

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 January 2013

South Korea: Hyundai workers' pylon protest enters 13th week

Sacked Hyundai contract worker Choe Byeong-seung and Cheon Ui-bong, a temporary workers' union official, are continuing the occupation of a 30-metre high electricity pylon at Hyundai Motor's Ulsan factory that they began in mid-October. The protest, which has won wide working-class support nationally, is for regularisation of all the company's "illegally dispatched" temporary workers.

Hyundai has about 8,200 contract workers, or 22 percent of its total workforce, who are paid at least half the rate of regular workers with reduced entitlements. Over 1,900 contract workers have filed a suit demanding they be recognised as Hyundai employees.

This week Hyundai offered 37-year-old Choe full-time regular employment in a bid to end the protest. Dismissed in 2005 as an in-house subcontractor worker after demanding his position be regularised, he immediately rejected the offer.

The temporary workers' union, which is affiliated with the Korean Metal Workers Union, has not called any industrial action over the issue since December 2010 when it ended a 25-day strike and occupation of 500 temporary workers at the Ulsan plant after management agreed to negotiate. Hyundai, however, has only transferred subcontract workers to full-time employees as their individual appeals are upheld in the courts. They are then hired on inferior wages and conditions than those of current permanent employees.

Bangladeshi water transport workers on strike

Thousands of Bangladesh Water Transport Labourers' Union members who crew commuter ferries and cargo vessels on inland waterways, began a national strike on January 9 over 16 demands, including a pay increase. A spokesman for the workers said they would remain on strike until all their claims, which employers had promised to fulfil by May 2012, were met.

The transport labourers want landing passes for India-bound labourers, security in waterways, an end to harassment by marine courts, increasing the navigability of waterways and full implementation of maritime laws that includes proper safety certification of all motor vessels.

Bangladesh garment workers protest over safety

Several hundred garment workers rallied outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on January 4 over several demands related to the Tazreen

Fashion factory fire that killed 112 garment workers in November and left over 900 without jobs.

Workers' demands included immediate arrest and trial of Tazreen Fashion's owner and negligent managers, payment of wages and allowances and compensation to 15,000 workers of the Hallmark Group. Protesters also called for amendments to the Labour Welfare Foundation Act and Labour Law, establishment of "safe workplaces" in the garment sector and free trade union rights.

The protest was organised by the National Garment Workers Federation in an attempt to divert attention from its long record of ignoring workers complaints over unsafe and poor working conditions and allowing factory owners to falsify current limited safety checks.

According to local media reports there have been 17 fires in Bangladeshi textile and garment factories since the Tazreen Fashion disaster. In one case, a worker died as panic-stricken employees jammed into a workplace stairwell.

Last month, 10 Pacific Blue Jeans Wear workers in Ashulia were injured as they rushed for exits when a fire broke out in the factory. One worker was hospitalised in a critical condition. Last week, 35 employees were hospitalised when workers at the Pacific Jeans 2000 garment factory in the Chittagong Export Processing Zone ran for their lives, fearing fire at the factory. The stampede was triggered by an exploding light fitting.

Bangladeshi airline workers strike

On January 8, workers from the state-owned Biman Bangladesh Airlines at the Shahjalal International Airport in Dhaka walked out over seven demands. The strike affected some 3,000 passengers at the airport.

The airline workers want better medical coverage, meal allowances increased to 50 taka (62 US cents), proper uniforms and the withdrawal of two legal cases against the president of their union, the Biman Sramik League.

The union ended the strike after seven hours when the civil aviation minister and Biman authorities held a three-hour meeting, assuring the union that workers' demands would be met. While Biman's managing director made an agreement in writing, workers were sceptical, complaining that earlier management promises had proven false.

Pakistan: Karachi municipal workers protest

Thousands of Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) employees—white and blue collar workers—protested on January 7 to demand immediate payment of salaries, pensions and other outstanding

allowances. Teachers have not been paid for two months and 1,600 fire fighters salaries are three months in arrears. It is the fourth time in six months that KMC employees have downed tools over non-payment of what is due.

In December hundreds of sanitary workers from surrounding towns and villages joined city colleagues in a protest at the Karachi Press Club to demand their salaries. District Municipal Corporation workers and KMC workers walked out twice last July, claiming that over 30,000 employees were two months in arrears.

Rawalpindi municipal workers union embraces privatisation

The Municipal Workers League representing hundreds of Rawalpindi municipality sanitation employees in Pakistan's Punjab province last week called off a strike over privatisation of the city's sanitation department after authorities gave a vague commitment that no jobs would be lost. The union also abandoned workers' demand that the city drop plans for a sanitation tax after privatisation.

Even if the 700 daily wage workers' jobs are retained, their wages are likely to be cut. Sanitation workers employed by Lahore, the provincial capital, were contracted out and forced to accept a 3,000-rupee wage cut to 8,000 rupees (\$US88) per month after recent privatisation of the service.

India: Kerala private bus workers strike ends

Strike action at private bus operators by Motor Thozhilali Samyuktha Samara Samithi members was called off on its second day on January 8, following a decision by the Labour Ministry to increase the private bus workers daily wage by 60 rupees (\$US1.10). Thousands of private buses were grounded during the walkout, causing massive traffic jams in all major cities in India's south-west coastal state of Kerala. The strike was sparked after bus owners failed to honour their commitment on a pay increase made during a tripartite negotiation three months ago.

Strikers had demanded an immediate 50 percent interim increase in salary. Most workers have not had a pay increase since 2008. The basic wage of a private bus driver is 6,070 rupees (\$US121) per month, conductors 6,000 rupees and ancillary workers 5,970 rupees.

Kerala government employees strike against participatory pension

Tens of thousands of Kerala government employees, including teachers aligned with the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M)-led Action Council of State Employees and Teachers and the CPI-led Teachers and Service Organisations' Action Council, walked off the job on January 7 to oppose a proposed Participatory Pension Scheme (PPS).

PPS, which requires workers to contribute part of their wages to the scheme, is a government austerity measure and will be imposed on those workers who join the government service from April 1, 2013. In the face of stiff opposition, the government has dropped its proposal to extend the number of years between salary revisions from five to ten years.

The Joint Council of State Service Organisations and the Federation of Employees and Teachers Organisations said the strike would continue

until the government dropped the proposed PPS. Kerala has about 450,000 government employees. Not all public sector workers have backed the strike and pro-government supporters have clashed with striking workers picketing government buildings.

Karnataka noon meal centre workers protest

On January 7, Karnataka State Anganwadi Workers' Association members protested outside the deputy commissioner's office in Chikkaballapur against harassment of women in the workplace. According to a spokesman for the Trade Union Coordination Committee, which led the demonstration, the women are threatened with dismissal if they complain about being mistreated.

Other union demands included the upgrade of mini centres to full time centres, provision of liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) in all cooking centres, and for anganwadi workers and assistants to be regularised and included in the government employment scheme.

Cambodian garment workers maintain strike

Around 300 garment workers at the Master and Frank factory in Ang Snuol district on the outskirts of Phnom Penh have defied a court order to return to work and are maintaining strike action begun on December 19. They are demanding reinstatement of 11 union members fired over the past four months and payment of overdue lunch wages. Two hundred strikers travelled from their Kandal factory to the ministry of social affairs in Phnom Penh to demand the government resolve the dispute.

Late last month 50 police attacked garment workers protesting outside their factory, hitting the protesters with electric batons and knocking two demonstrators unconscious.

Queensland hospital staff oppose job cuts

On January 10, 150 nurses and supporters rallied at the Prince Charles Hospital in Chermside, Brisbane to protest the axing of 25 full-time nursing positions. Staffing cuts are being facilitated by combining wards, reducing bed numbers and pushing patients more quickly through the system.

According to hospital management, staff in the axed positions will be offered voluntary redundancies or moved into other roles in the hospital. Questioned by media, management refused to rule out forced redundancies.

A Queensland Nurses' Union (QNU) official told protesters that the hospital had been closing beds since the state budget last year. In September, the Queensland Liberal National Party government announced 2,754 jobs would be shed at Queensland Health, including 1,537 full-time positions at Hospital and Health Services, under a budget plan to slash 14,000 state public service positions.

The QNU and other public sector unions have no fundamental differences with the job cuts. Opposing unified state-wide industrial action to defend the jobs and protect hospital services, the unions have called a series of isolated, harmless protests to dissipate workers' anger.

Papua New Guinea stevedore workers threaten strike action

The PNG Maritime and Transport Workers Union, representing over 1,000 workers at the Lae wharf on Papua New Guinea's mid-north coast, has threatened strike action after the PNG Ports Corporation failed to respond to its demands by January 4. A union spokesman said their claim will be registered with the industrial registrar and legal advice sought on strike action.

Lae is PNG's largest cargo port and located at the start of the main road transport corridor from the Highlands region to the coast. Strike action at the wharf would affect the entire country, especially large inland mining operations.

The workers, who are employed by three major stevedoring companies—Riback, United Stevedores and Lae Port Services—are opposing PNG Ports Corporation plans to remove the import/export clearance or IDD docket from the stevedores' main gates and cut jobs. One worker told the media that many employees were made redundant when the Ports Corporation recently took over gantry crane operations.

The PNG Ports Corporation is state-owned and controls all port movements. In 2009 its CEO announced a restructure plan to "change its work culture from that of the public sector to one of the private sector".

Solomon Islands teachers threaten strike action

Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) delegates met in Honiara on January 11 to discuss plans for a national teachers' strike. The association said the government had failed to address four key issues, including promised pay rises, travel expenses and housing allowances. The last time teachers received a wage increase was in July 2011.

SINTA delegates also want suspension of Honiara City Council (HCC) officers suspected of misappropriating funds of the teachers' travel budget. Last month, 600 public school teachers were stranded in Honiara after the HCC failed to pay a long-standing sea-fare allowance that helps pay for travel to their home provinces for the end of year vacation.



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