Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 December 2010

Korea: Hyundai strike in fourth week

At least 400 temporary workers at Hyundai Motor in Ulsan are continuing a sit-in strike they began on November 15 to demand they be made regular employees. The company is refusing to negotiate and has shut off all power and water to the plant strikers have occupied. Left isolated and with no support from Hyundai's regular workers' branch of the Korea Metal Workers Union (KMWU), nearly 100 strikers have been forced to quit the occupation.

Hyundai has about 8,200 contract workers, or 22 percent of its total workforce, who are paid wages at least half the rate of regular workers with reduced entitlements. The strikers want a July Supreme Court ruling implemented which directed 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 company claims that the occupation has cost it 270.4 billion won ($US238.1 million) in lost revenue. It has filed four criminal suits against 64 of those alleged responsible for organising the strike and three civil suits against 65 strikers, each demanding 1 billion won in compensation.

Last month, the KMWU threatened national action if the company refused to negotiate. The union, however, has directed its regular members at Hyundai to maintain production. Thousands of Ulsan workers have been holding daily rallies near the Hyundai plant but neither the KMWU nor Korea's peak union body, the KCTU, has shown any intention of organising industry-wide action to back the strikers.

Bangladeshi garment workers walk out over wage cuts

Over 3,000 employees of the Korean garment factory GS Hawae in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone (CEPZ) stopped work on December 8 and refused to leave the factory in protest against salary cuts. Garment workers also struck at four factories at Dhaka Export Processing Zone in Ashulia. Workers claim that many had their wages reduced following the introduction of new Bangladesh Export Processing Zones Authority (BEPZA) pay scales on November 1.

About 1,700 Universal Knitting employees also downed tools over the issue and at least eight workers were injured at Universal Knitting when management called police to evict strikers from the factory. Meddler Apparels shut its plant for an indefinite period after workers went on strike and demanded increased wage rates under the new pay structure, and at least 3,000 Palmal Sweater workers walked out this week to demand a pay rise.

India: Punjab power workers strike

Over 60,000 Punjab power sector workers struck for 48 hours on Wednesday after talks broke down over implementation of the state government's commitment to improve pay and other benefits. In April, the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) unions called off a two-day strike and agreed to drop its opposition to privatisation in return for improved pay and conditions once they were absorbed into the new power corporations.

Since then PSEB has been split into two divisions—the Punjab e Power Corporation Limited (Powercom) and Punjab State Transmission Corporation (TRANSCO)—but workers' wage demands have not been honoured.

Punjab hospital contract workers return to work

Over 800 contract workers, employed as ward servants, sweepers and hospital attendants at the Postgraduate Institute of Medical Education and Research (PGI) in Chandigarh, Punjab have ended strike action which began on December 5 over outstanding wages.

The contract workers claim they were not paid for October and November. The strike erupted when a female worker was attacked by the chief security officer at the institute during a protest over non-payment of salaries. According to the strikers, PGI tried to break the strike by employing 100 contractors to do cleaning duties and attend wards.

Contract employees returned to work on Thursday after a two-hour meeting between PGI officials and the protesting employees. PGI officials agreed to look into the complaint against the security officer.

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Andhra Pradesh nurses end strike

Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Hospital nurses in Hyderabad ended a three-day strike this week after authorities agreed to negotiate on their demands including for employment regularisation. Ten nurses had climbed a water tower at the hospital and began a hunger strike while other nurses picketed the base of the tower to prevent police reaching the hunger protesters.

Karnataka secondary teachers protest

On December 4, Karnataka Secondary School Teachers' Association members protested outside the tax collector's office in Hubli to demand equal conditions and benefits with other government employees. The protesters alleged that their union had been calling on the government to address their concerns for several years.

The teachers want improved salaries, job security, pension benefits for those employed after 2006, high school vacancies filled, medical allowances and timely distribution of text books.

Hong Kong pilots vote for industrial action

Cathay Pacific pilots voted by 96 percent for work-to-rule industrial action last week if negotiations for a 30 percent pay rise over three years are unsuccessful. Negotiations commence on December 13. Cathay Pacific expects to nearly triple its full-year profit to $12.5 billion ($US1.6 billion).

The proposed campaign would be the first of its kind since 2001, which led to the sacking of 49 pilots. Last year some of the pilots won millions of Hong Kong dollars in unfair dismissal claims.

Victorian meat processing workers locked out

At least 140 employees at the Swift Australia meat processing plant in Brooklyn, Melbourne have been locked out since December 3, after striking for a new work agreement. The meat workers are picketing the plant and have vowed to stay out until an agreement is reached.

National Union of Workers members rejected Swift's offer of a 2 percent annual pay increase for two years in exchange for company demands that they work 12-hour shifts on Saturdays on reduced penalties.

Swift is Australia's largest meat exporter and has processing plants and feedlots in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia and Tasmania.

Victorian laboratory workers strike

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at Omic Australia, a food-testing laboratory in Melbourne, began rolling one-hour stoppages and overtime bans this week for a new work agreement. Omic employees want a union-negotiated agreement.

Omic workers walked out for 24 hours last month after the company refused to negotiate with the union. The company has responded by threatening to lock out workers if they strike again.

Queensland bus drivers strike

Over 200 Sunbus drivers in Townsville, on Queensland's mid-north coast, stopped work for 24 hours on Wednesday in a dispute over wages and conditions. A North Queensland Transport Workers Union (TWU) official told the media that the drivers had attempted to reach an agreement for improved pay and conditions for more than a year.

The TWU wants a 4 percent pay rise and current entitlements maintained. According to the union, the Transit Australia Group, Sunbus's parent company, wants the drivers back on award pay rates and conditions. Drivers claim this would mean wage cuts of up to $4 an hour and loss of allowances they won over the last 10 years.

Sunbus drivers on the Sunshine Coast (100km north of Brisbane) planned to strike for 24 hours yesterday.

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