

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 August 2012

Striking South Korean auto workers attacked by company thugs

On July 27, hundreds of helmeted, club- and steel pipe-wielding employees of a private security company Contractus raided the factories of car parts makers SJM, in Ansan, south of Seoul, and the Pyeongtaek, Munmak and Iksan factories of Mando Corporation, to evict striking workers. At least 30 workers were seriously injured and hospitalised. Witnesses said police had been pre-warned of the raids but stood by while the attacks took place. Workers of both companies have been locked out until August 5 when the summer vacation period starts.

Both SJM and Mando are in dispute with unions over wages in a collective bargaining agreement. A spokesman for the Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) alleged that the lockouts would not have been imposed without the consent of the big auto makers who receive the parts. Workers at Hyundai, Kia and GM auto plants have been holding limited strike action since July 20 as part of an ongoing wage campaign by KMWU affiliated unions. The strikes have led to a sharp drop in production.

South Korean journalists boycott MBC current affairs program

Close to 800 journalists at four major radio and cable broadcasting stations KBS, MBC, SBS, and EBS have refused to write for MBC programs following the broadcaster's sacking on July 25 of all the journalists who work on its current affairs program "PD Notebook". Writers leading the action held a press conference on July 30 outside MBC's headquarters in central Seoul, demanding that the company rehire the writers.

The protesting journalists allege that the workers were sacked because of their participation in a three-month strike over political bias by management. Journalists returned to work following an announcement by the government and the opposition party that MBC president Kim Jaechul would be replaced and the journalists' concerns would be discussed when parliament reopens this 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. In the latest dispute, journalists have vowed to maintain the boycott on MBC until the six "PD Notebook" writers are reinstated.

Sri Lankan university teachers' strike in fifth week

Around 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) have been on strike since July 4, following failed talks with the government over unresolved pay issues from 2008. All state universities are severely affected and effectively closed. Teachers and students have been holding demonstrations across the country to demand the government meet their demands.

The teachers want a 20-percent rise in their basic salary effective from January 2012, education funding increased to 6 percent of GDP, all education reforms to involve university teachers and the general public, and an end to education privatisation and politicisation of university management. In May, 2011 the Court of Appeal forced FUTA members back to work after they resigned en masse over the same issues.

Sri Lankan university teachers are among the poorest paid in Asia and monthly salaries are only 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors.

Sri Lankan family health workers on strike

On July 24, family health workers walked off the job with a raft of demands. An official of the Association of Family Health Workers told media that they walked out because the government has continuously ignored their demands. He said that the strike was the first ever by Sri Lankan family health employees.

The strike followed a month of protest action that included withholding end of month reports. The workers want office, uniform and fuel allowances increased.

Pakistan government accountants department workers strike

All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) members at the Accountant General Pakistan Revenue department have been on strike since early July to demand pay-scale revisions to bring them in line with other government department employees. Salaries and other payments have been delayed for several weeks by the walk out. Workers are also demanding an investigation into last month's assassination of Bakhsh Elahi, APCA Accountant General office president, who was leading strike.

Joint Action Committee union leaders decided at a meeting this week to suspend the strike during this month's Ramadan religious festival but claimed they would resume industrial action if their demands were not met.

Karachi police attack protesting municipal workers

Hundreds of striking workers of District Municipal Corporation (DMC) and Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) were baton-charged by police and 28 were arrested on July 31 while marching from the Karachi Press Club to the Governor's House to demand immediate payment of salaries and pensions. In other parts of the city workers used garbage trucks to block main roads. Later that day workers threatened to stop collecting garbage until the detained workers were released.

The latest strike was the second in July over the issue. The Municipal Workers Trade Union Alliance called off a strike on July 17 after the Municipal Commissioner promised to pay outstanding salaries and pensions within two days. It was the second time authorities had made a commitment to pay the dues.

According to reports, up to 32,000 workers have not been paid for the last two months. More than 4,000 workers of Karachi Development Authority also threatened to protest if their unpaid salaries since June are not released immediately.

India: Gurgaon medical equipment manufacturing workers protest

Close to 2,000 employees at the medical equipment manufacturing plant of Eastern Medikit in Udyog Vihar, Gurgaon have been locked out since May 10. According to workers, the company owner suddenly decided to shut operations and disconnected the water and electricity supply. "The owner locked the premises without paying us our salaries," one employee complained. Workers have been turning up at the factory every day demanding their dues.

Groups of workers have been demonstrating outside the district commissioner's office to demand government intervention. Union officials have threatened to call a hunger strike if authorities continue to ignore their demands.

Karnataka beedi workers protest

Beedi (local cigarettes) workers of South Kanara Beedi Workers' Federation protested outside the deputy commissioner's office in Mangalore on July 26 to oppose government moves to stop paying education scholarships to beedi workers' children until the age of 14. The beedi workers also want a 3,000-rupee (\$US54) monthly retirement pension. The Employees' Provident Fund only pays 100 rupees a month for retired beedi workers.

Australian construction workers end strike

Striking members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) returned to work at 22 Lend Lease building sites across Australia on July 31 after the union reached a tentative agreement for a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement. Workers walked off the job on July 24, after failing to reach agreement with Lend Lease for improved wages, the inclusion of a job security clause requiring the company to offer subcontractors the same pay and conditions as union employees, and

provisions for apprentices to work on Lend Lease sites.

In the agreement workers receive a 20 percent pay rise over four years and supplementary workers brought in by the company can only be employed for a maximum of four weeks. The agreement also guarantees supplementary, or casual, workers the same conditions and pay as full-time employees. Other issues, such as provision for apprentices to work on Lend Lease sites and extension of the agreement to include Western Australian members, are still to be resolved.

Salvation Army workers in Victoria protest

On July 26, more than 200 employees of The Salvation Army (TSA) protested outside the organisation's headquarters in Blackburn, Melbourne over pay. Australian Services Union (ASU) members are protesting delayed wage increases that were to be paid from July 1. TSA management told employees the new salary rates would not be paid until December.

In addition, the ASU has accused TSA of under classifying its employees in a bid to cut costs as it moves to the new pay scale. An ASU official claimed that some employees have been incorrectly classified and will lose over \$200 a week. The dispute affects community service workers at nine TSA centres throughout Victoria.

Queensland public sector workers accelerate industrial action

As part of a state-wide action to oppose the Liberal National Party (LNP) government's proposal to axe up to 20,000 jobs, public sector workers at 1,000 work sites across Queensland will begin a series of protected rolling stoppages on August 8. The action follows state-wide protests that began in June by public sector union members.

On August 1, thousands of delegates from 34 Queensland unions voted unanimously in favour of a day of strike action on September 12—the day after the LNP government is due to deliver its first state budget. The job destruction is part of the state government's plans to slash \$2.8 billion from the state budget in the next 12 months.

At least 6,000 jobs have already been axed, mostly through not renewing temporary work contracts. 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. Queensland Premier Campbell Newman has earmarked another 14,000 cuts.

A Public Service Commission directive issued this week strips job protections from all but police and health workers, overriding enterprise-bargaining agreements. Public servants' union Together claimed that under this directive, previously protected positions could now be contracted out and forced retrenchments would also be allowed.

Queensland cleaners protest

On July 27, members of the United Voice (UV) union who work for cleaning contractors in shopping centres owned by an off-shoot of the Commonwealth Bank of Australia protested outside the bank headquarters in Brisbane's CBD to demand improved wages. The action was part of UV's long-running "Clean Start" campaign to unionise Australia's low-

paid contract cleaning sector.

In December, cleaners employed by Spotless in south-east Queensland's shopping centres, along with Spotless cleaners at 11 shopping centres in Victoria voted overwhelmingly for industrial action, with ongoing protests. The cleaners on average are paid \$17 an hour, slightly above the government minimum wage of \$15.96 an hour. UV has demanded a 33 percent pay increase for all cleaners.



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