

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 June 2009

## Korean auto workers protest job cuts

Locked-out Ssangyong Motor workers rallied outside the automaker's main plant in Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi on May 31 against company plans to slash over 2,600 jobs. Ssangyong locked out its entire workforce of 7,100 employees last week after indefinite strike action by union members on May 21.

Ssangyong sales fell by 76 percent in the first three months of this year and the Korean bankruptcy court has given the company until September 15 to begin implementing its restructure plans. By cutting its workforce by 36 percent and offering its Pyeongtaek plant as collateral, the company hopes to receive 250 billion won (\$US199.5 million) in new loans.

Meanwhile, Korean Metal Workers' Union members at Hyundai, Kia, GM Daewoo and various domestic auto-parts makers will begin daily two-hour strike action on June 10. The union is opposing further job cuts and wants a 4.9 percent increase in basic pay, a guaranteed 1.07 million won (\$US712) minimum monthly wage and cuts in working hours.

## Korean construction workers strike

At least 25,000 members of the Korean Construction Workers Union struck on May 27 and protested in and around Seoul after talks with the Land Ministry over working conditions were not fully resolved. Morning rallies were held in Daebang-dong and Samseong-dong that drew 4,000 workers and in the afternoon 20,000 workers demonstrated at the government complex in Gwacheon, Gyeonggi.

The union claims that the government is discriminating against its members by increasingly using outsourced non-union workers and contractors. It also wants guaranteed labour rights for self-employed workers and a program to combat unemployment during the economic downturn. Both sides have agreed to resume talks.

## Indian tyre workers begin hunger strike

A strike by 5,000 MRF employees at its tyre factories in Arakkonam and Puducherry passed 32 days on June 2 as many of the workers began a hunger strike. MRF workers walked off the job on May 9 over wages and union rights. The MRF United Workers Union is not recognised by the

company, which responded to the walkout with a lock out.

Striking workers and their families last week resumed protests at the Labor Commissioner's office in Chennai and the Vellore Collector's office, even though Tamil Nadu police arrested and removed 3,000 of their colleagues and supporters during protests last week. Last month police assaulted tyre workers and arrested 600 during a demonstration outside MRF's Arakkonam plant.

## Indian Airline workers on strike

Around 300 contractual, security and commercial workers at the Indira Gandhi airport, New Delhi struck on June 1 over pay and conditions. Indian Airlines Limited-Airport Services Limited (IAL-ASL) Employees Union chairman, Jit Singh, said contractual workers at Amritsar, Jaipur and other airports were also on strike. X-ray and baggage clearing facilities for 60 international airlines at passenger, cargo and courier terminals were affected.

Workers are demanding a wage rise, provident fund, medical facilities, renewal of identity cards and compensation for injury or death while on duty. Their 5,500-rupee (\$US116) monthly pay has not been revised in the last five years.

Singh said, "Many of our men were injured while on duty, but none of them were given any medical assistance. Salaries are deducted for any leave we need to take, despite presenting medical reasons and all the requisite certificates."

Air India management has threatened to sack the striking workers.

## Uttar Pradesh municipal workers protest

In two separate demonstrations last week, municipal staff in Varanasi and Allahabad rallied outside council offices demanding the payment of wages outstanding for two months. The Varanasi employees union claimed municipal workers in Lucknow, Kanpur and Agra are also owed wages.

The municipal corporations claim they cannot pay the outstanding amounts because of insufficient grants from the State Finance Commission. Union official Peer Mohammad told the local media that municipal councils are still being funded according to the 1991 population census.

## Indian meal workers demonstrate

Tamil Nadu Nutritious Meal Workers Union members demonstrated at Palayamkottai, Tirunelveli on June 1 to demand medical allowances and traveling payments for physically challenged workers and pensions. The workers also want their salaries paid on the last day of every month.

Nutritious meal workers prepare midday meals for children at public schools.

### **Pakistan workers protest for union rights**

National Trade Union Federation Pakistan (NTUFP) members in Lahore rallied outside the Punjab Assembly on May 29 in protest against employers banning workers from joining unions.

The demonstrators demanded that workers forcibly removed from the Interwood carpet factory be allowed to resume their duties and that robbery charges be dropped against the carpet workers' representative Niaz Khan. Workers also want the release of two jailed leaders of the Labor Qaumi Movement, an organisation of textile workers.

### **Pakistan workers demonstrate for wages**

Thousands of workers marched in Islamabad and rallied outside the national parliament on May 26 for improvements to the National Pay Scale in the next federal budget and a revision of "outdated labour laws". Other demands included, withdrawal of government plans to privatise the electricity, rail, postal, oil and gas, and steel industries and that enterprises "treat contract and agency workers on an equal basis with regular employees".

The protest was organised by the Pakistan WAPDA Labour Union (PWLU). The Pakistan Workers Federation held a rally at parliament a week earlier on similar issues.

### **Vietnam garbage collectors strike**

Dozens of Ho Chi Minh City garbage collectors struck this week, joining colleagues from outlying districts who have been on strike for over a month in protest against a 15 percent increase in taxes on garbage they collect.

Le Du Hoang from the Binh Thanh District garbage collectors union said collectors work in pairs and are paid on average 3 million dong (\$US169) per month. After the new tax and fuel charges are applied they will only earn 900,000 dong (\$US51.50) each per month. Workers want the tax reduced to 5 percent and the right to collect the garbage fees from customers rather than district officials.

Workers have pointed out that new government regulations on garbage collection vehicles will force them to take out expensive bank loans to purchase new trucks. A city spokesman told the local media that the Finance Department will be asked to review its proposals.

### **NSW social workers demand new pay deal**

Hundreds of community workers marched through Sydney on May 30 to demand a wage rise. Australian Service Union state secretary Sally McManus said NSW social and community workers were paid up to \$20,000 less a year than government workers and up to 35 percent less than colleagues in Queensland.

The workers operate in services such as family support, day care, disability assistance, youth and women's refuges, employment and training services and neighbourhood and community centres. Although employed in the non-government sector, the organisations are government-funded.

McManus said union members would take industrial action if the disparity in their wages was not addressed in the next NSW budget in two weeks.

### **Queensland casino workers vote for strike**

Over 350 members of the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) at Brisbane's Tabcorp-owned Treasury Casino voted last week to take protected industrial action for wage and working condition parity with other Tabcorp Casino employees.

The union claims most of the 1,500 Brisbane workers are paid \$4,525 less than their counterparts at Tabcorp's Sydney Star City casino. Treasury Casino's last offer in April of a one-year 3 percent pay rise and a reduction in sick-leave entitlements was rejected by workers. The union wants a 5.5 percent increase plus more leave and better conditions.

The LHMU claims that Treasury Casino has punished its workforce by removing amenities, including the water fountain and storage from their rest areas, since the dispute began. Union members are expected to begin holding four-hour stop work meetings in mid-July, escalating to eight-, 12- and then 24 hours.

### **Queensland teachers to vote on extending strike action**

On June 9, Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) members will vote on further strike action in support of a new work agreement. QTU president Steve Ryan said teachers will also consider imposing work bans.

Over 37,000 teachers and administrative staff at public schools across the state struck for 24 hours on May 19, after refusing a government pay offer of 12.5 percent over three years. Teachers and administrative staff want parity with their colleagues in other states, which they claim earn between \$4,000 and \$7,000 more per year.

### **Victorian textile workers protest transfer of machinery**

Around 200 Textile Clothing and Footwear Union members and supporters rallied at the Melbourne waterfront on May 29 in protest over the transfer of sewing machines from the Pacific Brands Holeproof factory in Nunawading to Indonesia.

Transport Workers Union members claimed they had located a shipping container from the Nunawading factory at the docks. Maritime workers at the West Swanson Dock have refused to load the container.

About 250 Nunawading factory workers will lose their jobs in two months as Pacific Brands ends production in Australia, New Zealand and

China and axes more than 2,000 jobs.

### **New Caledonia police attack airport occupation**

French riot police fired tear gas at 100 workers and arrested 30 attempting to occupy Noumea's domestic airport on May 28. The attack came after Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) members, including leader Gerard Jodar, breached a perimeter fence and entered two Aircal planes, New Caledonia's domestic carrier.

The confrontation, which lasted for several hours, followed the airline's refusal to pay wages to employees who took previous strike action in support of a worker facing unfair dismissal. Aircal flights to the outer islands were affected for several days and French union alliance, the CGT, called for the immediate release of the arrested workers.

The French high commissioner claimed an explosive device was found in one of the aircraft, a charge that has since been denied. Six USTKE leaders were eventually released and will face trial in two weeks.



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