

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

31 August 2013

South Korea: Hyundai and Kia auto workers continue rolling stoppages

Hyundai workers downed tools for four hours during day and night shifts on August 26 and Kia workers struck for several hours on Thursday after the latest round of talks over a new work agreement deadlocked. The walkouts followed limited strike action last week by 46,000 union members at Hyundai and 35,000 at its affiliated company Kia Motors in the Ulsan Industrial District.

The Korean Metal Workers Union, which covers in-house unions at both companies, has demanded a 130,498-won (\$US117) rise in the monthly base salary and the retirement age increased 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.

Education workers in Seoul end six-year protest

Jaeneung Educational Institution (JEI) union members ended a six-year protest on August 26 after the private tutoring company agreed to reinstate 11 dismissed tutors and pay them a combined compensation of 220 million won (\$US197,500). The Seoul Administrative Court ruled in November that JEI's sackings were illegal.

Union members had staged a sit-in rally outside the company's main office in Hye-hwa-dong, Seoul, since December 2007 to protest salary cuts and the "suppression of labour activities." Two female JEI workers had occupied the 20-metre bell tower of the Hye-hwa Catholic Church, directly opposite the JEI headquarters for 202 days. The 2,076-day protest was the longest in South Korea's history.

JEI has agreed to enter negotiations for a work agreement to be finalised by the end of this year.

Seoul City call centre workers strike

On August 28, 150 unionised contract workers at Seoul City's 120 Dasan Call Center, walked out for four hours to demand a wage rise and improved job status. Their action followed a one-hour stoppage on Monday over the issues. The union threatened to call a longer strike for Friday if workers' claims are not resolved.

The call centre is run by a consortium of three private agencies on behalf of the city government and employs more than 450 contract workers. The 270-member union wants a 4 percent pay rise, additional paid leave, a 100,000-won (\$US89) holiday bonus, and a change of status for full-time employees directly hired by the city. The agencies have offered a pay increase of only 1.9 percent and 30,000 won in extra bonuses.

India: Andhra Pradesh refinery workers strike

Around 4,000 contract workers at the Hindustan Petroleum Corporation Limited (HPCL) refinery in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, downed tools and blockaded the plant's main gate and the Scindia to Sriharipuram highway on August 26 to demand compensation for workers killed and injured in a refinery blast on August 23. Nine workers were killed and over 40 suffered burns to 70 percent of their bodies following a major explosion and fire at the plant.

The protest by members of the HPCL Contract Workers Union was sparked when a government minister visited the injured workers but failed to announce any compensation.

Andhra Pradesh communications workers protest

Several dozen workers of the government-run national telecommunications company BSNL staged a protest outside the company's Ongole office in Andhra Pradesh on August 23 with 28 demands. These included filling of vacancies, regularisation of contract workers and fair wages for casual workers. Protesters were members of the CITU-affiliated BSNL Employees Union.

Tamil Nadu plantation workers protest

Nilgiris Estate Workers Union (NEWU) members demonstrated on August 23 outside the local government office in Gudalur, a hill station in the Nilgiris district, to demand full payment of the minimum wage. The tea plantation workers also called for implementation of housing schemes, a government takeover of the financially troubled Mahaveer Plantations, increased compensation for the families of workers killed by wild animals, and a pension scheme set at 3,000 rupees.

Sri Lankan heart-machine operators strike

Over 25 heart-lung machine technicians (perfusionists) at three government health facilities—Colombo National Hospital, Karapitiya Teaching Hospital and Kandy Teaching Hospital—struck for 48-hours on August 26. They were demanding rectification of salary anomalies in the 2006 Circular No.26, provision of a risk allowance, and a fixed rate for extra duties. Their union, the Government Perfusionists Association, said only emergency heart operations went ahead during the walkout while others procedures were postponed.

Thousands of Cambodian garment workers still on strike

More than 5,000 workers at two SL Garments factories in the Meanchey district, Phnom Penh have been on strike since August 12 over eight demands, including an increase in the minimum wage to \$US150 a month. They also want military police, who patrol inside the plants, removed from the facilities.

Workers planned to demonstrate outside Phnom Penh's

City Hall this week, following two rounds of failed negotiations between SL management and the Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union. A union spokesman accused the company of stalling negotiations in an attempt to push the dispute into the labour court.

Meanwhile, 1,000 workers at the nearby Next-t Apparel plant walked out on August 22, after two employees were fired for collecting money to buy water for the striking SL workers.

“The company officer saw a piece of paper that I wrote to every worker to donate some money to help protesters at SL,” said Yin Phanna, 21, who was fired along with Chan Srey Mom, 23. “Three company officials forced us to sign a termination letter,” Yin said. Next-t Apparel has since agreed to rehire the sacked workers.

Toll Holdings workers vote for national strike

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members at Toll Holdings—Australia's largest haulage company—have voted to strike in a dispute over a new enterprise bargaining agreement. The secret ballot followed 100 hours of failed negotiations since April. Possible action would include work stoppages up to 72 hours, and bans on overtime, hire duties and paperwork.

The TWU wants a 16 percent wage rise over the four-year life of the agreement, superannuation obligations increased to 15 percent by the end of the agreement, and for all Toll employees and contractors to receive the same rates. Additionally, the TWU also wants the enterprise agreement extended to all new Toll work to prevent the company establishing green-field agreements.

Toll has offered a 15 percent pay rise and 12.25 percent superannuation contributions. Management claimed that other demands would undermine the company's competitiveness. The EBA covers about 10,000 workers at Toll. About 8,000 employees are TWU members. Negotiations between the transport company and the TWU are continuing.



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