

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 July 2012

South Korean auto workers begin strike action

Some 45,000 workers at South Korea's Hyundai Motors and 30,000 workers at affiliate Kia Motors were to stage their first strike in four years after annual wage talks collapsed over working conditions. Both unions, affiliates of the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU), called an eight-hour strike on July 13 and will decide on future action on Monday. General Motors workers have been stopping for several hours each day since July 11. The KMWU covers over 150,000 workers in the auto industry.

The most important demand by Hyundai, Kia and GM workers is for an end to overnight work.

South Korea's MBC and YTN journalists remain on strike

A strike by several hundred journalists and production staff at South Korea's public broadcasters MBC and YTN over political bias by management is in its sixth month. Over 300 employees at MBC walked out on January 30 and were followed by journalists at KBS, YTN, and the publicly-funded news agency Yonhap, all calling for their respective pro-government CEOs to resign over alleged political bias.

While MBC and YTN journalists remain on strike, the KBS union dropped its demand for the CEO Kim In-kyu to step down and has accepted a deal establishing an internal watchdog committee and reestablishment of a political investigative reporting team. Yanhap workers have also returned to work.

Bangladesh: Benapole port workers end strike

Thousands of cargo loading workers at the Benapole land port on the Indian border ended strike action on July 11 after the government assured the unions that their demands would be met. Workers walked off the job on July 9 after the government failed to honour promises to increase wages to the government-declared minimum. Hundreds of cargo trucks were stranded on both sides of the border and riot police were deployed to the port.

The Benapole Port-handling Workers' Union called off a four-day strike on June 6 after the government falsely pledged to meet their demands.

Bangladeshi water transport union ends strike without resolution

The Bangladesh Watercraft Workers Federation, the Bangladesh Ship Workers Federation and the Bangladesh Lighterage Workers Union called off national strike action by 150,000 water transport workers which was planned to begin at midnight on July 8, after the shipping minister claimed he would consider their demands.

The water transport unions' charter of 16 demands includes a pay rise, regular payments and the issuing of appointment letters. The unions also want reinstatement of retrenched workers and withdrawal of legal action against members and leaders of the three unions.

India: Jammu & Kashmir public service unions call off strike

For the seventh time in 10 months the Joint Action Committee (JAC), representing over 400,000 government employees in India's northern border state of Jammu & Kashmir, has called off strike action in a three-year dispute over pay and conditions.

The latest proposed four-day strike from July 9 was called after the JAC reached a deal with the government which it claimed "finalised the road map for addressing the issues." The government, however, has only agreed to decide on the "major" issues by September 30.

Workers' demands include payment of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and arrears, 7 percent dearness allowance, the retirement age lifted from 58 to 60, regular employment for 50,000 daily wage workers and ad hoc employees, and increased payments for Anganwadi (childcare) workers.

Despite full support from workers in all government departments, the JAC has only called limited stoppages. The JAC has previously called off strike action whenever the government threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act.

Kingfisher pilots continue rolling stoppages

As part of ongoing industrial action over outstanding wages, 70 pilots at Kingfisher Airlines walked off the job in Mumbai on July 10. It follows a strike by 200 pilots on July 1. Most Kingfisher employees, including engineers and cabin crew, have not been paid, or only paid a portion of dues, since February. The latest strike is the fourth in ten weeks. A large number of flight engineers have reportedly quit due to the delayed payments.

The airline, which has not posted profit since inception in May 2005,

has a total debt of about 70 billion rupees (\$US1.4 billion) and accumulated losses of about 60 billion rupees. According to media reports, the Service Tax department has frozen 40 of Kingfisher's bank accounts. The airline has drastically cut flights and its workforce to reduce losses.

Andhra Pradesh school meal workers protest

Andhra Pradesh Mid-Day Meal Scheme Workers' Union members protested outside the Municipal Corporation School offices in the Jemmi Chettu Centre on July 5. The midday meal scheme provides nutritional lunches for about 204 municipal schools in the state. Workers complained that many of the schools do not have cooking sheds or utensils.

Their demands include timely payment of bills and honorariums, cooking sheds, cooking gas cylinders, and utensils. The union said protests would continue until the workers' demands are met.

Sri Lankan university teachers' strike in second week

Over 4,000 Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) members have been on strike since July 4, following failed talks with the government over unresolved pay issues from 2008.

Workers want a 20-percent rise in their basic salary effective from January 2012, education increased from the present 1.8 percent to 6 percent of GDP, all education reforms to involve university teachers and the general public, and an end to politicisation of university management and privatisation of education.

Sri Lankan academics, who are among the poorest paid in Asia, have not received a rise since 1996. In 2006 the Rajapakse government cut academic allowances from 30 percent to 25 percent of their monthly salary. Monthly salaries are only 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors.

Sri Lankan power workers strike over sackings

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) workers walked out on July 6 after management sacked 120 casual workers who participated in a strike two days earlier. The union ended the strike after five hours, claiming that management had agreed to reinstate the casual workers and not to cut the salaries of striking workers.

Over 15,000 CEB workers walked out for 24 hours on July 4 to demand a revised contract that would give a pay rise equal to the 45 percent recently granted to executives and engineers. Their existing contract provides for a pay rise of only 25 percent until 2015.

Cambodia garment workers' strike in third week

Close to 4,000 employees at the Taiwan-owned Yung Wah garment plant in Kandal province have been on strike and picketing their factories since June 25 for better working conditions. Strikers planned to march to

Phnom Penh on July 11 to present a petition with their demands to the prime minister. Hundreds of police stopped a protest march to the city by garment workers last week.

According to the Cambodian Workers Economic Federation, it is the third strike by Yung Wah employees to improve their wages and secure a 60,500-riel (\$US15) transportation and housing allowance, a 3,000-riel daily lunch stipend and a 4,000-riel good performance bonus.

Factory management claimed that the demands were in excess of the Labour laws and the strike has been declared illegal by the Arbitration Council. The minimum wage for a Cambodian garment worker is \$US61 a month.

Cambodia: Horus Industrial garment workers walk out

More than 300 workers from Horus Industrial Corp, which makes sportswear for Puma and Nike in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district, walked out on July 5 to demand the reinstatement of 15 union officials and several workers sacked in June.

Strikers, who recently established a union at the plant, are maintaining a picket outside the factory with signs displaying 10 demands that include rehiring the sacked officials and workers; ending anti-union discrimination, threatening of workers and forced resignations; and providing advance notice to workers being fired. Horus management said the company had sent the dispute to the Arbitration Council.

Philippines radio broadcast workers on strike

Members of the Radio Mindanao Network Davao Employees Union walked off the job and demonstrated outside the broadcaster's headquarters in Davao City on July 10. Technicians refused to enter transmitter sites causing a shutdown of Radio Mindanao Network's broadcasts.

According to the union, Radio Mindanao Network management has failed to comply with the collective bargaining agreement signed in November 2011. Union members were to be paid one-off lump sums between 6,000 and 10,000 rupees, according to their years of service, and further negotiations to discuss welfare and benefits were to be held in May. These promises were not implemented.

Victorian warehouse workers maintain picket

Around 600 striking employees of Toll Holdings, a logistics and labour-hire company, at the national distribution warehouse of supermarket giant Coles in Melbourne's northern suburb of Somerton, are maintaining picket lines set up after walking off the job on July 10 over a new enterprise agreement. Toll trucks are being prevented from entering or leaving the warehouse. Up to 80 police officers, including eight on horseback, have been dispatched to the facility.

On Thursday, National Union of Workers (NUW) members rejected a revised pay offer from Toll which increased its original offer of 3.5 percent annual pay increases to 4 percent.

The union's log of claims includes a 5 percent annual pay rise, payment of shift loadings for the entirety of hours worked on afternoon and night

shifts, and a rostered day off for day shift. Other claims are for permanent positions to be offered to casual workers after several months of employment, a voluntary work system for public holidays and the protection of union rights.

Toll workers said they want the same wages and working conditions as other warehouse workers employed by Coles. The base wage rate offered by Toll is \$24.91 per hour, compared to about \$29 at other warehouses. Toll workers do not receive rostered days off and there are no shift loadings for afternoon and night work.

Toll has taken action in Fair Work Australia (FWA) to have the picket declared illegal. On Wednesday, FWA ordered 200 Coles employees at its Goulburn warehouse in New South Wales to return to work after they walked out in solidarity with the striking Toll workers in Victoria.

Melbourne rail and tram workers to vote for protected action

Following failed negotiations at Metro Rail and Yarra Trams in Melbourne transport unions have lodged applications with FWA to ballot their members for protected industrial action in their disputes for new work agreements.

Around 700 maintenance and construction workers at Metro Rail are particularly opposed to Metro Rail's proposal to drastically increase the number of night-time rosters.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union representing workers at Yarra Trams is opposed to the company's proposal for longer shifts at less pay but with the option of a four-day week. The union claims this would lead to serious safety problems, with some drivers working for more than 10 hours at a time, including driving for up to 5.5 hours without a break.

It will be at least four weeks before the balloting of train and tram workers is complete.

Papua New Guinea mine workers locked out

Over 2,000 Wagi-Golpu gold mine project workers in Morobe Province have been locked out for two weeks after demanding better pay and conditions. The Golpu Landowners' Association, which represents small land owners and indigenous workers, wants locals given employment priority and their wages increased by 50 percent with improved training and promotion.

According to landowners, Morobe Mining Joint Venture management had failed to respond to a March 12 petition. The company is refusing to enter negotiations.



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