

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 August 2014

Hyundai workers in South Korea vote for strike

On August 17, about 70 percent of 47,000 union members at Hyundai Motor, South Korea's largest auto manufacturer, voted for strike action if agreement cannot be reached in their annual wage talks.

Union members want an 8.16 percent base pay rise, guarantee of retirement age until a pension scheme is introduced, an unconditional reduction of working hours by one hour and adoption of the "8 plus 8 daytime shift" from 2015. Their principal demand is for the inclusion of bonuses in the base pay rate.

Last December, Korea's Supreme Court ruled that KB AutoTech workers' bonuses should be included as part of their base pay. This is significant because base pay is used to calculate other benefits, including overtime, holiday allowances and severance pay. The union has not set a date for strike action.

Bangladesh: Tuba Group closes five plants

The Tuba Group garment group has responded to three weeks of protests by 1,600 employees by announcing on August 19 that it was indefinitely closing five plants. Two union leaders were arrested on Wednesday while protesting workers attempted to block the road near Hossain Market where Tuba Garments is situated.

Tuba Fashion, Tuba Textile, Bukshan Garments, Tayeb Design and Mita Design employees walked off the job on July 28 over five demands including payment of wages, overtime, and bonuses for May, June, and July; compensation for the 112 workers who were killed in the 2012 Tuba Group-owned Tazreen Fashions fire in Ashulia; and the death penalty for Tuba Group managing director Delwar Hossain, who was recently released on bail.

The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association (BGMEA) had offered to pay a major part of the salaries in an attempt to end a highly publicised protest and hunger strike by Tuba workers. The majority of workers, however, rejected the offer and maintained occupation of a factory in Badda until they were violently evicted on August 6 by riot police. On August 10, BGMEA paid outstanding wages but not overtime and Eid bonuses.

Workers are maintaining protests to demand reopening of the factories, full payment of all outstanding money, and cancellation of Delwar Hossain's bail.

Garment workers locked out in Ashulia

About 800 Sonia Fine Knit factory workers in Ashulia on the outskirts of Dhaka were locked out on August 19, after they struck the day before to demand a salary increase and the Eid bonus. Police were deployed to the area when workers began protesting in the nearby streets after management posted a notice to say the factory was closed for an indefinite period.

Garment workers in Savar walk out

On August 16, over 400 workers at the Bovs Apparels factory at Hemayetpur in Savar, 24km northwest of Dhaka, walked off the job to demand overtime pay and the reinstatement of several workers previously sacked for making the same demand.

Employees said they were forced to work extra hours after the Eid holiday began but were not paid for it. They also claimed that the company had imposed a 30 percent increase in jacket production targets, forcing employees to work longer hours, and that management frequently assaulted workers.

Garment workers in Chittagong protest

Around 100 workers from the Valiant Garments factory in Chittagong demonstrated in the city on August 19 over closure of their factory on July 18, following a safety inspection. Workers rejected a management offer to relocate to other Valiant factories or leave with termination pay.

India: West Bengal taxi drivers strike again

For the second time this month, 25,000 taxi drivers in Kolkata, the West Bengal capital, stopped work on August 18 to demand fares be increased and to protest an increase in "refusal fines" from 100 rupees to 3,000 rupees. Drivers struck for two days earlier in the month over these issues.

The "refusal fine" is imposed when drivers refuse a passenger in violation of their permit. A Taxi Men's Union spokesman claimed that high running costs meant drivers could not afford to have an empty return run after dropping a passenger at a distant location. "If the government allows us to hike fares, refusals will automatically go down," he said.

The drivers were also protesting the state government's move to revoke the bail of 22 colleagues arrested during a protest on August 7.

West Bengal tea plantation workers demonstrate

On August 20, thousands of workers from 300 tea gardens affiliated to 22 North Bengal labour unions marched in Siliguri to demand an increase in the minimum wage and the reopening of five closed tea gardens. Union representatives submitted a memorandum to the North Bengal Joint Labour Commissioner.

While the state minimum daily wage for unskilled agricultural workers is 206 rupees (\$US3.40) tea garden workers are only paid 95 rupees. The United Tea Workers' Forum wants the minimum daily wage set at 322 rupees. Tea plantation owners have offered a 21-rupee rise, phased in over three years. The next round of talks will commence on August 23.

Jammu and Kashmir police attack protesting government workers

On August 21, police in Srinagar in India's north used water cannons and baton-charged dozens of government employees marching to the Civil Secretariat building to demand regularisation of their services.

Jammu and Kashmir Left-out Daily Rated Workers Association representatives said that around 1,500 daily rated workers were not included in 2000 when the state government regularised daily wage workers who had been employed for seven years. While the protesting workers had not completed the mandatory seven years at that time they now qualified.

Pakistan: Sindh province paramedics demonstrate

On August 18, Sindh province paramedics protested outside the Karachi Press Club in the first phase of a campaign over several demands by the Paramedical Staff Joint Action Committee Sindh. This includes health, high-risk and rural initiatives allowances on par with the federal payments and the inclusion of paramedics in a service structure implemented in 2006. A provincial strike is planned for August 25.

Lahore power workers protest fatal accidents

Lahore Electric Supply Company (LESCO) workers demonstrated outside the company's headquarters in Lahore on August 19 over the rising number of fatal accidents involving line staff. At least 25 linemen were electrocuted while on duty in the previous two weeks.

Protesters said that over 200 LESCO workers died every year while performing duties on lines and grids, with many more losing limbs or disabled. Workers blamed the poor safety record on inadequate staff numbers, lack of safety training and safety equipment.

All-Pakistan Wapda Hydro-Electric Workers Union officials failed to call for strike action or any concrete campaign to stop the accidents. Instead they moved a harmless resolution calling on the company to "investigate" and "enforce preventive measures to minimise chances of such accidents in the future."

Strikes continue in Cambodian garment industry

About 3,000 employees of the Chinese-owned Jiun Ye garment factory in Kompong Chhnang province, in central Cambodia walked off the job on August 18 accusing management of withholding between \$5 and \$20 of their monthly bonuses. Strikers blocked National Road 5 for more than four hours Tuesday and said they would not return to work until their bonuses were paid.

In a separate incident, more than 400 Xin Fang garment factory workers in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district have been on strike since August 18 over 19 demands. These included a lunch allowance, benefits for pregnant women and new mothers, a \$3 bonus for working on holidays and a \$15 monthly accommodation allowance.

In Bavet City in Cambodia's south-east province of Svay Rieng, 800 employees of You Li garment walked out for the day on August 18 and demonstrated on National Highway 1 with a number of wage demands. Workers ended the blockade after police arrested the factory's union leader.

Workers' demands included on-site medical care, an additional \$10 per month for 18 months for new mothers, more fans to cool the factory, and improved toilet facilities. While management agreed to these claims, it rejected demands for bonus payments for those who exceeded production targets and an extra \$5 per month for staff with special machinery skills.

Meanwhile, on August 18, Yorkmars Garment management in Phnom Penh's Pur Senchey district agreed to reinstate six Cambodian Labor Solidarity Union Federation members after a one day strike. The workers had been sacked for attempting to form a union at the factory.

Queensland: Curtis Island construction workers accept offer

Six days of strike action by 148 members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) at the \$60 billion natural gas processing site at Curtis Island, near Gladstone, ended on August 15 after a narrow vote by all employees to accept Bechtel's latest enterprise bargaining agreement offer. The difference between the "yes" and "no" votes was a marginal 583 votes, with more than 1,300 of the 8,000 workers on site choosing not to vote.

After ten months of negotiations, Bechtel offered CFMEU, Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Australian Workers Union back pay, a \$35 ferry allowance, a 15 percent pay rise, daily productivity pay, a \$45 daily travel allowance, increasing to \$50 in November, and a \$10 per day attendance allowance rising to \$30 in November.

Bechtel rejected union demands that the current fly-in, fly-out roster be changed from four weeks on and one week off to three on and one off, in line with most other remote construction sites around Australia. In the final offer Bechtel committed to deliver the 3/1 fly-in fly-out roster toward the end of the project.

Industrial action by Victorian dairy workers in eighth week

Some 110 maintenance workers at six Murray Goulburn dairy-processing factories in Victoria have been holding limited stoppages and work bans since the beginning of July in a dispute for a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

Workers struck for 24 hours on August 15 in an attempt to get Murray Goulburn to resume negotiations. Their limited action includes the imposition of ongoing bans on overtime and attending callouts. It follows a 24-hour strike on July 16 and a stop-work on July 4.

The protected industrial action follows seven months of negotiations between the company and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU). According to the AMWU, the pay offer was less than inflation. Management also refused to employ more local apprentices and has demanded reduced redundancy entitlements and separate wage arrangements for new recruits.



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New South Wales plaster manufacturer lifts lockout

Plaster manufacturer CSR Gyprock in Wetherill Park, south west of Sydney, ended its lockout of 50 workers on August 15 after reaching an enterprise bargaining deal with the United Voice (UV) union. CSR workers had not been paid for four weeks and were locked out by the company for nearly two weeks.

UV officials claimed the deal was an improvement and ensured “strong, secure jobs.” In fact, workers will only receive a 12.25 percent pay rise over four years, barely keeping pace with inflation, and in exchange for rostered day off trade-offs, which have not been made public.

Ausreo workers remain locked out

Twenty-four employees of Ausreo, which supplies concrete reinforcing products to the construction industry, have been locked out of their Wetherill Park factory since July 19, after demanding wage parity with their interstate colleagues. They have been maintaining a daily protest outside the factory gates.

Most workers, who are members of the AMWU, are only paid \$20 an hour. They want their hourly rate increased by \$3 and improved redundancy provisions. Ausreo has only offered a 3 percent “Christmas bonus” but paid at management’s discretion. While the 100,000 member AMWU has postured as defenders of the locked out workers, the union has refused to mobilise any of its members to defeat the lockout.

New Zealand public health union calls off strike action

The Public Service Association (PSA), representing 12,000 public health employees across New Zealand, has withdrawn strike notices after reaching a tentative deal for five new collective agreements with the District Health Board (DHB) on August 20. Industrial action was to commence on September 2.

Over 87 percent of PSA members had voted for industrial action after the DHB offered a miniscule 0.7 percent annual pay increase, and rejected demands for additional training and professional development. Bargaining had been ongoing for 12 months. Staff covered by the settlement include mental and public health nurses, physiotherapists, anaesthetic technicians, dental therapists, administrative staff and a number of other occupational groups.

Details of the settlement, which is to be ratified by members at meetings across the country, have not been made public.