

Workers Struggles: Asia and Australia

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Pay strike at Kia

More than 90 percent of the 12,410 workforce at South Korea's Kia Motors voted last week to take strike action for a 9 percent pay increase, the payment of bonuses owed to them since 1997 and a guarantee of job security until the year 2000.

The unions attempted to come to an arrangement with the company to avert the strike but Kia has refused to meet any of the workers' demands. The management claimed that agreements brokered by the unions last year with Hyundai and Daewoo Motors accepting a wage freeze set a benchmark for the entire motor industry.

Since the onset of the financial crisis in 1997 wage levels throughout manufacturing have declined. A survey by the Korean Chamber of Commerce and Industry released this week showed that wages fell for the first time since the organisation began recording statistics in 1978.

Since the end of 1997 wages have dropped by an average of 1.9 percent. Of the companies polled in the survey, 80.4 percent had frozen or reduced wage levels.

Thai teachers strike against cooperative

More than 1,000 teachers in the Muang district in Thailand went on strike this week to protest the mismanagement of funds by the board of the Ubon Ratchatani Teachers Cooperative. The teachers objected to the refusal of the board to pay dividends to teachers who did not pay debt repayments promptly.

The teachers are angry that while canceling dividends the board members had awarded themselves large bonuses ranging between 150,000 to 250,000 baht each. The strikers threatened to cease paying their cooperative contributions and said they would launch a campaign to urge 7,000 other members to do the same.

Hong Kong union activist victimised

Workers forced their way into the offices of the Orient Overseas Container Line this week demanding the reinstatement of sacked union activist Tang Sin hing and the payment of work allowances and holiday pay amounting to more than HK\$2 million. The family of Hong Kong's chief administrator Tung Chee-hwa, a billionaire businessman, owns the company.

The 40 workers have accused the company of breaching labour laws which Tung's office is supposed to uphold.

Last May the workers set up a union and affiliated to the Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU) to fight the breaches. Tang Sin-hing, a container driver for Orient for more than six years said he was forced to resign from the company last month because of union activity.

"The company said that I could either resign or I would be sacked. I was told verbally that the company was unhappy about a summons for illegal parking and that I had angered some clients. But are these the reasons?" Tang Sin-hing said.

A CTU spokesman, Wong Ying-su, said an ultimatum had been sent to the company demanding a final decision on the allowance issue but "before it was sorted out a core member of the union was sacked."

Indonesia troops fire warnings shots at workers

Indonesian troops fired warning shots to prevent nearly 8,000 workers from two factories from marching into the city of Surabaya on Thursday to attend rallies in support of improved wages and working conditions.

Workers from the household goods maker PT Maspion were already on a toll road heading for Surabaya when soldiers opened fire and ordered them to return to the factory.

In another district, security officers fired shots to prevent workers from the furniture maker PT Sinarindo Megantara from leaving their factory. No injuries were reported.

NSW teachers demand parties declare policies

Over 35,000 teachers from government schools and

Technical and Further Education colleges in the Australian state of New South Wales went on strike for 24 hours this week demanding that the state Labor government and the Liberal Party opposition reveal their policies on teachers' salaries and school funding before the March 27 state election.

About 4,000 teachers in Sydney marched on state parliament while others attended membership meetings throughout the state. The Liberal opposition education spokesman Stephen O'Doherty was jeered when he addressed the rally outside parliament house. He claimed that the teachers who had remained at work were dedicated teachers, not scabs.

The statewide meetings overwhelmingly endorsed an official resolution for further industrial action but the leadership of the NSW Teachers Federation did not set any date for future stoppages.

Rolling stock company to close

Goninan, one of Australia's major rolling stock manufactures, has announced it will mothball its Broadmeadow plant in Newcastle and retrench 230 from its 280-strong workforce.

Speaking at a press conference on Wednesday a spokesman for Goninan's parent company Howard Smith said the loss of a \$220 million contract to build "fourth generation" passenger trains for State Rail to Clyde Engineering was a major factor.

State Labor Premier Bob Carr said sacked Goninan's workers would get "preferential employment" when Clyde starts work on the contract in June but the company will only employ 170 workers at its Cardiff facility.

Over the past 18 months Goninan has retrenched 650 workers from its Broadmeadow plant and 220 from its workshop in Taree in northern NSW. The unions did not mount any opposition to the previous downsizings.

PNG office workers denied pay increase

Over 60 workers at the Port Moresby Transport office in Papua New Guinea stopped work for 24 hours this week to protest the refusal of the management to honor a pay increase to compensate for around-the-clock shifts. The workers had expected a 25 percent increase but were paid only 7 percent. Workers also complained that they had not been paid risk and housing allowances.

Three killed by deadly gasses in New Zealand

Three New Zealand workers were killed last week

while flushing out sewer lines in Ponsonby, Auckland. The men, Eddie Rihia, 30, Kenneth Karu, 47, and Darren Skeen, 19, were overcome by a cocktail of deadly lethal gasses, including hydrogen sulphide and carbon monoxide.

A spokesman for the Ponsonby fire service said the men were not equipped with breathing apparatus and would have been unaware of the deadly gasses. He said the fire station had received a phone call from one of the men saying that he had discovered a worker lying face down in the sewer and another unconscious nearby. The worker himself died when he entered the sewer and attempted to give assistance.



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