

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 August 2013

Hyundai and Kia workers in South Korea strike

At least 46,000 union members at Hyundai Motor and 35,000 at its affiliated company Kia Motors in the Ulsan Industrial District on South Korea's east coast have begun strike action in separate disputes for new work agreements. Hyundai workers walked out during the week in two four-hour stoppages and refused to work overtime, while Kia workers struck for two hours on Wednesday. Hyundai management agreed to restart negotiations on Thursday.

The Korean Metal Workers Union, which covers in-house unions at both companies, has demanded a 130,498-won (\$US117) increase in the monthly base salary and an extension of the retirement age to 61. Other demands include 10 million won (\$8,900) to help the children of union members find jobs and medical expenses for workers diagnosed with cancer.

India: Andhra Pradesh paramedics on hunger strike

Following two months of protests and limited strike action paramedics and drivers of the Andhra Pradesh 108 Ambulance Service began a hunger strike on August 20. Their contract employer GVK-EMRI has refused to negotiate with the union, sacked over 250 strikers, and started recruiting replacements.

The Centre of Indian Trade Unions-led 108 Services Contract Employees Union wants monthly wages increased to 15,000 rupees and work restricted to eight hours per day. The union said that although employees regularly work a 12-hour day they are only paid for eight hours.

GVK-EMRI employees complained that most are posted outside their districts and paid a paltry salary of 7,000 rupees (\$US240) a month and, if they have an accident in their ambulance, have to pay for the repair works. The union has demanded that the government's contract with GVK-EMRI be ended and workers absorbed back into the public service.

Protesting Tamil Nadu farm workers arrested

On August 20, 1,300 landless farmers of the All India Agricultural Workers' Union (AIAWU) were arrested for demonstrating outside the District Collectorate in Erode, Tamil Nadu. Protesters complained of delays in salary payments and reduced working hours under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MNREGS).

According to the union, agricultural mechanisation has meant higher

dependence of rural farmers on MNREGS for survival. This has drastically reduced the number of work days from 120 to 70 days and pushed workers below the official poverty line.

Protesters demanded that the number of minimum work days be set at 150 per year and workers' families paid 100,000 rupees (\$US2,000) death compensation.

Coffee plantation workers in Tamil Nadu protest

On August 19, around 200 Neelamalai Coffee plantation workers, mostly women, in Yercaud, in the Servaroyan hills, Salem district, held a one-day hunger strike near the Yercaud collectorate to demand the minimum daily wage be increased from 183.9 to 260 rupees. Other demands of the Neelamalai Plantation Workers Union are provision of free housing plots and restrictions on luxury hotel construction in their villages.

Vietnamese garment workers walk out over food contamination

Over 2,000 workers at the On Accessories garment factory in the Tan Huong Industrial Park in southern Tien Giang Province, Vietnam walked out on August 16 after management had failed to explain why there were maggots in their meal the previous week. When the contamination was discovered by workers, management said it would "resolve the incident soon" but did not report back on how the contamination happened.

In July, nearly 200 workers from the garment manufacturer Kotop Vina Company in southern Dong Nai Province were hospitalised due to food poisoning after a dinner at their work place. This followed the poisoning and hospitalisation of 150 workers at the Terratex garment factory in Ho Chi Minh City in March. Terratex had reported several cases of food poisoning in 2007 and 2011, causing over 370 workers to be hospitalised.

Western Australian dock workers strike

On August 19, dock workers in Broome, in Western Australia's north west Kimberley region, refused to unload a cargo ship and occupied the vessel after the Barnett state Liberal government announced that it had ended an \$8 million annual subsidy to the shipping company that provides the only shipping service connecting Perth and the state's northern towns such as Karratha, Port Hedland, Broome and Wyndham. The ship was on

its last voyage.

The strikers, members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), refused to unload the ship until the government agreed to restart the service. According to the MUA, 25 jobs will be lost and goods for residents in the region will be up to 25 percent more expensive if transported by road. The MUA has not extended industrial action to include its members at other cargo ports.

New South Wales child protection workers protest

On August 20, over 25 members of the Public Service Association (PSA) from the NSW Department of Family and Community Services offices at Charlestown and Edgeworth in Newcastle, 70 km north of Sydney, held a lunchtime protest outside the Charlestown office of the local state member of parliament to protest high vacancy rates in the department, lack of resources, computer problems and excessive red tape that is preventing face-to-face work with vulnerable children and families.

The government's own figures show that due to inadequate staffing levels only 28.2 percent of "at risk" children in the region were seen and assessed by a caseworker between July 2012 and the end of March this year.

In July last year, leaked NSW Treasury documents identified job destruction targets over the next four years, including more than 900 in the Department of Family and Community Services. These job cuts are already proceeding with the complicity of the 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 (members of parliament).

Victorian visually impaired workers protest

On August 18, over 100 visually impaired workers and their supporters held a rally in Melbourne to protest the destruction of almost 60 jobs by their employer Vision Australia, a charity set up to assist blind and low vision people. The organisation employs 73 workers, 58 of whom are blind or have low vision, through its commercial arm called Vision Australia Enterprises (VAE) in Melbourne and in Brisbane, Queensland.

VAE claimed that the workshops were losing money and had to close. Despite making \$2.4 million a year, the charity claimed that it cost \$3.6 million per year to run. A spokesperson for the Blind Workers Union, said that the organisation is supposed to support marginalised individuals in the workforce. "This will have a tremendous impact on the most vulnerable people in Australia's workforce," she said. These people are unlikely to find other work.

New Zealand workers protest industrial law changes

At least 1,500 workers demonstrated in Wellington, on New Zealand's North Island, on August 20 to oppose the National government's proposed changes to the employment law, which unions say threatens to cut pay and remove basic rights for New Zealand workers. The 40,000-strong Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has scheduled further rallies for Auckland and Christchurch, in the South

Island, for next week.

According to unions, if the Employment Relations Amendment Bill, currently before parliament, is passed employers will be able to refuse to negotiate a collective agreement and opt out of multi-employer collective bargaining in order to undercut their competitors on wages and conditions. The new law also makes it harder to strike, allows employers to reduce meal and rest breaks, and removes safeguards on low-paid contract workers when the employer's contract changes.

The 47,000-member New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has called national stop-work meetings during August but confined its protests to urging workers to send submissions to the government opposing the proposed amendments.

A government Select Committee began hearing submissions from employers and employees on the proposed amendments to the employment bill. Media reported that around 12,000 submissions have been made and most are against the proposed changes.

Fiji sugar union stalls calling strike action

The Sugar and General Workers Union, covering employees of the government owned Fiji Sugar Corporation (FSC), is stalling on members' demands for strike action in a dispute over wages. Last month the sugar workers defied government and company threats and overwhelmingly voted for industrial action.

The union has allowed two truckloads of soldiers to be deployed to the FSC mill and management has compelled workers to sign forms stating whether they intend to strike, warning them of the "consequences" if they do. Adding to the intimidation, the FSC has revealed plans to offer work to retired mill workers and threatened to recruit workers from India.

The sugar workers have rejected a 5.3 percent pay rise and a health and welfare insurance scheme. A union official told the media that wages have fallen by 40 percent in real terms over the last seven years and that the 2,000 sugar workers, who earn just \$7.10 (\$US4.03) a week, could not afford to pay for the health and welfare premiums.

French Polynesia port workers end strike

A 17-day strike by port workers in Papeete, the French Polynesian capital, ended on August 17 following a deal between the government and strikers. Over 2,000 cargo containers had been stranded at the port by the strike. Neither side has revealed any details about the deal that ended the strike.

Workers walked out on August 1 to demand improved safety. According to the media, there have been four fatal accidents in the port in five years.



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