

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

25 October 2014

Asia

South Korea: Kia Motor union endorses wage deal

Following three months of limited strike action, the union representing workers at Kia Motors Corp., South Korea's No. 2 automaker, on Wednesday reached a tentative agreement with the company for a 5.1 percent pay increase. The two sides agreed to raise basic monthly salaries by 98,000 won (\$US93), and give workers 450 percent bonuses and a further lump sum of 8.9 million won which includes various compensation and rewards for meeting production targets and launching of new car models.

Management also agreed to set the retirement age at 60 from the previous 59, with the company pledging to improve medical check-ups for employees and expand maternity leave. The union said it will hold a vote Monday on whether to approve the pact.

While the deal is in line with that made with unions at Kia's affiliate Hyundai Motor, the Kia and Hyundai unions dropped demands for bonuses to be included in the basic pay rate. This would have increased overtime, holiday allowances and severance pay.

South Korean shipbuilders vote for strike

Workers at Hyundai Heavy Industries, the world's largest shipbuilder, have endorsed a strike motion, threatening the first walkout in 18 years. More than 97 percent of some 10,000 workers who voted on Wednesday approved the motion after pay negotiations with management broke down on September 19. Negotiations were to resume yesterday.

Their demands include a 6.5 percent raise in basic pay and a one-off bonus equal to 10 weeks' wages. A union spokesman said young workers had traditionally filled out their low basic salary packages with bonuses and by working overtime. "But the company started cutting overtime pay and bonuses last year, citing a weaker balance sheet," he said.

South Korean shipbuilders have been hit by a global economic slowdown and growing competition from Chinese rivals over the past several years.

Indian contract workers continue strike at state-owned energy company

Close to 13,000 contract workers, half the workforce of the Indian government-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu, have been on strike since September 3 for higher wages and permanency. They are defying a back-to-work order by the Madras High Court, which declared the walkout at the company's three power plants and three open-pit coal mines illegal three days after it started.

Contract workers are subject to arbitrary and brutal working conditions and many are paid as little as 10 percent of the wages paid by regular workers. NLC management has long ignored their demands to be hired as permanent workers. Making on average 10,000 rupees (\$US167) a month, the strikers are calling for an immediate increase in the minimum wage to 25,000 rupees (\$415) until they are hired as regulars.

In the latest round of talks that ended on Monday, only leaders of the two recognised unions, the Labour Progressive Front (LPF) and the Anna Workers and Staff Union (AWSU), were allowed to participate. Details of a package offered were not disclosed.

The media reported that NLC had insisted that contract workers' wages remain below those paid by state-controlled Coal India, which is currently 486 rupees per day.

Bangladesh: Auto-rickshaw drivers in Sylhet strike

Auto-rickshaw drivers in Sylhet city, in north-east Bangladesh, struck on October 19 on several demands. The Sylhet Road Transport Workers' Union ended the strike later that day after a government official gave a vague assurance that "all their demands would be met."

Demands included the end to corruption by transport officials, end to police harassment, repairs to the rundown Sylhet-Tamabil road and mitigating transport related cases at Sylhet instead of in the nearby Habiganj district.

Toy factory workers at the Uttara Export Processing Zone down tools

About 2,000 employees of the Hong Kong based high-tech toy manufacturer Sonic (Bangladesh) Ltd at the Uttara EPZ in Sadar, central Bangladesh, downed tools on October 19 with nine demands. After police forcefully removed them from the premises, workers picketed the plant and detained a jeep carrying factory officials.

Workers complained that management forced them to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week. They are not paid any overtime and if anyone protests they are sacked. They alleged that pregnant female workers do not receive maternity leave and workers are also fined over trivial matters with the fines deducted from their monthly pay.

Around 50 strikers returned after union officials and management promised to meet workers' demands. The remaining employees said they would continue striking until all demands were met.

Sri Lankan public sector workers protest for wage rise

On October 20, hundreds of workers representing several trade unions, including the National Trade Union Centre, gathered outside the Fort Railway Station in downtown Colombo and marched towards the main road, blocking the traffic on Olcott Mawatha. They were demanding the Rajapakse government's 2015 budget include a pay rise for public sector employees.

Union officials said they wanted the public sector monthly wage increased by 10,000 rupees (\$US75.50) and a relief allowance of \$38 a month for workers in the private sector. They said they would not accept piecemeal allowances which could be taken away later by the government. The budget was due to be released on October 24.

Pakistan: Home-based workers demand recognition

Over 800 home-based women workers (HBWs) from the Punjab province resolved on October 20 to stage a sit-down protest outside the Punjab Assembly in Lahore if the provincial government does not pass its draft HBW bill within a month. The bill, which recognises HBWs as labourers and would provide them with social security in accordance with the labour laws, affects over 5,000 women in the Punjab province.

HBWs complained that the Punjab provincial government has had the draft law for 18 months. A similar law has been passed in other Pakistani provinces.

Punjab government clerks protest for wage rise

All Pakistan Clerks Association members from the Departments of Agriculture and Livestock, Environment, and Education in Punjab demonstrated on October 20 to demand better pay and benefits.

The association wants the provincial government to increase wages of all government employees by 60 percent to compensate for inflation, a 30 percent rise in the house rent allowance and all Punjab government employees given leave encashment for a year following their retirement.

The government clerks also want the pay scales of all Grade 5 to 16 employees increased in line with government workers in the neighbouring province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. Their demonstration followed similar protests in January and February over the same issues.

Chinese paper mill workers strike

Nearly 800 women workers at the Gold East Paper Company plant in Jiangsu province, on China's east-coast, walked off the job on October 15 after being told that they would not get the pay increase that had been awarded to their colleagues because their positions had already been

“outsourced” without their consent.

Striking workers staged a peaceful sit-in at the factory gate holding banners stating: “Sisters, let's stand together and safeguard our rights!” Police were called in and clashes led to several workers being injured, with at least five hospitalised. Workers later took their protest to the streets of Zhenjiang city. They remained on strike three days later. The workers denounced the official factory trade union, declaring that it has “always sided with the company.” Workers said the company union shared an office with the factory's “culture and propaganda department.”

Philippines chemical workers strike

Cenapro Chemical Corporation workers in Cebu have been on strike since October 18 to demand the company restart negotiations for a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA). Cenapro stopped negotiations in July and filed administrative cases against the union leaders following the union's picket to protest against the firm's compulsory 16-hour work day.

Cenapro produces activated carbon for water filters. Its output has been reduced by around 80 percent due to the strike. The president and vice-president of the Cenapro Chemicals Employees Association-Alliance of Nationalist and Genuine Labor Organizations, an affiliate of the Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), have been charged and could be sacked under company rules.

Japanese English teachers strike

On October 20, non-Japanese English teachers at the Shibaura Institute of Technology in Tokyo walked off the job for four hours and distributed leaflets in the university to protest management's plan to sack them and replace them with Japanese-speaking English teachers.

The strike involved the Shibaura Institute of Technology Workers Union and supporters from parent-union Zenkoku Ippan Tokyo General Union. Teachers said they plan to continue industrial action until the university stops stonewalling and agrees to some kind of compromise.

Australia and the Pacific

Victorian early childhood teachers strike

Over 400 early childhood sector teachers across Victoria walked out for 24 hours on October 22, closing down 60 kindergartens and forcing 450 more to run limited services. The Australian Education Union (AEU) members attended a stop work meeting in Melbourne and then marched to state parliament. There have been 14 months of negotiations over an enterprise bargaining agreement centring on issues concerning wages, classification structures and workloads. It is the first strike by early childhood teachers in ten years.

The teachers want pay parity with state government primary teachers, since they are lagging behind by between five and nine percent, depending on their classification. Their employer, the Early Learning Association of Australia, which covers not-for-profit kindergartens, has offered annual pay increases of 2.5 percent, and claimed this would bring about parity with primary teachers by 2018. The current wage gap, however, is expected to grow because the current agreement for primary teachers is

due to be renegotiated in 2015.

New Zealand family support workers impose work bans

Some 25 social workers, family workers and support staff working for Anglican Family Care in Dunedin and South Otago, on New Zealand's South Island, have begun industrial action for a wage rise. Following five months of failed negotiations, Public Service Association (PSA) members have implemented action that includes work-to-rule and bans on administrative work and overtime. Members will also hold lunchtime pickets and a two-hour stop-work meeting on November 4. Action will continue until November 14.

Workers want a pay increase that will significantly close the 40 percent gap between their wage and that of government employees doing the same job.

Puma Energy workers in Papua New Guinea strike

Workers at Puma Energy oil refining and distribution facilities in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea's capital, walked off the job on October 17 and rallied at the Konedoby cricket oval over the company's refusal to enter talks to resolve their grievances. The workers are former employees of the InterOil Corporation, an extensive network of fuel terminals, retail service stations and aviation facilities, which was acquired by Puma in June. Puma is now Papua New Guinea's major supplier of fuel.

The Energy Workers Union served a strike notice on October 7 with a seven-day ultimatum in which they demanded that management pay all outstanding entitlements from their employment with InterOil. They also want the current employment terms and conditions reviewed to comply with international oil and gas standards and the PNG Employment Act 1978.

Most workers returned to work within 24 hours after Puma agreed to enter talks over the issues.



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