

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

21 July 2012

South Korean auto workers continue strike action

Workers at Hyundai and Kia auto plants planned to walk out again for eight hours on July 20 as part of an ongoing wage campaign by the Korean auto unions. Up to 75,000 Hyundai and Kia employees struck on July 13. The unions want an end to the night work and to regularise non-regular workers. GM workers have been stopping for several hours each day since July 11 over similar demands.

The auto unions are affiliated with the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) which covers over 150,000 workers in the industry. The unions are due to meet with employers on July 25 but will implement overtime bans on July 26 and 27. The factories close down for the seven-day summer holiday on July 28.

South Korea's MBC journalists return to work

Over 300 striking journalists at public broadcaster MBC voted to return to work on July 18 ending a 170-day strike in a dispute over political bias by management. The decision followed an announcement by the government and the opposition party that MBC president Kim Jae-chul would be replaced and the journalists' concerns would be discussed when parliament opens next month.

MBC journalists 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. 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. Yonhap workers have also returned to work. Striking YTN journalists have not yet made a statement on the development.

India: Jharkhand hospital workers protest

Around 600 non-medical and nursing staff at the Central Institute of Psychiatry (CIP) in Ranchi, Jharkhand protested outside the hospital's administrative office on July 16 and 17 over several demands. These include promotion of sisters to senior grade, child care for women employees, a hostel subsidy and no outsourcing of work.

The union called off industrial action planned for July 18, after the High Court banned all strikes on the grounds that the hospital workers had "no rights to cause inconvenience to the in-house patients." CIP management has threatened to take legal action against any strikers.

Jharkhand coal mine workers walk out

On July 12, contract workers at the Chasnala colliery, which is operated by IISCO Steel Plant, stopped work and demonstrated outside the general manager's office with a charter of eight demands.

Members of the Asanghit Mazdoor Morcha union want pay parity with regular workers, a minimum of 26 days' work for contract workers, payment of arrears and bonuses as per the official agreement and other pay related issues. The union has threatened further action if its demands are not met within a fortnight.

Goa electricity workers protest

Around 40 contract workers from the Goa Electricity Department protested outside Customs House in Panaji on July 12 over the state government's failure to regularise the contractors. Last December the state government issued appointment letters for the regularisation of about 127 workers.

Following state elections in January, the government issued an order stating that their regularisation was in abeyance until further notice. The electricity workers said that their protests would continue until the government honoured its regularisation promise.

Maharashtra bank employees on strike

Almost 400 Janalaxmi Cooperative Bank employees in Nasik have been on strike since June 18 over a pay dispute. At least 30 branches have closed despite management attempts to keep them operating using scab labour under police protection. A Janalaxmi Cooperative Bank Union official told the media that bank workers want increased pay scales.

Striking Kingfisher pilots appeal to labour court

Striking Kingfisher pilots have decided to appeal to India's labour court to resolve their dispute with the airline over outstanding wages. The pilots are representing the airline's 1,700 workers who are not organised in unions.

Most Kingfisher employees, including engineers and cabin crew, have not been paid, or only paid a portion of their dues, since February. The

latest strike, which began on July 10, is the fourth in ten weeks. A large number of flight engineers have reportedly quit because of the delayed payments.

The airline has not posted a profit since inception in May 2005 and has a total debt of about 70 billion rupees (\$US1.4 billion) with accumulated losses of about 60 billion rupees.

India: Orissa contract nurses on strike

Up to 2,000 contract nurses at three government medical colleges and hospitals in Bhubaneswar, Orissa have been on strike since July 15 over longstanding demands. These include regularisation of their services and for an enhanced pay package.

Several nurses were injured on Thursday when police broke up a protest at the health minister's residence. Patients are being attended by regular nurses and trainees.

Pakistani municipal workers walk out

On July 17, thousands of Karachi Metropolitan Corporation and District Municipal Corporation employees stopped work and demonstrated outside the Karachi Civic Centre and other government buildings, to demand the immediate payment of salaries and pensions for June.

The Municipal Workers Trade Union Alliance called off the strike after the Municipal Commissioner promised to pay outstanding salaries and pensions within two days. This is the second time authorities have made a commitment to pay the dues.

Indonesian workers rally in Jakarta

On July 12, 30,000 workers from the Confederation of Indonesian Workers Union (KSPI) marched on the Presidential Palace in Jakarta while thousands more demonstrated at other government buildings in the city to demand a higher minimum wage and an end to outsourcing.

In an attempt to head off more protests Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono told the media that he had instructed the Ministry of Manpower and Transmigration to begin talks with employers and union representatives over the issues.

Cambodian garment workers win small pay increase

Following three weeks of strike action by over 4,000 garment workers at Yung Wah Enterprises and Tai Yang plants in Kandal province, the Cambodian government announced on July 12 that it had reached agreement with garment and footwear manufacturers to pay an extra \$US10 in monthly bonuses and allowances.

The increase, which commences on September 1 and applies to about 600,000 workers, falls far short of workers' demands. These included a rise in the current base rate of \$61 a month for eight-hour days, six days a week, an extra \$25 a month for transportation and housing and increases

in other payments. Tai Yang workers also wanted company contributions to child-care costs and protection from demotion if workers are on sick leave for more than three days.

At least 100 Tai Yang employees have refused to return to work. The company has issued them with termination papers.

Queensland public servants continue protests

On the evening of July 17, 6,000 state public servants demonstrated outside state parliament in Brisbane to oppose the Campbell government's proposal to axe up to 20,000 jobs, mostly through not renewing temporary work contracts. Demonstrators voted to authorise the Together union to begin the process of getting "protected action" status for about 1,000 worksites in August. The demonstration follows state-wide protests that began in June by public sector union members.

Over 30,000 of Queensland's 250,000 public servants are believed to be on temporary contracts—most of them employed on that basis for over 10 years. At least 3,000 jobs were axed when contracts expired in June. The job destruction is part of the state Liberal National government's plans to slash \$2.8 billion from the state budget in the next 12 months.

Queensland sugar mill workers locked out

Around 100 workers at Bundaberg Sugar's Bingera mill in Bundaberg, south-east Queensland, were locked out for several hours on July 18 after they threatened to strike over a proposed work agreement. Last week, more than 70 percent of workers voted against a management offer that included a 3.5 percent pay rise but abolished rostered days off (RDOs).

Management lifted the lockout after several hours when the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union agreed to put a revised proposal to members that retained RDOs but offered a smaller pay rise of 2 percent, well below the state's inflation rate.

Queensland meat workers continue strike action

Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union members at the Dinmore plant of Australia's largest meat processor, JBS, commenced four-hour rolling stoppages on July 17 in a pay dispute. The union wants a 4 percent annual rise and increased penalty rates for Saturday work. The Brazilian-owned meat processing company has only offered a 3 percent pay increase.

The strike follows rolling stoppages and lockouts since May and also included JBS's Fitzroy plant in Rockhampton. Last week, the 400 workers at Fitzroy narrowly accepted JBS's 3 percent pay rise offer.

Victorian blood processing workers strike

For the second time in a week, 50 members of the National Union of Workers (NUW) walked out at the CSL blood plasma company in Broadmeadows, Melbourne in a wages dispute. The NUW, the

Community and Public Sector Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, covering 1,700 CSL employees, have been negotiating for a new enterprise agreement since April.

The unions want 6 percent annual pay rises for the next three years, preservation of shift arrangements and restrictions on outsourcing. In response to industrial action CSL has offered a pay rise of 3.75 percent for the first year, followed by 3.5 percent annual increases for the following two years. A strike planned for July 24 has been called off but overtime bans will remain in place while workers vote on the latest offer.

Victorian mental health union accepts pay cut

On July 19, the Health and Community Services Union (HACSU), which covers 350 government psychiatric nurses, support staff and mental health employees, settled for a draft pay and conditions agreement that is much less than their members' original demands. The sell-out agreement follows ten months of negotiations and several months of work bans and rolling stoppages.

On top of an 18 percent pay rise over three years, HACSU members had demanded more staff for night shifts and high-dependency units, and better training. Under the new agreement workers will receive just 2.5 percent annual pay increases—a real pay cut—and the state government will only provide funds for 43 additional mental health positions.

The union has attempted to talk up the deal by claiming that members can boost their pay by up to 4.6 percent through professional development allowances. Members will vote on the draft agreement within the next eight weeks.

Victorian emergency services workers walk out

Up to 100 Victorian State Emergency Service (SES) workers planned to walk off the job for 24 hours on July 20 in an 18-month pay dispute with the Victorian state government. According to the Community and Public Sector Union, the SES workers, who train the organisation's huge volunteer workforce, were paid at least \$30,000 less than their counterparts at the Country Fire Authority and other emergency services.

The state government had increased its offer from a 2.5 percent annual pay increase over three years to 3.5 percent, but the union wants pay parity with the other organisations within three years—a 30 percent increase.

The stoppage is an escalation of work bans that have been in place for four months, including communications, training of volunteers and participating in meetings with other emergency services. Workers also held a 24-hour stoppage in May.

New South Wales road maintenance workers strike

About 80 road maintenance workers walked out of the Roads and Maritime Services' (RMS) Russell Vale depot in Wollongong on July 12 over the outsourcing of jobs. According to the Australian Workers Union, RMS is hiring three new recruits using a skill hire company rather than hiring them direct. Workers fear that the government is proposing to contract out routine maintenance work across NSW.

The “unprotected” industrial action ended the next day after management agreed to enter talks with the union.

Western Australian building workers strike

On July 17, 50 building workers walked off a Perth building site and formed a picket in a dispute over unpaid entitlements. Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members claim that workers and subcontractors have not had their superannuation and other entitlements paid by the Northerly Group construction company.

CFMEU officials accused Northerly of attempting to avoid payment by claiming that the workers were independent contractors and not entitled to superannuation, annual leave and sick leave. Strikers returned to work after 24 hours following an application made to Fair Work Australia by Northerly Group.

New Zealand aged care nurses strike

Close to 70 members of the New Zealand Nurses Organisation and the Service and Food Workers Union Nga Ringa Tota employed at Aranui Home and Hospital in Mount Albert, Auckland began three days of limited strike action on July 17 in a wages dispute. The unions have been negotiating since October last year for a pay rise that will put them above the official minimum of \$13.50 an hour. Workers complained that they only get a pay increase when the government lifts the minimum rate.

Aranui's owner Ashton Parker has interests in early childhood facilities, gynecology services as well as residential aged care—all sectors receive significant taxpayer funding.



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