

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 August 2012

South Korean auto workers continue strikes

Unions affiliated with the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) at Hyundai, Kia and General Motors (GM) have been holding rolling stoppages since July 11 in a dispute over wages and conditions. The workers also want regularisation of non-regular workers and night work ended.

Hyundai workers stopped work on Tuesday and Wednesday for two and six hours respectively and Kia workers struck for six hours on Wednesday. Hyundai and Kia employees want a 151,696-won (\$US135) rise in monthly wages and for 30 percent of the companies' net profit to be used for performance-based bonuses.

Hyundai, which has a 34 percent stake in Kia, offered to introduce the daytime-only shift system in 2013 and give permanent contracts to more than 3,000 subcontracted workers by 2015. It has refused to employ additional workers to cover the night shift closure and is demanding the same production output. The union wants additional employees hired and all of the current 8,000 in-house subcontract workers made permanent.

GM workers have rejected a basic pay increase of 92,000 won, performance-based bonuses of 5 million won and a one-off incentive payment of 3 million won per person. The GM union hopes to restart negotiations next week.

South Korean tyre manufacturing workers strike

Over 3,000 workers at Kumho Tire, South Korea's second-biggest tyre maker, struck at company plants in Gwangju and Gokseong on August 16 to demand a wage rise. The union wants a 13 percent increase and reinstatement of some fired workers. The tyre-maker offered a one-off 150 percent bonus and a "wage-peak system." The union suspended the strike the next day after a court injunction was issued against the walkout.

The strike came just two days after the union ended a month-long partial strike over wage anomalies and other outstanding differences. While most issues were resolved after the month-long dispute, the wage demands remained.

Indian bank workers hold national strike

Close to one million employees of 24 public sector utility (PSU) banks, 12 private banks and six foreign banks walked out for 48 hours on August 22 in a nationwide strike against the Indian government's banking reform bill. The United Forum of Bank Unions, an umbrella organisation of nine

unions, claimed that the legislation, which was introduced into parliament on August 22, was in preparation for the outsourcing of non-core bank activities and eventual privatisation of PSU banks.

The bank unions are also demanding resolution of long-standing issues such as pensions, housing loan revision and a five-day working week.

Retired Tamil Nadu transport workers resume protests

For the second time in two months, Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation (TNSTC) Retired Employees' Welfare Association members staged a sit-in outside the TNSTC head office in Madurai with a six-point charter of demands.

TNSTC members want provision of bus passes for widows drawing a pension, payment of all dues on retirement and employment for children of workers who have at least four-and-a-half years' service. The association has also demanded the Tamil Nadu State Transport withdraw plans for a new pension scheme.

Sri Lankan government shuts 21 universities

All universities in Sri Lanka, except medical institutions, were shut down for an unspecified period on August 21, following a directive by the Rajapakse government's higher education minister. The minister claimed the closure was due to ongoing strike action by 4,000 Federation of University Teachers' Associations (FUTA) members. The university teachers have been on strike since July 4 over pay issues, unresolved since 2008.

The FUTA members 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.

FUTA officials told the media this week that they would end the strike if the government responded positively in meetings this week. The government, however, had previously made clear that it has no intention of granting FUTA's demands and claimed that university teachers are well paid.

Sri Lankan academics are among the poorest paid in Asia and 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.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Over 2,500 workers from Phnom Penh's Ocean Garment factory, which manufactures for retail giant Gap, have been on strike since August 11 to demand that the company dismiss a manager who is accused of sexually harassing four female employees. A workers' representative claimed that the manager threatened the female workers would be denied overtime if they refused to go out or sleep with him.

Striking garment workers attempted to march to the Ministry of Social Affairs to protest on August 20 but were stopped by 100 armed police and ordered back to the workplace.

Ocean Garment management met with the government officials and workers' representatives this week but refused to dismiss the accused manager.

Queensland teachers, firefighters and paramedics protest

On August 21, 500 public school teachers rallied outside the Queensland Parliament in Brisbane against proposed changes to workplace agreements and a 2.7 percent annual wage increase.

Queensland Teachers' Union members are opposed to state government's demands for the removal of class size guidelines and other basic working conditions from their next enterprise bargaining agreement. The latest rally was the union's third outside parliament in two months.

Prior to the teachers' rally, around 500 firefighters and ambulance officers demonstrated denouncing Liberal Premier Campbell Newman of trying to strip away workplace conditions. A United Firefighters' Union official said the government was attempting to remove clauses in their enterprise agreement requiring management to "consult" with firefighters about proposed operational changes. Fire brigade management plans to use "lesser trained" people as casual firefighters in Queensland metropolitan areas.

Ambulance officers have also accused the government of trying to remove two 30-minute breaks for paramedics working 12-hour shifts. If paramedics are too busy to take the breaks, which is common, they receive a "meal overtime penalty payment." Queensland Ambulance Service management claims that it can slash \$4.5 million in operating costs by eliminating the long-standing provision. Ambulance officers have also rejected a 2.2 percent pay rise each year for three years.

Victorian health workers strike

Pathologists, pharmacists, dietitians and psychologists at public hospitals in Melbourne have begun strike action after eight months of enterprise agreement negotiations with the Baillieu government reached deadlock. Health Services Union members held 24-hour strikes at St Vincent's Hospital and the Monash Medical Centre on August 23 and August 24 respectively. A four-hour walkout is planned at the Royal Children's Hospital on Monday.

HSU members have rejected the government's proposal to increase shifts to seven days and demanded pay increases above the 2.5 percent offered by the state government and the retention of all existing conditions.

Grocon construction workers protest

Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members struck for 24 hours at Grocon construction sites in Melbourne and Brisbane on August 23. Both sites were closed for the day after Grocon workers established pickets. The walkouts followed a wildcat strike at a Grocon site in Footscray on August 17.

The dispute is centred around the union appointment of on-site health and safety officers, who also act as shop stewards, on Grocon projects. Grocon management has obtained a Supreme Court injunction banning CFMEU industrial action over the issue.

Victorian power station workers vote for industrial action

Australian Services Union (ASU) members at the Hazelwood Power Station in Victoria's Latrobe Valley have voted to take industrial action after three months of negotiations with management for a new work agreement. An ASU representative told media that outsourcing and redundancies were sticking points in the negotiations. ASU members are yet to decide on the form of industrial action.

At least 30 jobs are currently earmarked for destruction, with hundreds more to follow if the power station, which uses brown coal, is shut down under the Gillard Labor government's "Clean Energy Future" plans. Labor plans to close 2,000 MW of the dirtiest fossil fuel power generating capacity in Australia by 2020.

Western Australian court security staff vote to strike

Court security workers employed by G4S in Western Australia's capital Perth have voted to strike for 24 hours on August 27 against proposed changes to pay and conditions.

The strike will close the Perth District Court and Central Law Courts. Members of the Transport Workers Union claim that changes to working conditions by G4S will leave them up to \$100 per week worse off.

New Zealand rail workers walk out

KiwiRail track workers in Christchurch downed tools and held a stop-work meeting on August 18 to protest the transport company's plan to outsource their work. The action by members of the Rail and Maritime Transport Union (RMTU) was sparked after a manager revealed that the company plans to axe 181 jobs nationally and use "outside help" to keep the network up to standard. Workers voted to take industrial action if the plan went ahead. The RMTU has called meetings across the country.

KiwiRail (previously known as Tranz Rail) was fully privatised in 1995, taken over by Toll Holdings in 2004 and renamed Toll NZ. The government then commenced negotiations with Toll on track access charges. These negotiations failed and the government nationalised Toll NZ's rail and ferry assets in 2008, renaming them KiwiRail.



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