

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 August 2013

## South Korea: Hyundai and Kia auto workers vote to strike

Around 45,000 union members at Hyundai Motor Co. and Kia Motors Corp. (70 percent of the workforce) this week voted in favour of strike action following a breakdown in wage negotiations with management. Under Korean labour law workers are prevented from taking action until current mandatory mediation talks in the National Relations Labour Commission end on August 19. A union official told the media that management had not made any “positive offers” to resolve the dispute.

The Korean Metal Workers Union is demanding a 130,498-won (\$US117) increase in the monthly base salary and an extension of the retirement age to 61, as well as other benefits. In August last year, Hyundai workers ended the second-costliest strike in the company’s 45-year history after management agreed to increase basic salaries and bonuses and scrap the overnight shift from March 2013.

## Nepalese industrial zone workers extend strike action

Thousands of workers in the Bara-Parsa industrial corridor, in the sovereign state of Nepal on India’s northern border, have extended a 48-hour strike begun on August 6 in a dispute over wages. The indefinite extension followed the failure of the government to meet an August 9 deadline to resolve the dispute. At least 11 industries, including steel and textiles, are still closed by the strike. Over 300 companies operate in the zone.

The dispute was triggered after the government recently increased the monthly minimum wage by 1,800 rupees to 8,000 rupees (\$US102) and lifted all government wage levels accordingly. Private sector industries, however, only increased the pay of minimum wage workers and refused to pass on the raise to higher paid employees.

The Joint Trade Unions Committee has demanded a wage rise for all salary scales.

## India: Bajaj Auto workers’ union calls end to strike

On August 14, the Vishwa Kalyan Kamgar Sanghatana (VKKS) union representing 900 striking workers at the Chakan plant of Bajaj Auto Limited (BAL) in Pune, Maharashtra called an end to its 50-day strike without any of its demands being fulfilled. The union used a BAL management threat to close the Chakan plant and move production to its other facilities if workers did not return to work by August 13 as an excuse to end the strike.

Strikers have not received wages since they walked out on June 25 in a dispute for a new three-year work agreement. VKKS had demanded a pay rise, improved working conditions, 500 company shares for each employee at one-rupee per share and reinstatement of 22 suspended workers.

The union, however, allowed management to transfer some production to its sister plant in Aurangabad. Nor did it call for action from any workers at 120 companies in Chakan and Pimpri-Chinchwad industrial estates who had earlier threatened to strike in solidarity with the BAL strikers.

A union official cynically told the media: “We have decided to give them [BAL] another chance. We have put the ball in their court and will wait for their decision over the next few weeks.”

## Karnataka contract ambulance workers resume strike

After ending their two-week strike on August 8, following a court order, 2,000 contract employees, including drivers and paramedics, of the Karnataka ‘108’ Ambulance Service resumed industrial action on August 12. Their action was sparked when their contracting employer GVK-EMRI deducted between 1,500 and 2,000 rupees from their monthly salary as punishment for taking strike action.

Members of the Karnataka Rajya Arogya Kavacha 108 union had struck on July 27 to demand regularisation and a wage rise. The government had issued a court order prohibiting the strike and on August 5 their employer GVK-EMRI sacked 194 strikers and threatened to dismiss the rest if they failed to return to work. The union convinced members to return to work after a High Court order ordered GVK-EMRI to reinstate the suspended workers and ordered the employer and union to enter negotiations with the Health Department.

In their latest action workers said they would present themselves for duty but not attend emergencies.

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### **Orissa university non-teaching staff on strike**

Non-teaching staff at the Utkal University in Bhubaneswar, in India's north-eastern coastal state of Orissa, walked off the job on August 12 and began a relay hunger strike. They are demanding the filling of vacant positions and protesting over the unhygienic working conditions, decaying infrastructure and poor maintenance of living quarters. The Utkal University Staff Union submitted a charter of demands to management on June 30 but has received no reply. Workers also complained that retired staff are not being replaced, leaving 60 percent of posts vacant. The union claimed that there had been no recruitment for 20 years.

### **Rajasthan government employees on strike**

On August 7, hundreds of public servants, including veterinary doctors and teachers, joined the month-long strike by ministerial staff in the far north Indian state of Rajasthan to demand an increase in grade-pays, creation of senior level posts, correction of pay parity anomalies and improved benefits. Secretariat Employees Union members are maintaining a sit-in protest at the Jaipur city's Statue Circle. Talks between the government and the union failed on Tuesday evening with the government stating it was not willing to negotiate on the grade-pay issue.

### **Victorian auto parts manufacturing workers on strike**

Some 170 workers from break-pad manufacturer FMP in Ballarat, Victoria have been on strike for over two weeks in a dispute for a new work agreement. The company has agreed to 3 percent annual pay increases over three years but wants the right to attack entitlements and will not provide any back-pay, despite dragging discussions out for eight months.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members are picketing the factory where management is trying to fill orders using skeleton crews of outside contract labour.

According to the AMWU, FMP wants to take a key clause out of the agreement protecting workers from any loss of wages or conditions, leaving the way open for management to cut pay and demote staff if the machines they work on become outmoded. The company also wants the right to force workers to take accrued leave when demand is low.

### **New South Wales public passenger services employees walk**

On August 13, Public Passenger Services (PSS) employees in the Sydney suburb of Parramatta walked off the job mid-morning after management announced 12 job cuts. Workers complained that this will drastically increase their workloads and follows the transfer of additional bus safety duties previously handled by Transport NSW. PSS staff assess safety in the passenger transport industry, including the hire car and taxi industry, and conduct driver background checks and medical assessments.

The PSS job cuts are part of the New South Wales state Liberal government's plan to drastically slash public service jobs across the state. In July last year, leaked NSW Treasury documents identified job destruction targets over the next four years. These including more than 900 in the Department of Family and Community Services; over 3,600 in health; at least 2,400 in education; almost 400 in Roads and Maritime Services; and 350 in environmental services.

These job cuts are already proceeding with the complicity of the Public Service Association (PSA), which has over 43,000 state public sector members. The PSA is holding a series of harmless "out of working hours" membership meetings in the electorates of various state MPs.

### **French Polynesia port workers on strike**

Port workers in Papeete, the capital of French Polynesia, have been on strike for over a week due to safety issues. Operations at the Tahiti island port remain restricted due to the strike but workers have released a number of containers holding perishable goods. According to the media, there have been four fatal accidents in the port in five years. Talks between the union and territory government were due to begin on August 15.



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