Pakistan: Punjab government doctors protest

In a dispute that has included strikes and protests since the beginning of the year, government hospital doctors in several major Punjab provincial cities held demonstrations on August 21 to demand improved wages and staffing levels. Young Doctors Association (YDA) members protested outside their respective hospitals.

Although many of their demands, including service structure and pay, have been accepted, a YDA spokesman said the government was too slow to implement them and that staffing levels were still an outstanding issue. The YDA said that the government had failed to keep its commitment to create 800 new positions for postgraduate trainee doctors and 290 more jobs at the newly established government health facilities.

Doctors also rejected the government's plan for outsourcing health facilities. YDA said doctors would continue protesting once a week until the acceptance of all demands.

Lady Health Workers in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa protest

Hundreds of employees of the federal government's Lady Health Workers (LHW) program in Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa province demonstrated on Monday to demand four months' outstanding salaries. Workers holding placards and shouting slogans marched in Saidu Sharif city and blocked the main Mingora-Saidu Sharif Road for four hours. They dispersed after a government health official assured them their salary would be distributed in ten days and other issues would be considered.

Another demand was for job permanency. In 2012, the Supreme Court ordered the government to regularise the services of all LHW employees in Pakistan. The order has not been implemented.

There are over 100,000 people employed in the LHW program nationally. The workers are only paid 8,000 rupees (\$US77) monthly. The service provides vital but rudimentary health services in rural and remote areas.

Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa government employees stop work

Workers Welfare Board workers in Peshawar began a "pen-down" strike on August 26 to demand job permanency for contract employees and an end to attacks on benefits and harassment from authorities.

The welfare workers took action in March when the government failed to pay wages for the fifth consecutive month. Like other public sector workers, Welfare Board employees face protracted delays in gaining permanency, late or outstanding wage payments, low salaries and increasing attacks on entitlements.

Government hospital workers in Islamabad continue protests

Doctors and paramedics at the Federal Government Services Hospital, Polyclinic held a protest on August 20 demanding the reinstatement of the health risk allowance that was slashed this year. Their action forced the closing down of the outpatient department and other services. The Joint Action Committee called off a protest march to the prime minister's residence when police blocked their path.

The protest is part of a campaign in recent months by 10,000 workers at five major Islamabad public hospitals - the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Polyclinic, Capital Hospital, Federal Government General Hospital and National Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine - to get back the benefit that constitutes a major portion of their monthly income. Without the allowance, Grade 17 employees' monthly take-home pay is cut by 7,000 rupees (\$US68).

Government hospital employees won the Health Risk Allowance in 2011, after a 35-day protest campaign outside parliament. The allowance covers the risk of exposure to blood-borne and radiation-related diseases, such as cancer, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis and needle injuries. The government increased the salary of federal employees by seven percent earlier in the year but froze the health risk allowance for medical workers.

India: Mumbai port workers end hunger strike

Contract workers at Gateway Terminals India in Mumbai ended a 17-day hunger strike against contract work on August 25 after their union reached a vague agreement with the port operator APM Terminals (APMT). Vessels were diverted from the port during the strike.

The operations and maintenance workers were demanding direct employment with the port operator and an end to exploitative work contracts. APMT agreed to start creating opportunities for workers to become permanent employees and to begin a recruitment process for 24 new gate-checkers in line with the union's request.

Farmers and labourers in Punjab on five-day protest

In a statewide campaign, farmers and farm labourers in India's northern border state of Punjab held a five-day protest starting on August 24. They

wanted compensation to farmers and workers' families who committed suicide due to overwhelming debt burdens, continuing surveys of farmers' suicides and compensation to farmers who had lost income due to cotton crop failure this season.

Data collected by the Punjab Agricultural University, Punjabi University and Guru Nanak Dev University revealed that close to 4,000 farmers and farm labourers committed suicide over debts between 2000 and 2010. The farmers' union, the BKU (Ekta-Ugraha), said that while the government provided a small amount of debt relief to farmers, labourers were excluded.

New South Wales: Illawarra coal miners continue strike action

Around 200 workers at the South32-owned Dendrobium underground coal mine at Mount Kembla in the Illawarra region, 80km south of Sydney, are continuing industrial action and bans begun on August 14 for a new enterprise agreement. They planned to walkout on August 27 and 28, followed by work bans, after the breakdown of negotiations on August 21. The action followed a seven-day strike the previous week.

According to the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), the dispute mainly centres on job security. The miners want an agreement which restricts the use of short-term casuals. The CFMEU has made clear to the company that it was prepared to accept redundancies "if the positions were no longer needed."

Enterprise agreements at South32's other Illawarra coal mines—at Appin and West Cliff—expired last month.

Fairfax Media journalists strike over job cuts

Journalists at Fairfax Media's *Newcastle Herald* newspaper called immediate strike action on Thursday afternoon after being told that 69 jobs or two-thirds of the editorial staff would be cut in the Hunter region, 140km north of Sydney. The cuts include 46 journalists.

The Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance members returned to work yesterday. While it is not clear whether any future industrial action is planned, the union has been collaborating with Fairfax Media, one of Australia's largest private media companies, and other news outlets, to axe hundreds of editorial and printing jobs across Australia in the past four years.

Fairfax Media's regional division, Australian Community Media, is implementing its "news now" model across all its regional mastheads. The model allows the company to shed staff by training reporters to subedit and headline their own stories as well as take photographs and write captions.

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