

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 December 2010

South Korea: Hyundai temporary workers' strike isolated

At least 500 temporary workers (employees of in-house contractors) at South Korea's largest auto manufacturer Hyundai Motor have been on a sit-in strike at the company's Ulsan plant since November 15, demanding to be made regular employees. The company has about 8,200 contract workers, or 22 percent of its total workforce.

On the first day of the strike over 20 workers were injured and 50 arrested after Hyundai called in riot police using tear gas to assist company thugs to remove striking workers from one of its factories. Workers have since re-entered the building and stopped production of the company's new Accent model.

Hyundai claims the occupation has cost it over 18,700 vehicles in lost production and 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.

The walkout follows a Supreme Court ruling in July, and later confirmed in the Seoul High Court 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 it.

The Korea Metal Workers Union (KMWU), which covers both regular and non-regular employees, had threatened to take national action if the company refused to negotiate, but in a sign of solidarity with the company, the KMWU leadership has directed its regular members to maintain production at the plant.

Last weekend, thousands of workers from other industries in Ulsan held sit-down protests on streets around the Hyundai plant to show their support. Neither the KMWU nor Korea's peak union body, the KCTU, has shown any intention of organising industry-wide action in support of the strikers.

Bangladeshi mine workers strike

Nearly 300 Maddyapara Granite Mining Company (MGMCL) employees in Dinajpur launched an indefinite strike on November 27 to demand withdrawal of charges against five sacked union leaders accused of taking documents and assaulting officials of the company. Workers have lodged a seven-point claim, including demands for regularisation of jobs, employment of local youth, and an increase in the number of eight-hour shifts.

MGMCL Miners and Workers Union members have been campaigning since the beginning of the year for their claims and have vowed to continue striking until their demands are met.

Bangladeshi apparel workers injured in police attack

On November 27, 50 apparel workers, including 15 women, were injured when Actor Sports garment factory management in Ashulia mobilised police and Economic Processing Zone security officers against 3,000 demonstrating workers inside the factory.

The workers were demanding reinstatement of one of their colleagues and being forced to work nearly two additional hours each day to make up for a wage rise as part of a new government wage structure introduced in November. The protestors attempted to work on Sunday but the factory was locked with a management note on the gate stating that plant would remain closed "for a while".

India: Kerala drivers strike

Nearly 4,000 lorry drivers began an indefinite strike on November 30 at the Ernakulam Wharf in Cochin to demand a wage rise. Earlier that day container lorry owners rejected drivers' demands for a 40 percent pay increase. The Cochin Container Carrier Owners' Welfare Association said owners were only willing to lift wages by 20 percent.

The Trade Union Coordination Committee, comprised of many unions representing over 10,000 private sector workers, organised the walkout.

Tamil Nadu milk workers demonstrate

Tiruchi district employees of the Tamil Nadu Milk Producers Cooperative Societies demonstrated on November 29 to demand the state government implement a 10-point charter of demands.

The primary claim is for current employees of the milk cooperative societies to be employed by Aavin (trading name of the Tamil Nadu Cooperative Milk Producers Federation) on a 3,500-rupee monthly wage, with 2,500 rupees for other workers until a new pay scale was fixed. The workers also want vacant positions at Aavin to be filled by milk cooperative employees.

Uttar Pradesh: Ghaziabad municipal staff strike over bashing

A day after three municipal councillors beat up a senior executive engineer from Ghaziabad Municipal Corporation, nearly 4,500 staff and

officials from the civic agency boycotted work on November 27. The strikers threatened to remain out indefinitely if the accused attackers were not immediately arrested. A complaint was lodged against four suspects but no arrests had been made.

Andhra Pradesh workers protest government cuts

On November 24, Andhra Pradesh police established roadblocks outside Hyderabad in an attempt to prevent thousands of teachers and civil servants protesting government budget cuts in the capital. Despite the police intervention, thousands of workers were able to join the demonstration organised by the Joint Action Committee of Employees, Teachers, Workers and Pensioners (JAC).

The JAC advanced an 11-point plan, including an end to outsourcing, the filling of 400,000 government vacancies across the state, and an end to the teacher apprentice system, which employs teachers on low salaries and on a short-term basis.

The JAC claimed that the Andhra Pradesh government was imposing World Bank structural adjustment demands with public spending cuts and the introduction of user fees for government services.

Sri Lankan nurses strike

On Thursday, at least 6,000 nurses at government hospitals held one-hour sit-in protests over long-standing demands. The nurses want revision of the informal nursing constitution, reestablishment of a four-year nursing degree, a five-day working week in line with other public sector institutions, the three-year nursing training period extended by six months, and professional salaries for nurses.

This is the third time in as many months that nurses have struck over these demands and the Nursing Officers' Union has threatened to call an indefinite strike if the government fails to address these issues by the end of December.

Sri Lankan hospital staff on sick-note campaign

Junior staff, including sanitary workers, cooks, attendants, watchers and lift operators, in Ratnapura and Kegalle in Sabaragamuwa Province, launched a sick-note campaign on November 24 and failed to report for work. They want timely promotions, new recruitments and permanent appointments for casual workers. Some workers picketed the Provincial Council administration office in Ratnapura.

Sri Lankan water supply engineers strike

Up to 700 engineering assistants of the National Water Supply and Drainage Board from around the country picketed the board's head office in Ratmalana, on the outskirts of Colombo, on November 23. They were protesting against recruitment procedure changes, which they allege violate their rights.

Indonesian workers protest low minimum wage

Thousands of factory workers rallied at the Kawasan Berikat Nusantara industrial estate in East Java on November 25 over a miniscule increase in the minimum monthly wage.

A National Workers Union official said that this year the city's wage board, which includes representatives of several companies and labour unions, had failed to agree on the minimum wage and handed the decision to Governor Fauzi Bowo. He set the new minimum monthly wage at 1,197,000 rupiah (\$US134), an increase of just 79 rupiah.

Demonstrators demanded wages be increased to 1,410,000 rupiah a month, which they said would help cover the high cost of living in Jakarta.

Indonesian telecommunications workers protest

Hundreds of employees of Flexi, a subsidiary of state-owned Telekomunikasi Indonesia (Telkom), rallied on Tuesday in Jakarta at the State Palace against company plans to merge with private mobile operator Bakrie Telecom. Asep Mulyana from Flexi's labour union said that all 1,300 workers were opposed to the merger and feared that their benefits and jobs would be cut. Last week, the union demonstrated outside the State Enterprises Ministry and in October, Flexi workers in Bali protested against the planned merger.

As state employees, Flexi workers have a pension plan and better conditions that are rarely offered by private sector firms. Asep said that the union would only approve the merger if workers could retain their status as state employees.

Philippines workers rally for minimum wage

Thousands of private and public sector workers converged on Manila on Sunday for protests to demand "legislated, substantial" pay increases. Demonstrators want the national minimum hourly wage for the private sector set at 125 pesos (\$US2.80) and 6,000 pesos (\$136) a month for government workers. They are also demanding an end to government outsourcing of jobs to contractors, which they claim cuts wages and conditions.

Philippines state university staff and students strike

On November 25, students, faculty and other employees at many of the 97 State Universities and Colleges (SUCs) in the Philippines walked out for several hours and protested against government budget cuts to education. Several days earlier, students and employees of the Polytechnic University of the Philippines in Manila walked out for the day to oppose the budget cuts.

The Philippine Association of State Universities and Colleges claims that 1.1 billion pesos (\$US25 million) has been slashed from the government's 2011 budget for the SUCs and funds for student financial

assistance cut by 43 percent.

Cambodian casino workers protest

Over 300 VIP Casino employees at Bavet City on the Cambodia/Vietnam border protested outside the casino premises this week demanding unpaid wages, after it suddenly closed on November 29. Workers left after the casino owner, in the presence of police, assured them they would be paid their dues.

Until the 2008 global financial collapse, Bavet had 14 casinos but many have closed following a huge drop in customers. A Ministry of Economy and Finance spokesperson told the media that other casinos would declare bankruptcy soon. Gambling in Cambodia is restricted to foreign passport holders.

New South Wales: Sandvik workers to end strike

Two hundred Sandvik employees in Newcastle, who service construction and mining machinery, have voted to return to work this Monday. Members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Australian Workers Union at Tomago, Hexham and Broadmeadow walked off the job on November 24 following a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement.

The Swedish-owned Sandvik is restructuring its Newcastle operation, which is currently spread over four separate sites. It plans to transfer all staff and equipment to a single site and double its workforce. The unions and Sandvik have been negotiating an agreement to cover the new site but Sandvik wants reduced entitlements applied to new recruits. This includes capping of redundancy payouts at 10 weeks' pay (currently one week's pay for each year of service, uncapped), elimination of annual-leave loading and reduced long-service leave. Sandvik has offered a 10 percent pay rise over two years and maintenance of all conditions for current employees.

This has been overwhelmingly rejected by Sandvik employees, who also rejected a return to work proposal put to them by AMWU organiser Cory Wright earlier this week.

Yesterday Wright told a meeting of almost 200 strikers at Tomago that they should end their strike because the union had a new strategy and that the International Metalworkers Federation would pressure the company in Sweden. The resolution was passed.

Sandvik Group currently has 44,000 employees (2,000 in Australia) with operations in 130 countries and annual sales of approximately \$US10.4 billion.

New South Wales harbour workers walk out

Up to 300 workers who deal with speed zone enforcement, navigation assistance, boating accidents, licenses and registrations on Sydney Harbour and other NSW waterways, walked off the job on November 26 over a wages dispute with the state maritime authority. The Australian Services Union and the Maritime Union of Australia have been deadlocked with the authority since June over demands for 4 percent annual pay increases over three years.

According to ASU State Secretary Asren Pugh, the maritime authority is stalling negotiations. "We're told the water body needed permission from the state government to commence negotiations," he said and that the last agreement in December 2008 took 18 months of negotiation.

NSW Maritime said they would be lodging a dispute with the NSW Industrial Relations Commission in response to the unions' demands.

Visy workers hold national stoppage

At least 500 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) held a 24-hour stoppage on November 29 at Visy's five cardboard manufacturing sites in Western Australia, Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland, after the company broke off negotiations for a new enterprise agreement.

Workers want a 5 percent annual pay rise over three years, a dispute resolution clause and the introduction of a heat policy. After ten weeks of negotiations, the company has not lifted a 4 percent annual pay increase over three years and rejected all other demands. An AMWU spokesperson said there would be meetings around the country to discuss future action, including indefinite stoppages.

Queensland hospital staff strike

Allied health workers in Queensland hospitals held a statewide 24-hour stoppage on December 1 as part of a six-month campaign for a wage rise. Queensland Public Sector Union and Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union members want a 4.5 percent annual wage increase over three years.

Despite months of rolling stoppages, including stop-work meetings and pickets at various hospitals throughout the state, Queensland Health has refused to raise its offer above 2.5 percent over three years. This is below the state's current 3.2 percent inflation rate.

A striking physiotherapist at Nambour Hospital told the media: "I can't believe how insulted I've been by the fact that politicians can grant themselves a 5 percent pay rise, thinking that what I do is only worth 2.5 percent." Around 30 allied health workers protested outside Health Minister Paul Lucas's electorate office in Brisbane.

Western Australian hospital support workers demonstrate

More than 500 hospital support workers, including cleaners, orderlies and clerical staff, rallied outside state government offices in Perth on December 2 in protest against the government's plan to privatise hospital services.

On October 24, officials of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU), representing the state's 8,000 support workers, opened the way for further hospital privatisation in a new enterprise agreement with the state Liberal government and the Health Department.

The government had insisted that anti-privatisation clauses in the old agreement be removed, but in the face of stubborn opposition from workers the government backed down.

Under the deal, the state government has only agreed to postpone attempts to remove anti-privatisation clauses in the agreement for the next

two years and claims that the clauses only apply to existing hospitals. As a result, the government has begun to contract out services at three new hospitals, the Fiona Stanley Hospital, Midland Health Campus and the new children's hospital in Nedlands.

New Zealand gas and power workers' union calls off strike

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), representing 200 gas and power engineers on New Zealand's North Island, this week called off planned industrial action following a new pay offer from their employer Tenix Group. The union is recommending members accept the company's new offer and expects voting by members to take place at work sites over the next week.

The EPMU in mid-November issued a notice to strike, following a breakdown in negotiations for a new work agreement. Tenix wanted to reduce superannuation contributions from 8 percent to 2 percent and change rules on working hours. Industrial action was to commence on November 30. Details of the new offer have not been released to the media.

Secondary school teachers hold last strike for the year

In a dispute that has involved rolling stoppages and work bans over the past four months, secondary school teachers across New Zealand struck for the last time this year on Wednesday. Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) members refused to teach year nine students as a protest over their stalled collective agreement negotiations. Teachers plan to take further action next year unless the collective agreement is settled.

The PPTA has rejected the Ministry of Education's latest pay rise offer of 2.75 percent over two years plus an \$800 one-off payment in the first year. Teachers want a 4 percent pay increase and a commitment by the ministry to address increasing class sizes through teacher retention and recruitment.



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