

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 August 2007

Korean auto workers resume strike

Union members at Kia Motors Corporation, South Korea's second largest auto maker, resumed strike action on August 13, after rejecting a union-approved pay offer. The package included a 5.2 percent pay rise and a bonus amounting to 200 percent of their annual salary. Management also offered each employee a one-off one million won (\$US1,088) payment if the deal was accepted.

The latest offer was similar to an earlier one rejected in July, after a nine-day strike. The only change was an increase in the bonus from 150 to 200 percent.

Kia claims that the industrial action cost the company 338 billion won (\$US364 million), or more than 23,000 cars, in lost production.

Korean retail giant E.Land locks-out unionised workers

On August 13, the South Korean Ministry of Labor and the National Labor Relations Commission gave approval for the E.Land Group to lock-out all unionists at six of its Seoul stores.

The decision follows sit-ins at several E.Land stores over the past four weeks. Several workers have been hospitalised after riot police were mobilised to break-up the protests. Workers and union officials have also been detained and threatened with heavy fines if there are more sit-ins.

E.Land sacked some 700 non-regular workers in June and replaced them with contract labour prior to the implementation of new laws that force employers to make part-time workers, who had been with the company for two years, permanent. The protesting employees have received widespread support with members of the public joining their protests outside E.Land stores.

Sacked workers want reinstatement but E.Land, having secured a lock-out ruling, has now threatened to break off all negotiations and bring the case to the National Labor Relations Commission for binding arbitration.

Pakistani health workers demand reinstatement

Paramedics, technicians, sanitation workers and class-III and class-IV employees from the Ayub Medical Complex in Abbottabad began an indefinite strike on August 10. They presented a log of 13 demands, including reinstatement of two employees from the complex's blood bank. Workers claim that they were unfairly terminated.

As the strike entered its second day, management suspended 15 employees, banned union activities at the hospital and refused to have any discussion with workers' representatives.

While the strike, which was organised by the Paramedics Association, has stopped the complex's three operating theatres, care is still being provided to cardiac and intensive care units.

Pakistani doctors protest retrenchments

More than 50 doctors retrenched from the Jinnah Postgraduate

Medical Centre (JPMC) in Karachi, held a sit-down protest on Shareef Faisal, the city's main thoroughfare, on August 11. Organised by the newly formed Doctors' Action Committee, they were demanding the federal government review its decision to terminate their services from August 6.

The doctors marched from JPMC to the city carrying banners and chanting slogans. After police were deployed to break up the demonstration, the doctors marched to the Karachi press club.

Pakistani clerks demonstrate

Population Welfare Unit clerks in Nawabshah boycotted work on August 11 and demonstrated outside the city's press club to demand correct recruitment procedures and the regularisation of employment. The protesters carried banners and placards with anti-government slogans.

Demonstrators told the media that department recruitment was organised on a political basis and was therefore illegal and unconstitutional. They also pointed out that employees recruited in 1998 had not yet been made permanent and called for 50 percent of job vacancies to be filled by the relatives of deceased and retired staff. The demonstration was organised by the All Pakistan Clerks Association.

Sri Lankan university non-academics demand reinstatement

Nine suspended non-academic staff members began a fasting protest outside the College House on August 13 to demand reinstatement. The workers were suspended for participating in a national strike last April.

Sri Lankan non-academic staff walked out on April 24 to demand removal of salary anomalies and the payment of wage arrears to all new recruits. University administrations responded by cancelling all leave for non-academic staff and demanded that staff on probation, or employed on a temporary, casual or daily-paid basis, report for work or face penalties.

The University Trade Union Federation called off the strike on May 7, following mediation by the Labor Ministry and the establishment of a cabinet sub-committee headed by Prime Minister Ratnasiri Wickramanayake to supposedly resolve the dispute.

The arrangement, however, allowed the University Grant Commission (UGC) to go on the offensive. UGC cut the pay of the workers involved in the strike and suspended nine union activists, accusing them of organising the strike.

Hong Kong building workers strike enters second week

Over 700 construction workers—mostly welders and bar benders—from 60 different sites in Hong Kong ignored a union directive to end strike action on August 13 after employers offered to increase the daily wage from \$HK600 (\$US77) to \$HK850. The workers want an increase to \$950, the same rate paid in 1994.

Building workers' pay was reduced from \$HK1,200 a day a decade ago.

The Hong Kong Construction Industry Bar-Bending Workers' Union (CIB-BWU) and the Hong Kong Federation of Trade Unions (FTU) withdrew from the strike, accusing the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (CTU), which initiated the strike, of taking "drastic action".

The CIB-BWU and FTU, which have previously been chief negotiators for construction workers, had accepted employers' demand for a decade-long wage cut. The Hong Kong Construction Association is refusing to negotiate with the CTU, insisting that it will only talk to the CIB-BWU. At least 400 workers are still on strike at a Ho Man Tin construction site.

Hong Kong police has warned against disruptive demonstrations and on August 14 refused a request from the CTU to march to the Special Administrative Region and Government Headquarters. The refusal followed a rowdy demonstration three days earlier when 100 workers marched to Central District and maintained a two-hour street blockade.

Thai furniture workers protest sudden factory closure

Phoenix Furniture workers in Thailand began picketing the company's closed factories in Samut Prakan and Chon Buri on August 8. Employees only learnt of the closures from notices on the plants' locked gates. Phoenix Furniture, which employs over 6,000, provided no explanation for its actions.

Workers attempting to locate the owner Lee Chenfu approached the Labour Ministry for assistance and were told by an official that he would attempt to locate him and give him 10 days to "sort out the problem".

Hospital support workers demand wage increase

Around 5,000 Western Australian public hospital support workers, including orderlies, patient-care assistants, cleaners, catering and security staff, have begun a series of two-hour workplace stoppages for a 6 percent pay rise over 3 years. They are members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMWU).

An LHMWU spokesman said many of the health support workers earned less than \$35,000 annually and were struggling to cope with the cost of living increases associated with the state's mining boom. Employees have not had a wage increase for over a year.

Victorian nurses reject government wage offer

Around 1,500 nurses from across Victoria rejected the state Labor government's workplace Enterprise Bargaining Agreement proposal at mass meetings on August 15. The Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) has been in protracted negotiations over the terms of the new agreement.

Nurses rejected a 3.25 percent pay offer and attacks on working conditions and health standards. Under the government "offer", management will be able to change patient-to-nurse ratios, allow unlicensed workers to perform nursing duties, reduce emergency department staffing in regional hospitals and introduce short shifts.

An ANF spokesperson claimed that the government proposals represented a return to the days of understaffed hospitals, unsafe patient workloads, chaotic rosters and unsafe nurse hand-over periods with the possible increase in medical and clinical errors.

The official pointed out that Victorian nurses, on average, earn \$123 per week less than their interstate counterparts. The nurses want a 6 percent wage rise and improvements in the nurse-to-patient ratio.

Demonstration over low youth wages in New Zealand

Hundreds of young workers protested in Auckland and other New

Zealand centres on August 11 for an immediate increase in the minimum wage for all workers. Workers aged 16 and 17 years can be paid as little as \$8.20 an hour, while the minimum hourly adult rate for employees over 18 years of age is \$11.25.

The protest was to highlight age discrimination and youth exploitation ahead of proposed new legislation. Demonstrators were angry that a bill by Green MP Sue Bradford, which was originally aimed at ending youth rates entirely, was watered down. Labour and New Zealand First used their majority on the select committee to insert a 200-hour probationary period before youth receive adult pay.

Locked-out Auckland hotel workers face sack

Gateway Hotel workers in Auckland, who have been locked out since August 3, now face the sack. They were locked out after beginning strike action two days earlier over collective agreement negotiations that had stalled for nearly a year.

Management is attempting to sack them, claiming that he needs to employ contractors for kitchen and restaurant work. He has also failed to provide wage and time records to Labour Department inspectors and may face prosecution. The workers have been picketing the hotel since the lockout began.

New Caledonian nurses protest

About 20 nurses picketed the Nouville Psychiatric Centre in Noumea on August 13. Members of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE), they were protesting the refusal of New Caledonia health authorities to reimburse a nurse for a training course she attended in France two years ago. The workers held a two-day strike over the issue late last month.

Appeal over sacking of Tongan public servant

Mele 'Amanaki, secretary-general of Tonga's Public Service Association (PSA), is appealing her dismissal from the Ministry of Agriculture. She was sacked after allegedly breaching a public service code of conduct which bans political activities. Amanaki, however, is being victimised for submitting a petition signed by PSA members calling on the government to honour its commitment to public servants over pay and conditions.

The PSA leader claims that the directive for her sacking came from Prime Minister Feleti Sevele and said it was a clear attempt to intimidate all public servants. PSA members are threatening industrial action over a number of grievances and the government failure to implement a memorandum of understanding signed to end a lengthy public sector strikes two years ago.



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