

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 January 2012

Hyundai workers in South Korea down tools

Over 2,000 workers at five Hyundai Motor's engine plants in Ulsan walked out for 24 hours on Tuesday to protest management's indifference to the attempted self-immolation by a work colleague. The 44-year-old worker surnamed Shin was taken to hospital after the incident on Sunday and is in a critical condition.

Hyundai union officials claimed that management was to blame. Citing notes Shin left on his computer, it said that the worker had been bullied by bosses after he filed complaints about engine quality to a senior executive and his unit came under management audit.

Strikers returned to work on Wednesday after Hyundai agreed to offer an official apology, punish those responsible for the suicide bid and offer compensation to Shin.

India: Striking doctors in Andhra Pradesh arrested

Police entered the grounds of the Siddhartha Medical College in Vijayawada and the King George Hospital in Visakhapatnam and arrested around 270 striking members of the Andhra Pradesh Junior Doctors Association (APJDA) on January 10. They were taken to the Patamata police station before being released after two hours. No reason was given for their arrest.

Junior doctors at ten medical colleges and teaching hospitals attached to the Andhra Medical College have been taking industrial action, including strikes and protests, since December 26. Demands include regular payment of stipend, and full payment of four months' dues. In addition, doctors want a 15 percent salary increase every two years, improved security and better facilities, and plans dropped making one year's rural service compulsory.

Striking junior doctors at the Guntur Medical College marched to Sankar Vilas Centre to protest against the arrests. An APJDA official said industrial action would continue despite the arrests.

Karnataka nurses strike

Over 500 nurses at Maipal Hospital in Bangalore walked out on January 11 and demonstrated outside the hospital's emergency unit to demand a salary increase and overtime pay. Other demands include incentives and better working conditions. Nurses claim that they are

forced to work unpaid overtime.

"Although we are supposed to work for eight hours in a single shift, we invariably end up working for more than 12 hours. This we are forced to work even without overtime wages," one of the protesting nurses said.

Indian Nurses Welfare Association members have threatened to launch "indefinite protests" if their demands are not met by January 15.

Process workers at Gujarat cooking oil plant on strike

Over 600 production workers at the Ruchi Soya cooking oil plant at Patalganga in India's north-west coast state of Gujarat have been on strike since December 19 to demand a pay rise. The strike hit cooking oil supplies to Maharashtra, Gujarat and parts of Madhya Pradesh.

Workers want their monthly salary increased from 4,300 rupees (\$US95) to 6,000 rupees. The company has offered just 4,500 rupees. Employees are also demanding increased staffing levels and an eight-hour day implemented, with days off for holidays. According to a workers' spokesman, some workers were doing 12-hour shifts with no time off for six months.

Ruchi Soya is India's largest cooking oil processor, producing over 3.2 million tonnes annually from plants in Kandla, Nagpur, Indore, Mangalore and Patalganga.

Air India union issues strike notice

The Aviation Industry Employees Guild, representing nearly 8,000 Air India workers, has issued a strike notice with the Labour Commission for January 14 in protest salary payment delays. Employees of the national carrier have not been paid for the last two months. Sustenance allowance and productivity-linked incentives have not been paid for five months.

On Monday, 89 flight attendants who were rostered on international flights refused to fly and more than 100 cabin crew did not report to work. According to the union, cabin crew who get 70 percent of their salaries in the form of sustenance allowance are struggling to survive. They travel frequently to international destinations where they require at least \$US50 every day to survive.

A recent report by the Director General of Civil Aviation disclosed that almost all of India's carriers faced "severe financial stress." Stiff

competition in India's airline industry has driven down revenue to the point where several carriers are nearing bankruptcy. Air India's current debt is \$13.3 billion. The airline was unable to pay salaries to its 33,000 employees and 7,000 casual workers in May.

Pakistan Railways workers protest

Pakistan Railways (PR) workers protested outside Karachi station on January 11 to oppose a government plan for downsizing and privatisation. The government announced in November that the state-run rail service would be semi-privatised on a priority basis under the direction of the cabinet committee on restructuring. Freight and major passenger services are to be run through a public-private partnership, starting from December 25.

Privatisation was initially proposed in 1997 by the military regime of General Pervez Musharraf. While it could not complete the plan, it split the railways into separate business units, and all "surplus assets" were disposed of. Shutdowns and layoffs reduced the workforce from 113,000 in 1997 to 95,000 in 2001 and then 85,000.

PR workers in Lahore and Quetta also protested, demanding salaries in cash rather than bank cheques. In November, PR workers from Lahore, Peshawar, Rawalpindi, Multan, Quetta, Sukkur rallied in Lahore to protest non-payment of wages.

Bangladesh sugar workers down tools

Hundreds of Natore Sugar Mill and North Bengal Sugar Mill workers walked off the job for two hours on January 5 to demand a separate wage board for mill employees. Mill workers across the country have been demanding a separate wage board since 2009, when the government declared a new pay-scale for government employees.

The Bangladesh Sugar Mill Employees' and Workers' Federation postponed industrial action in October 2010 after the government gave an assurance that their demand would be met. But workers resumed protest action on November 27 last year as the government failed to honour its commitment. Striking workers last week agreed to take further action on January 15 if the government continued to ignore their demand.

Sri Lankan public transport workers strike

Workers in the state-owned Nittambuwa and Negombo bus depots, on the outskirts of Colombo, walked off the job in a wildcat strike on January 11 to protest the non-payment of their salaries. A workers' spokesperson said that employees at the Nittambuwa Depot were yet to receive their salaries for November and December and Negombo workers were not paid for December.

Strikes continue at Ports of Auckland

Over 300 Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) members at the Ports of Auckland Limited (POAL) container terminals walked off the job for 48 hours on Monday in a long-running dispute for a new work agreement. The action follows a series of strikes and lockouts that began on December 1. Both parties resumed negotiations on Thursday.

The company has held firm on last year's offer for a 10 percent pay rise and performance bonuses of up to 20 percent on hourly rates in exchange for the "new flexible roster system" that will place staff on call. The union has rejected the offer, claiming the money is not the stumbling block. The workers' main concerns are the ongoing contracting out of port shuttle work to Conlinxx, a 90-percent owned POAL subsidiary that employs non-union labour, and a proposed new roster system that the union claims will result in less hours, subsequently less pay.

Ports of Auckland CEO Tony Gibson said he would not back down from the company's final offer and has begun steps to lay off 330 union workers and replace them with contract workers.

Papua New Guinea road construction workers on strike

Road construction workers employed by five different sub-contractors on the Passam to Angoram highway in East Sepik walked off the job on Monday after their employers said they could not pay wages from last year. The sub-contractors said they had not been paid anything by major contractor Aspec Limited for over two months. The contractors are owed between 35,000 kina and 45,000 kina (\$US19,600). Aspac claimed that it was waiting for the Department of Works and Transport to release the funds.

Solomon Islands gold miners return to work

Workers at Gold Ridge Mining Limited (GRML) in the Solomon Islands ended a one-day strike on January 4 after the company agreed to sign a memorandum of agreement (MOA) that resolved disputed issues. The MOA included a cost of living adjustment of 8 percent across the board to all employees effective from January 1, 2011, future wage increases based on the consumer price index and payment of wages lost during recent shutdowns caused by a dispute between the company and land owners.



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