

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

18 August 2012

South Korean auto components manufacturer lifts lockdown

On August 14, South Korea's largest auto components manufacturer Mando Corporation complied with a government directive to end the lockdown at its Pyeongtaek, Munmak and Iksan plants. Mando previously told striking employees that they would not be allowed back to work without signing a "no strike" pledge.

The lockdown began on July 27 after hundreds of helmeted, club- and steel pipe-wielding Contractus private security employees violently evicted Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) members from the plants. KMWU members had been on strike since early June over a pay dispute. Police were pre-warned of the raids but did not intervene during the brutal attack. At least 30 workers were seriously injured and hospitalised.

Workers began limited strike action on June 4 for a wage rise, retirement age extension and against the takeover of a local auto parts maker previously an affiliate of Mando but later sold to a US firm. Mando is the biggest parts supplier to Hyundai and Kia.

Hyundai and Kia are currently in dispute with KMWU members who are demanding a pay rise, regularisation of non-regular workers and night work ended. Hyundai employees have been holding daily two-hour rolling stoppages since August 8. Their action followed joint strikes by 75,000 Hyundai and Kia employees on July 13 and 20. GM workers began limited industrial action on similar issues on July 11.

Strikes continue in Bangladesh garment industry

At least 150 employees of JR Fashion in Chittagong walked off the job on August 15 and demonstrated outside the factory to demand payment of salaries outstanding for the last four months. Over 40 police were deployed to clear the road. Workers moved after management and police said wages would be paid by mid afternoon, which didn't happen. Strikers then occupied the factory and vowed to remain until they were paid.

Media reported that officials of the Bangladesh Garments Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) had rushed to the factory fearing a return of mass protests that have recently severely disrupted production and profits. On August 9, a large contingent of police was mobilised as thousands of garment workers at factories across the country held street processions to protest non-payment of festival allowance before the Eid-ul Fitr (religious) holiday. Many workers were owed wages for June and July and took to the streets after turning up at the factories to collect their pay and found the factories locked and no management personnel in attendance.

In June over 500,000 workers were locked out in Ashulia. Hundreds of factories closed in response to a mass strike over brutal working conditions and poverty wages. More than 1,000 police and Rapid Action

Battalion forces were mobilised to clear the streets of thousands of striking garment workers. Many workers were injured and hospitalised due to police actions.

Sri Lankan power workers on strike

Around 14,000 workers of 28 unions at the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) struck on August 10 to demand an end to privatisation and for 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. Thousands of strikers demonstrated in front of the CEB in Colombo on August 13 blocking traffic for several hours in the city centre. Strikers said they would stay out until their demands were met.

CEB has implemented rolling three-hour power cuts throughout the country. The Ceylon Electricity Board Engineer's Union has taken the side of management and has allowed its members to scab, along with contract workers and retired workers. Armed forces have been deployed at the CEB head office and at key installations.

The government has earmarked CEB depots at Karawella and Galapitama for privatisation. The latest action follows a 24-hour strike on July 4 over the same issues.

Sri Lankan university teachers' strike continues

Around 4,000 members of the Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) have been on strike since July 4 over unresolved pay issues from 2008. All state universities are severely affected and effectively closed. Teachers, supported by students, have been launching picket lines near the universities and on the parliamentary road during the last week.

Demands include 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.

The government indicated it has no intentions of granting their demands, saying university teachers are well paid, even though Sri Lankan university teachers are among the poorest paid in Asia. Monthly salaries are only 20,700 rupees (\$US190) for junior lecturers and 57,000 rupees for professors.

India: Karnataka university staff on indefinite strike

About 500 daily wage field workers at the University of Agricultural Sciences in Dharwad have been on strike since August 13 to demand job regularisation. Strikers held a procession in the university campus and protested in front of the administrative building. An official of the Agricultural Laborers' and Monthly Paid Employees Association told demonstrators that 665 field workers have been working as daily wage workers since 1984 but the vice chancellor and registrar had refused to send a request to the government for regularisation, even though the government has said it would approve the request.

Kerala LPG head-load workers end strike

The 16 day long strike by LPG head-load workers in Kerala ended on August 10 after contractors agreed to implement a government order directing them to pay the 27 percent levy to the Welfare Fund Board, as required by law. Delivery of LPG cylinders for household cooking had reached a 45-day backlog. The government had threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA), if the deadlock continued.

Pakistani fertiliser workers protest

On August 7, 150 employees of Fatima Fertiliser Company in Bahawalpur, Punjab walked off the job and protested outside the plant to oppose the sacking of 40 workers including two office bearers of the FFC All-Contract Workers Union. The protest was called off after four hours when management agreed to renew the sacked workers' contracts.

The union had also demanded permanent jobs for all contract employees. According to union leaders, only 450 of the 2,000-strong workforce are permanent.

Western Australian hospital support workers stop work

On August 13, 50 hospital support workers at the Sir Charles Gardiner Hospital in Perth walked off the job to discuss the Liberal state government's latest pay offer. Members of the United Voice union want a pay increase of \$80 per week. Workers rejected the government's offer of only \$28, which they claimed was not enough to cover cost of living rises and increased staff parking fees.

In the absence of any call from UV officials for strike action, members voted to impose a work to rule campaign along with workers at other Perth hospitals who are due to hold similar stop work meetings.

Victorian rail unions implement bans

Around 700 workers employed in the Metro rail network in Melbourne began industrial action on August 18 in a dispute for a new work agreement. The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Association of

Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers Australia, representing signaling and track maintenance workers, will implement overtime bans this Saturday and the Rail Tram and Bus Union, representing train drivers, will follow the week after. The three unions will also hold stop work meetings next Tuesday.

Track and signal maintenance workers are particularly opposed to Metro's proposal to drastically increase the number of night-time rosters. According to an ETU spokesman the compulsory shift changes proposed as part of the new enterprise agreement could reduce the income of members by \$10,000.

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union 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.

Victorian public school teachers and support staff to strike

Close to 7,000 Victorian public education support staff, including teachers' aides, IT and administrative workers, have voted (by 97 percent) to join teachers and principals in a state-wide 24-hour strike on September 5 in a ten-month dispute with the Baillieu government for a new Enterprise Agreement. The state's 1,200 public schools will shut for the day. Fair Work Australia has approved the Australian Education Union's (AEU) application for support staff to join teachers in the strike.

The strike follows a 24-hour walkout by 30,000 teachers and principals in June which closed 200 schools. The AEU wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years and a reduction in the number of short-term contracts. Close to 45 percent of education support staff are on short-term contracts. The government is offering 2.5 percent per year, with any further increases offset by productivity gains and the introduction of performance-based pay.

Queensland sugar mill workers reject pay offer

Following two months of strikes and lockouts, workers at Bundaberg Sugar's Bingera mill in Bundaberg, south-east Queensland, on August 10 voted against the company's latest pay offer. The offer, rejected by members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and Electrical Trades Union, included 2.7 percent wage increases each year for three years and the option to have one or two weeks of workers' six weeks of annual leave bought back by the company.

According to an ETU official the 2.7 percent wage increase offer was not in line with other Queensland mills, which had recently signed new agreements that included 4 percent increases and no loss of entitlements. The official said the company wanted to strip all ADOs (accrued days off) plus four RDOs (rostered days off) from annual leave. Negotiations are scheduled to resume next week.

Solomon Islands luxury hotel workers strike

Over 150 employees at one of Solomon Islands' premier hotels, Heritage Park Hotel, walked off the job for 24 hours on August 10 in a

longstanding dispute over pay and conditions. Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) members said management had repeatedly ignored employees' longstanding issues during staff meetings.

Workers agreed to return to work the following day after management gave an assurance to deal with their log of claims and respond by August 31. SINUW has lodged a notice of dispute with the Trade Disputes Panel and has sought a hearing in the High Court over the workers' grievances.



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