

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 September 2007

Asia

Hyundai auto workers begin industrial action

Hyundai Motors union members in Ulsan announced on August 28 that they will boycott special weekend shifts in order to pressure the company to “sincerely” engage in wage negotiations. The announcement was made just before the union and management were to meet over the union’s log of claims.

Hyundai has offered a 5.4 percent wage increase but wants the union to agree to flexible allocations of “surplus workforce” and cuts to holidays. It also wants the union to scrap a previous agreement requiring the automaker to shutdown overseas plants first if the company faced bankruptcy.

The 44,000 strong union has said that it will not budge from its original demand for an 8.9 percent wage rise with a bonus increase of 800 percent of monthly wages up from the current 700 percent, and an extension of the retirement age from 58 to 60.

A strike is likely because every year Hyundai fails to reach agreement with the union prior to strike action. Union and management have met eight times since July 12 but have failed to make any progress. Last year workers struck for 33 days before an agreement was reached.

Kia workers on strike

About 400 part-time workers from Kia Motors in Hwaseong, just south of Seoul, have been on strike since August 23. They want higher wages, job security and equal working conditions with full-time employees. The workers walked out five days after full-time employees at Kia accepted a 5.2 percent pay rise.

Company management has refused to negotiate with part-time employees, declaring the strike and their union illegal. The part-timers formed a union in June 2005 and now have 800 members, including employees at Kia’s 26 subcontractors.

Kia, which is 36 percent owned by Hyundai Motors, has lost production of 3,000 vehicles worth 60 billion won (\$US64 million) since the strike began.

Hong Kong building strike enters fourth week

About 700 striking members of the Hong Kong Construction Industry Bar-benders Union (CIBU) elected new representatives on August 28 to negotiate with the Bar-Bending Contractors Association for better pay and shorter working hours. The workers struck on August 8 for a daily pay rate of \$HK950 (\$US122), up from \$HK600, and an 8-hour day.

Early in the strike union officials accepted \$850 per day and \$950 in August next year but this was rejected by construction workers because it did not make up for a 50 percent wage cut in 1997, when wages were slashed from \$1,200 to \$600, followed by 10 years without a pay increase.

On August 26 about 2,500 strikers and supporters marched from Victoria Park to SAR government headquarters. The striking construction workers were joined by garment, postal and cleaning industry employees. One of the banners carried read: “Government officials get fat—workers tighten their belts”.

The strike is affecting nearly 100 Hong Kong construction sites. Around

100 strikers are meeting daily with Confederation of Trade Unions representatives at the Ho Man Tin construction site to coordinate industrial action.

Chinese police stop workers protest in Tiananmen Square

Beijing police removed about 300 construction workers gathering in Tiananmen Square for planned rally on August 28. It is not clear where the police took the workers.

The workers, mostly migrants, were demanding outstanding unpaid wages. One worker from Hubei province who had been employed by a contractor for over 12 months said, “We have never received any pay. We demand our pay and will not work until we get it”.

These sorts of labour disputes are increasingly common in China. The booming economy has created a cut-throat business environment where workers, particularly more vulnerable migrants, are often persuaded to work without pay for lengthy periods.

Indian explosives employees on fasting campaign

On 28 August, 27 workers from Tamilnadu Industrial Explosives Limited (TEL) began an indefinite fast at the factory’s main gate in Christianpet, near Katpadi, Vellore. The Ambedkar Workers Union members want the company to withdraw its plan to downsize the workforce through a voluntary retirement scheme and for the Tamilnadu government to pay an already approved 500 million rupee (\$US12.4 million) grant to rehabilitate the company.

Dunlop workers protest over factory closure

Some 28 employees of Dunlop India Limited in Ambattur, Tamilnadu demonstrated on August 28 to demand reopening of the factory which has been closed since August 7. The Dunlop Factory Employees Union members also want the company to pay outstanding monies to over 200 workers who opted for early retirement.

Management stopped production on April 27, citing “trade reasons” over a land deal as the reason. Employees have refused to accept this, saying that production can continue because there is over 150 million rupees (\$US3.7 million) worth of raw material still in the plant.

Cremation workers protest

Cremation ground workers from Tamilnadu’s Madurai, Theni, Sivaganga, Virudhunagar and Dindigul districts demonstrated in Madurai on August 27 for a long list of claims.

Mayana Vettiyanal Sangam, the cremation ground workers’ forum, which is affiliated to the Tamil Nadu Labour Union, wants female employees to be given 6,000 rupees in maternity benefits and included in the cremation ground helpers’ register.

The union also wants implementation of a government order which states that rural cremation workers be made government employees in line with urban cremation workers. Other claims include establishment of an exclusive welfare board, free group houses, a provident fund, coverage under Employees’ State Insurance Corporation Scheme, land under state government’s two-acre scheme and a pension for 60-year-old workers.

Karnataka textile workers protest for compensation

Former employees of Mahadev Textiles Mill (MTM) and family

members marched through Hubli in the south Indian state of Karnataka on August 22 to demand the government pay additional severance compensation. Over 500 employees lost their jobs when the company ran into financial difficulties in 1998. The demonstrators later submitted a memorandum addressed to the Chief Minister.

Sri Lankan power workers demand salary increase

Hundreds of power workers picketed the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) head office on August 29 to demand payment of a cost of living allowance, an additional 1,200 rupee allowance and implementation of a systematic method of annual salary increments.

Fourteen unions within the CEB participated in the campaign and have threatened to continue the struggle with a 24-hour strike next week if their demands are not met.

In a separate dispute, health workers protested outside the Matara base hospital for a promised cost of living allowance, price cuts for essential commodities, access to loan facilities with 4 percent interest and insurance cover.

Australia and the Pacific

Western Australian public hospital workers step up campaign

Support staff in Western Australia's public hospitals voted on August 27 to increase work bans in their long-running pay dispute with the state Labor government. The Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members, including cleaners, caterers, patient-care assistants, security staff and orderlies, are refusing to remove rubbish or change dirty linen.

Around 5,000 support workers began a series of two-hour stoppages in mid-August for a 6 percent wage rise over 3 years. LHMU secretary David Kelly said that support workers have not received a pay rise in 14 months and most earn less than \$35,000 a year.

Strike continues at auto parts manufacturer

A 10-day strike by 550 car component workers at Venture Industries in Broadmeadows, Victoria ended on Thursday, following threats of massive fines and without any resolution to outstanding issues.

The strike began on August 23, following the breakdown of negotiations over a new enterprise bargaining workplace agreement. Workers claim that Venture has plans to sack more than half its workforce and shift production to other lower wage factories in Melbourne and China. The company, however, has refused to guarantee more than \$25 million in workers' entitlements.

The Venture plant, which manufactures dash boards and trimmings and is located within the Ford Broadmeadows factory complex, is part of the just-in-time inventory system. Ford responded to the walkout by standing down more than 1,600 employees and arguing in the Australian Industrial Relations Commissions that the strike action was illegal.

On Wednesday Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) officials told the striking workers that they had an agreement with the company. Officials, however, admitted they had nothing in writing and workers refused to end their strike action. Union officials told a mass meeting the following day that the company still had put nothing to paper but that unless the Venture employees resumed work they could be fined.

The car component workers have given the company a week to finalise the details of a redundancy agreement or face another walkout.

National Jet pilots vote to strike

National Jet pilots operating Qantas Link's regional flights voted on August 27 to strike for a wage rise. The 115 pilots, who are based in Perth, Darwin and Cairns, are mainly involved in transporting workers to distant regional mining areas.

Transport Workers Union officials said that industrial action will also include rolling stoppages and work bans that will bring travel and freight in and out of regional Australia to a standstill. The union is currently applying to the Industrial Relations Court for a secret ballot, now required by law, to make any strike action legal.

The pilots, who are employed under Australian Workplace Agreements (AWAs), want to negotiate a collective agreement which includes increased pay, improved working conditions and payment of their last salary increment which the company has failed to distribute. National Jet has refused to meet with the union and said that it will continue AWA negotiations with individual employees.

Auckland hotel lockout continues into fourth week

Around a dozen, mostly minimum wage, workers at Auckland's Airport Gateway Hotel have entered the fourth week of a lockout that has left them without income and unable to work. The dispute began on August 3 when members of the Unite union went on strike after hotel management repeatedly refused to negotiate a collective agreement. Management responded to the strike by locking out the workers indefinitely.

The employer has now threatened to "restructure" and contract out the kitchen and restaurant work. Every day of the lockout he has called the police, and last week staff were issued trespass notices. Workers are picketing the hotel from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., seven days a week and seeking donations of food, money or support on the picket line.

This is not the first time Gateway Hotel has received attention for its poor treatment of workers. In November last year incoming management sacked a waitress because her pregnancy was perceived to be a "liability" to the business. She is still waiting for her case to be heard. The hotel is also currently under investigation by the Department of Labour for paying some of its cleaning staff less than the minimum wage. Management has harassed union members, told staff to leave the union, and brought in illegal labour to do their work.

New Zealand teachers vote to strike

At a series of meetings around the country, New Zealand secondary teachers have overwhelmingly rejected the government's response to their pay claim and voted to hold a one-day strike on September 12 should there be no substantive response to a new claim. The response to the government's offer, which would bind to teachers to a three-year agreement, was near unanimous, with 99 percent of teachers rejecting it. Votes in favour of the strike action and longer-term action proposals in the third term were overwhelming.

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) has lodged a new one-year claim for smaller class sizes, improved pay for teachers with additional responsibilities, equitable non-teaching time for part-timers and 7.5 percent on basic pay. A PPTA spokesman criticised the minister of education for saying "no" to virtually every professional issue in the original claim. The ministry's 4 percent salary offer failed to both keep pay in real terms up with rates set by an independent panel in 2002 or meet school recruitment and retention pressures.

A strike notice was lodged with the state Services Commission on August 28.

New Caledonia McDonald's workers strike

A dozen workers at the main McDonald's outlet in Nouméa, the capital of New Caledonia, held a one-day strike this week. They were protesting a management ultimatum preventing members joining the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE). The strikers took turns picketing the fast food store before a meeting scheduled with management later that day.

Meanwhile, on the island of Ouvéa, workers at the Paradis d'Ouvéa resort hotel remain on strike more than a week after the dismissal of a kitchen hand for the removal of a meal from the premises. The workers say the dismissal was unjustified and are demanding the issuing of a formal warning to the staff member instead.



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