

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 March 2016

Korean pilots and flight attendants protest sacking

Over 200 Korean Air pilots, supported by pilots and flight attendants from Asiana Airlines, Korea's second largest carrier, demonstrated outside Korean Air's headquarters in Seoul on Tuesday. They were protesting the sacking of a Korean Air pilot who—in line with union bans—refused to work more than 12 hours of straight flying within a day.

The demonstration ended after Korean Air dropped proceeding against the sacked pilot and agreed to resume negotiations on a new work agreement.

While Korean Pilots Union (KPU) members voted for strike action in February the union used a district court injunction lodged by the carrier to restrict industrial action to work bans.

The KPU and the New Korean Air Pilots Union are demanding a 37 percent pay rise. The company offered just 1.9 percent. Pilots want pay parity with their colleagues in other Asian airlines. The pilots have been complaining about their tight flight schedules and relatively small salaries compared to those of foreign airlines, a gap they say is the main reason for many of their co-workers leaving for higher-paying jobs, mostly in China.

Asiana Airlines flight attendants are in dispute over company plans to reduce the number of flight attendants per flight. Asiana Airlines Labor Union members have maintained a sit-in protest outside the carrier's main hangar at Gimpo International Airport since January 3.

Filipino television workers protest

TV5 Media Centre employees and their supporters demonstrated outside company offices in Reliance, east of Manila, on March 5 to demand management negotiate a new Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

Negotiations between the ABC Employees' Union (ABCEU) and TV5 management started last September but became deadlocked after management offered a small pay increase but combined with a two-tier wage scheme and a harsh code of penalties.

If the two-tier scheme is applied, employees are only guaranteed to receive a 1,500-rupee (\$US32) monthly increase for two years. The other half of the increase is dependent on company and employee performances. TV5's lowest paid rank-and-file employees in Metro Manila receive just \$246 a month with those in the provinces paid \$171.

Cambodian construction workers win improved conditions

Around 130 construction workers of the Thai Bun Rong Company in Kampot walked off the job on Monday over allowances and annual leave. The strike erupted after a union representative was fired. Workers complained of the company's unlawful paid-holiday policy and the lack of meal allowances or paid leave for half of the 150 day-contract workers at the company's cement factory.

Under Cambodian labour law, workers are entitled to one-and-a-half days of paid leave for each month worked, accruing for up to three years. According to a union representative, the company did not allow workers to roll their holidays over from month to month and those who tried to

take their accrued vacation had their pay docked.

Company representatives, following a meeting with the Building and Wood Worker Trade Union Federation and local government officials, agreed to reinstate fired union members, pay all cut salaries for January and February, allow rollover of annual leave and give days off for national holidays.

Pakistan: Power-loom workers in Faisalabad protest lockout

In a continuing struggle to defend jobs, power-loom workers in Sidhar village and industrial estate on the outskirts of Faisalabad, are holding a sit-down protest and a hunger strike outside the District Coordination Officer's office. The demonstration is over factory lockouts imposed by the loom owners.

Labour Qaumi Movement (LQM) leaders said that more than 10,000 power-looms are closed in Sidhar and about 3,000 loom workers jobless. LQM members said that they will maintain protests until their demands are met and the power loom operators withdraw legal action against union leaders.

The LQM wants the owners to implement a Punjab government regulation under which the owners employ oilmen, cleaners and loaders in their factories. The Council of Loom Owners Association has ignored the order, declaring that weavers traditionally perform these functions.

Last September, loom owners in Sidhar and Rashidabad responded to workers' demands for recruitment of oilmen, cleaners and loaders by closing factories for several days. When weavers refused to perform the extra duties on February 8, the owners closed 50,000 looms for ten days in retaliation.

Bangladeshi jute mill workers protest over privatisation

Jute mill workers from the state-owned Aleem Jute Mills and other mills in the Atara industrial area in Khulna demonstrated on Monday and Wednesday, blocking roads and rail tracks. The jute mill workers want the government to provide funding for the jute industry, pay salary arrears, establish a wage board and end privatisation of the state-owned industry.

Last July, the Aleem mill ended production and locked out 2,000 workers after its administration was privatised. Both state-owned and private jute mills in Khulna industrial belt are facing closure or restructure and rationalisation. The mill closures began in 2002 leaving thousands of workers without an income.

Bangladeshi shoe factory workers locked out

Around 3,000 workers at the Korean-owned Young International shoe plant in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) were locked out on Monday after demonstrating at the CEPZ main gate the day before. Workers were protesting against a cut to their annual salary increment—from 10 percent to 2 percent—and demanded payment of all salary arrears.

The lockout ended on Tuesday after factory management, under pressure from the CEPZ authority, agreed to pay one month's salary in

arrears and restore the salary increment as per existing labour law.

India: Tata-Marcopolo coach factory lockout lifted

Tata-Marcopolo lifted the month-long lockout at its coach and small truck manufacturing plant in Dhawad, Karnataka on March 7, after the company union gave assurances that the workers would not “disrupt the production.”

Management locked out the workers on February 6, after they walked out over the previous suspension of 12 workers and called for a wage rise. The Tata Motors Marcopolo Workers Association told striking workers that they would lose their jobs if they did not drop their demands. The plant employs 2,500 workers and produces 15,000 buses per year.

Tata Motors auto workers’ strike in third week

Over 400 workers at Tata Motors’ Nano plant in Sanand, Gujarat have been on strike since February 22. On March 3, the state labour department “prohibited” the strike and referred the matter to the industrial tribunal.

Strikers want reinstatement of 28 employees who were suspended for walking out last month in protest against the sacking of two workers on disciplinary charges in January. Around 2,200 workers are employed at the plant.

While management has stopped employees establishing their own union, workers have established a seven-member committee to organise the dispute.

Andhra Pradesh civic workers protest

Andhra Pradesh civic workers stopped work on March 9 to hold a protest hunger strike. Organised by the Municipal Workers Joint Action Committee, the workers are demanding the government withdraw its GO-279 order, which allows part privatisation of government municipal services.

The civic workers fear many of them will lose their jobs under the order. They are also demanding payment of 16 days’ wages which were deducted from the pay of employees who participated in previous protests and strikes.

Former Kingfisher Airlines workers protest in Mumbai

Over 3,000 former employees of the defunct Kingfisher Airlines are still waiting for unpaid wages that accrued during 2012. The workers held a demonstration on Monday in Mumbai demanding that the millionaire owner and liquor baron Vijay Mallaya return to India and release their salaries.

Kingfisher started having financial difficulties in early 2012, which sparked a series of strikes by employees over delayed wage payments. The airline has been grounded since and no longer has a flying licence.

Tasmanian power workers strike

Around 400 workers from TasNetworks, the Tasmanian state-owned power transmission company, struck for 24 hours Tuesday in a dispute for a new work agreement. The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) and TasNetworks have been in negotiations since May on a new single enterprise agreement to replace two agreements made redundant when Transend Networks and Aurora Energy merged in July 2014 to form TasNetworks.

The workers had previously rejected the TasNetworks offer. A CEPU representative told the media that the key sticking points included the small size of the pay increase, dispute resolution clauses and two-tier system used for new employees on electricity discounts, back pay and maternity leave conditions.

The strike was sparked when the company rejected the union’s offer to extend the existing agreements for another 12 months and backdate a 3 per cent pay increase. The CEPU wants nine outstanding issues to be

referred to the Fair Work Commission.

New South Wales power utility workers vote on industrial action

Essential Energy workers have begun voting on whether to take industrial action in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement with the New South Wales state-owned power distribution company. Management’s enterprise “offer” includes axing 800 jobs over the next two years and unlimited job cuts after 2018. Last year the company claimed that it needed to shed 2,500 jobs to remain financially viable.

While the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) claims to oppose the enterprise deal it has allowed the destruction of more than 1,000 Essential Energy jobs since 2013. The ETU told the media that Essential Energy wants to slash working conditions for the remaining staff and impose a two-year wage freeze.

Other attacks include continuation of the current ban on re-employing redundant workers within two years except for casual or temporary positions; halving the amount workers are paid when called in for emergencies from a minimum four hours’ pay to two; and cuts to wages and conditions of outsourced contractors.

On Tuesday Essential Energy filed a case with the Fair Work Commission seeking to terminate various agreements currently covering its workforce. These include axing redundancy provisions, staff redeployments and salary maintenance.

Victorian childcare workers demonstrate

Childcare workers protested outside the Office of Prime Minister and Cabinet in Treasury Place, Melbourne on Tuesday to demand better wages. United Voice union members said that 150,000 childcare workers nationally were seriously underpaid compared to other educators.

Figures compiled by United Voice reveal that childcare educators with a certificate III qualification earn \$20.13 an hour or \$39,776 a year, well below the average income of the wider workforce of almost \$80,000. Childcare workers currently have a case in the Fair Work Commission for higher pay for female workers, who are paid less than males in the industry.

New Zealand meat processing workers protest

Around 50 workers from the AFFCO Rangiuru meat processing plant in the Bay of Plenty on New Zealand’s North Island picketed the plant on Wednesday over the sacking without notice of 214 workers. The sackings came just one week after New Zealand’s Employment Relations Authority ordered the company to reinstate two locked out union members.

The company claimed that the lay-offs were a part of the normal seasonal production slow-down and that only 60 laid-off workers were union members. The meat workers claim that the lay-offs occurred three weeks earlier than the usual seasonal slowdown and that many of the workers had over 30 years’ service and were traditionally the last to be laid-off. AFFCO has meanwhile begun recruiting new workers on individual contracts.

Pak’n Save supermarket workers demonstrate

Pak’n Save supermarket workers in Invercargill, on New Zealand’s South Island, demonstrated outside the store last weekend holding placards saying “Fair wages under attack.” The supermarket employees want their hourly pay rate increased by \$2, to bring them in line with Pak’n Save workers on New Zealand’s North Island.

The current minimum pay of Invercargill checkout staff is just \$14.75 an hour, an amount that will be increased slightly to \$15.10 in April. The Pak’n Save workers also want standard hours of work and no change in working times with a mutual agreement between employee and management. They are also employed on individual contracts and have

told the media that the combination of low wages and a working week below 20 hours keeps them on the poverty line. The store owner and First Union have begun negotiating for a collective agreement.

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