

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

27 September 2014

South Korea: Hyundai and Kia workers strike

Union members at Hyundai Motor and Kia Motors struck this week at plants in Ulsan. Hyundai employees stopped work for two hours on each shift from last Tuesday through to Friday, while Kia workers did the same on Thursday and Friday. Over 47,000 workers are involved in the dispute over a new work agreement.

Union members want an 8.16 percent base pay rise, guarantee of retirement age until a pension scheme is introduced, 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.

South Korea: Public servants in Seoul oppose pension cuts

Around 200 unionised public sector workers entered the National Assembly in Seoul and protested at a meeting of the ruling Saenuri Party and the Korean Pension Association (KPA) on September 22. The meeting planned to announce proposed reforms of the public sector pension scheme. Workers held placards that read: “Scrap the plan,” “Pension is our lifeline, don’t fool around with it,” and “The Saenuri Party will lose in elections.”

According to the Korean Government Employees’ Union, public servants’ monthly pension will be cut by 34 percent but premiums increased by 43 percent. The age at which public sector workers can receive the pension will be lifted from 56 to 65 by 2033.

The KPA and the ruling party claim that the reforms are necessary to reduce the public sector pension fund’s deficit by 43 percent by 2016. Workers fear this is a move to force them into private pension schemes.

India: Bosch auto workers maintain strike

Close to 3,000 Bosch Auto employees, including 370 temporaries, at the Adugodi plant in Bangalore have been on strike since September 16 in a dispute for a new work agreement. Talks between the Mico Employees Association, Bosch management and the government on September 20 failed to reach agreement.

Workers want the 10,000-rupee (\$US166) monthly wage ceiling removed, withdrawal of new medical insurance policies, a working hours review and permanency for temporary workers. They also oppose management’s demand for productivity increases.

The labour commission ordered the union and management to continue

negotiations until the next tripartite meeting on September 26. Bosch has declared the strike illegal and threatened to cut eight days’ pay for each day workers remain on strike.

West Bengal taxi strike ends without resolution

On September 22, the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), and the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), in agreement with the Progressive Taxi Men’s Union, called off the five-day strike by over 30,000 taxi drivers in West Bengal’s capital Kolkata. The union and the two peak union bodies ended their “indefinite” strike after the West Bengal governor promised to discuss their claims with the state government. No issues were resolved.

The taxi drivers struck on September 18, the eighth time since August, to demand higher fares and in opposition to the increase in “refusal fines” from 100 to 3,000 rupees. The fines are imposed when drivers refuse a passenger in violation of their permit. A taxi 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.

After the drivers returned to work the West Bengal transport minister rejected any immediate fare hike and only offered to discuss withdrawing legal proceedings against 450 taxis and the 3,000-rupee passenger refusal penalty. The minister directed the taxi union to pay for repairs of vehicles damaged in clashes with non-striking drivers during the dispute and pay the medical expenses of those injured.

Uttar Pradesh power workers strike against privatisation

Around 800 power distribution workers in the city of Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh walked out for the day on September 22 to oppose the government’s plan to privatise the city’s power network. Power was cut for up to 10 hours in many residential and industrial areas during the walkout.

The UP Rajya Vidyut Karmachari Samyukt Sangharsh Samiti (federation of power workers) told the media that the government planned to sell-off infrastructure which it falsely claimed was unprofitable. Workers have threatened to hold more strikes if the government does not reverse its plans.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest

On September 20, Mamun Garments BD employees formed a human chain outside the National Press Club in Dhaka to demand unpaid wages and the Eid festival allowance. A Garment Workers Solidarity Federation spokesman said that workers had not been paid overtime for June-July or received their August salaries.

The garment workers also alleged that management had been deducting 500 taka from their monthly wages for insurance but no one has ever received any insurance payments. The federation wants a 10-day Eid and Durga Puja holiday and the Eid bonus and outstanding salaries paid by September 25.

Sri Lankan graphite miners hold underground strike

Seventy workers at the state-owned Kolongaha Graphite Mine in Kahatagaha, Maduragoda downed tools underground on September 22 over demands outstanding since 2012. They sent a message to the surface that they would not come out until their claims were met. The miners want insurance, improved working conditions and a salary increase.

The miners' union, which is affiliated with the main ruling Sri Lanka Freedom Party, ended the industrial action the next day after the Rajapakse government gave a vague promise to resolve workers' issues by the end of the year.

Sri Lankan bank employees protest

Peoples' Bank of Sri Lanka employees picketed the bank's Colombo Fort office on September 22 over various demands, including an increase in housing loans and resolution of promotion issues. The protest was called by the Ceylon Bank Employees Union which has branches in state and private banks.

Pakistan: Islamabad public school workers demonstrate

Hundreds of daily-wage employees of Islamabad's model colleges and other schools protested to the government minister in Islamabad on September 23 to demand regularisation and wages which have been suspended for the last four months. Workers complained that the government had failed to honour promises to pay outstanding salaries before the Eid festival.

Teachers and daily-wage employees at schools in the Islamabad Capital Territory have been protesting over late salary payments since the beginning of the year when the Capital Administration and Development Division (CADD) abolished student fees. Daily-wage workers are only paid between 8,000 and 10,000 rupees (\$US100) per month.

Doctors and utility workers take action over unpaid wages

Young doctors at the National Institute of Child Health (NICH) in Karachi protested outside the Karachi Press Club on Sep 18 to demand payment of three months' unpaid salaries. The Young Doctors

Association told the media that numerous representations to the NICH administration and the Sindh health department have been ignored.

On the same day employees of the Hyderabad Development Authority (HDA) and its subsidiary, the Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA), shut down the city's sewerage system and disrupted water supply over the non-payment of salaries.

According to the HDA Mehran Workers Union, at least 1,400 work-charged and contractual employees have not received their salaries for eight months. Another 1,200 regular employees and around 400 retired employees have not been paid salaries and pensions, respectively for five months. A union spokesman said repeated requests to the Sindh provincial government had been ignored.

Food processing workers vote for industrial action

Food-processing workers at Simplot plants in Devonport and Ulverstone in Tasmania and Kelso and Bathurst in New South Wales (NSW) have voted overwhelmingly in favour of taking protected industrial action after nine months of failed negotiations. A spokesman for the Manufacturing Workers Union said possible industrial action could include overtime bans, stoppages or strikes.

The union wants 4 percent annual pay increases over three years and retention of existing conditions. Simplot wants a wage freeze for year one, 2 percent increases in years two and three at its NSW plants and 2 percent each year for the next three years at its Tasmanian factories.

Public sector union delegates vote for industrial action

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) delegates from 70 different government agencies, employing 165,000 public sector workers, have voted to endorse the use of protected industrial action in a dispute for new work agreements. The CPSU claims that months of negotiations made no headway because agency heads were under instructions from the Liberal-National government not to make any pay deals that did not cut conditions.

The union, which has refused to fight the federal government's public sector job cuts, wants a 12 percent pay increase over the three year agreements. It has not yet applied to the Fair Work Commission for a members' ballot to endorse industrial action.

New South Wales disability workers demonstrate

On September 19, dozens of Ageing Disability and Home Care (ADHC) workers, supported by disabled people, parents and carers, held a lunchtime rally in Albion Park (south of Sydney) to protest the state Liberal government's plans to privatise the sector. The NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme), which was introduced by the former federal Labor government with support of all the health sector unions, opens the way for the New South Wales government to transfer 14,500 ADHC workers to the private sector. Other states are expected to introduce similar measures.

A Public Services Association spokesman told the media that privatisation will see wages cut by 30 percent and conditions reduced.

Parents and carers of the disabled fear that care services will be drastically cut.

The PSA has attempted to dissipate anger over the government plans by organising petitions and harmless one-hour stop work and lunch-time rallies across the state since March. The NSW PSA has refused to mobilise its 43,000 members in support of ADHS workers.

Victorian local council workers maintain work bans

Employees of the Whittlesea Council, 40 km north-east of Melbourne are maintaining work bans begun on September 16 in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement. Bans include rubbish collection, street cleaning and issuing of parking fines.

The workers are members of the Australian Services Union, one of three unions of covering the council's 1,200 employees. An ASU spokesman claimed the main issues of contention were wages and redundancy provisions. Workers rejected a revised "final" offer from council last week.

Victorian preschool teachers to strike

Preschool teachers in Victoria plan to strike for 24 hours on October 22 after negotiations for a new work agreement between the Australian Education Union (AEU) and the Early Learning Association Australia and the Municipal Association of Victoria broke down on Tuesday after more than 14 months of negotiations. The AEU expects about 400 preschool teachers and educators to walk out.

Workers rejected a 2.25 percent pay rise offer and opposed workload and employee classification issues. An AEU spokesman claimed that the previous work agreement had achieved parity for preschool teachers with their primary school counterparts but said that this would be eliminated in the latest offer.

Maritime union calls off strike at Mermaid Marine

For the second time in two months the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has called off proposed strike action by 60 workers at Mermaid Marine Dampier supply base in Western Australia's north west in a dispute for a new enterprise bargain.

While the union claims that the company is attempting to remove a number of safety and employee conditions from the existing agreement it has isolated the dispute while maintaining nine months of discussions with the company. The union last month called off a threatened 10-day strike over the dispute.

The Mermaid supply base supports offshore drilling operations and supplies materials to Chevron's \$US54 billion Gorgon project. BHP Billiton also uses the supply base.

Contract communications workers in Western Australia on strike

Some 80 communications maintenance workers employed by Melbourne-based services provider ISGM to repair Telstra's ageing copper network in Western Australia, walked off the job on September 23 over heavy workloads and unsafe working conditions. The striking Communications Workers Union (CWU) members said that ISGM wants them to take an unpaid week off work if they were not available on rostered off weekends.

The CWU and workers planned to meet toward the end of the week to decide whether to continue industrial action. Up to 1,000 fault repair jobs per day have been affected according to an official from the CWU.

New Zealand oil refinery workers to strike

The First union and the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), covering 160 of the 300 employees of New Zealand Refining at Marsden Point, has issued a notice of strike action on October 7 and 8. Despite the First union indicating it is willing to accept a nil pay increase, the unions and company have been unable to negotiate a new collective agreement since May.

The EPMU is playing down its cave-in to management over a nil pay rise, claiming that workers are more concerned about safety and job security. Workers have insisted that the number of continuous days worked on a 12-hour shift be limited to 7 days. It is common for workers to work 12-hour shifts for 14 days in a row. Management is opposed to the 7-day limit. Workers also want management to stop using contract employees to fill of full-time vacancy.

Management told media that the action by refinery operators, emergency servicemen, mechanical, instrument and maintenance workers, will force the refinery to shut down its processing units for at least 11 days.

Papua New Guinea hospital workers walk out

On September 22, staff at the Goroka Provincial Hospital, in Papua New Guinea's Eastern Highlands province, downed tools and demonstrated outside the Provincial Health Authority (PHA) within the hospital premises, to demand the release of funds which they said had been approved in the budget for the purpose of purchasing basic items. Protesters, including nurses, doctors, administration workers, drivers and ancillary staff, complained that they were using their own income to purchase urgently needed basic items such as sterilising materials, soaps, floor cleaning chemicals, photo copy accessories and vehicle maintenance.

Authorities met the protesters and said the required funds would be released by the end of the week.



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