

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

South Korea: Hyundai temporary workers maintain strike

A striking worker set himself on fire at the Hyundai Motor factory in Ulsan, South Gyeongsang last Saturday, in a dispute between temporary subcontract workers and the company. Over 400 workers have been on strike since November 15 to demand they be made regular employees. One assembly line occupied by the strikers has been closed and the company has sued 27 strike leaders, claiming that collective action for permanent employment is prohibited under Korean labor laws. Over 20 workers were injured and 50 arrested last week after Hyundai called in riot police using tear gas in an attempt to end the strike.

The walkout follows a High Court ruling on November 12 directing the automaker to transform in-house subcontractors who have worked at the plant for more than two years into official Hyundai employees. Hyundai has rejected the ruling and plans to appeal the decision. Over 1,900 in-house subcontractors filed a suit on November 4 demanding they be recognised as Hyundai employees.

Hyundai has about 8,200 contract workers—22 percent of its total workforce. The company claims that any concession will lead to the wholesale conversion of the workers' status and cost the automaker nearly 260 billion won (\$US230 million).

While the Korea Metal Workers Union (KMWU), which covers Hyundai's permanent employees, has threatened national action in December if the company does not negotiate by the end of this month, its members are still maintaining production at the plant. In December the KMWU told its Hyundai members to accept a wage freeze in return for a one-off lump-sum payment. The agreement set the industry standard and several months later Kia auto workers were forced to accept the same deal.

China: Foxconn workers walk out

An estimated 7,000 of 20,000 Foxconn employees defied company sacking threats and walked out of its Foshan factory near Guangzhou last week in protest over pay and company plans to redeploy some workers to inland factories. According to one worker, the Foxconn factory pays a basic wage of 1,100 yuan (\$US165.8) a month, which he claimed was less than promises made by the giant electronics company when it raised wages recently.

Foxconn employs hundreds of thousands of workers in south-east China but is currently building plants in western China where land and wages are much lower.

Indian radio staff strike

Staff at the All India Radio and Doordarshan Kendra stopped work for 48 hours on November 23, demanding repeal of the Prasar Bharati Act (1997), which they claim has undermined job security.

Strikers complained that service conditions, recruitment rules and other administrative procedures were yet to be regularised. News bulletins and other regular programs were disrupted during the strike. The National Federation of Akashvani and Doordarshan Employees organised the strike.

Andhra Pradesh rural health workers on strike

Rural medical service employees, known as "104 contract workers", have been on strike since November 11 over their demand to be made regular government employees. 104 Contract Employees Union members also want abolition of outsourcing, equal amenities with other state government workers and an agency allowance for those posted to the hill districts.

Several 104 workers were arrested on Monday after demonstrating outside the state Collectorate in Visakhapatnam. Union officials have said they will continue protesting until the government resolves workers' grievances.

In a separate incident, municipal sanitation workers from the All India Trade Union Congress protested at the Collector's office in Vizianagaram to demand outstanding wages.

Karnataka workers protest

At least 8,000 workers from the so-called "unorganised sectors", including auto drivers, childcare and health employees, beedi rollers, garment workers and building industry employees, rallied in Bangalore on November 17 over a series of outstanding demands. Rural Development Minister Jagadish Shettar met Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) officials at Freedom Park and received a memorandum from them.

Their demands include a 6,000-rupee (\$US134.5) minimum monthly

pay for district workers and 10,000 rupees for Bangalore employees, the abolition of contract labour, housing allotments for workers and the poor, and free sites for slum-dwellers. They also want ration cards for all workers and strict implementation of labour laws.

Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers Association (KSAWA) members rallied in Mysore, Karnataka on Monday against government delays in implementing the retirement age and pension demands of childcare and health workers and their assistants. They also want holiday leave, annual wage increments and other benefits extended to government employees.

In a memorandum submitted to the chief minister, the KSAWA members complained that they were not paid any government benefits, even after 35 years' employment. Many of the workers were over 60 years of age but had no benefits.

Mangalore Port security workers protest

On November 20, 60 employees from EDA Security at the New Mangalore Port Trust (NMPT) held a sit-down protest at the port's administrative building over their arbitrary retrenchment and other issues. Bahujana Karmika Sangha members claimed that there were irregularities in salary deductions for the Provident Fund and that they were given no proof of payment.

West Bengal steel plant workers locked out

On November 21, 1,500 workers from the Ram Swarup Louha Udyog steel mill in Kharagpur protested on the NH-6 National Highway after authorities closed the plant and suspended workers without pay. An All India Trade Union Congress official told the media that there had been no production at the plant for the last eight months and that the company was secretly moving machinery from the premises.

Workers ended the protest after five hours when management announced they would participate in a tripartite meeting with the labour minister and workers.

Cambodian garment workers protest

About 500 garment workers from the Zhen Yun Factory in Phnom Penh's Russey Keo district protested on November 16 to demand reinstatement of four union leaders and better working conditions. Yang Sophorn from the Free Trade Union of Workers said the company fired the four workers after they were elected union leaders. Following negotiations, Sophorn said management had agreed to most of the workers' demands, including an increase in the overtime pay rate and health services for sick employees, but refused to reinstate the sacked union delegates.

Indonesian workers protest abuse of domestic workers abroad

Workers and human rights groups have demonstrated in Indonesia in

protest against the government's inaction over the mistreatment of Indonesian workers employed as maids in foreign countries.

Migrant Care Indonesia organised a rally outside the Saudi Arabian Embassy in Jakarta this week over the torture of Sumiati Binti Salan Mustapa, a domestic worker. Sumiati, 23, was hospitalised in Saudi Arabia from injuries allegedly inflicted by her employers.

Other demonstrations were held in Madang, East Java to demand the government investigate following reports that an Indonesian female migrant worker Kikim Komariah was found dead in a trash can in Saudi Arabia. She was allegedly tortured to death by her employer.

In September, hundreds of angry Indonesian workers protested outside the Malaysian ambassador's residence in Jakarta over the abuse of Indonesian maids by Malaysian employers. The protest followed reports that a 26-year-old maid was raped and scalded with an iron by her employers.

Demonstrators want the government to provide stronger protection and legal assistance for Indonesians working abroad. In 2007, Indonesia received \$US6.6 billion in remittances from Indonesian workers overseas, and the government is reluctant to do anything that might jeopardise this income.

Sandvik workers in New South Wales on strike

On November 24-25, about 200 employees of Sandvik, a toolmaker and mine equipment manufacturer, struck for 48 hours and picketed the company's Newcastle factory sites at Tomago, Hexham and Broadmeadow to protest the company's plan to cut redundancy provisions.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union organiser Corey Wright said although members would return to work on Friday they planned overtime bans on the weekend and a 24-hour strike on Monday. Wright said the union is discussing further action with members. The union has made no call for the defence of all jobs.

In a recent media release, Sandvik revealed that it plans to rationalise its business during the next 12 months by closing its five sites in Newcastle and transferring operations to a new site under construction 20 kilometres away, near Raymond Terrace.

The Swedish-based Sandvik Group currently has 44,000 employees with operations in 130 countries and annual sales of approximately \$US10.4 billion.



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