

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 September 2015

Asia

South Korean tyre manufacturing workers locked out

Kumho Tire, South Korea's second-largest tyre maker, locked out its striking unionised workforce on Monday in a dispute over wages. The workers have been on strike since August 17, stopping production at Kumho's three production plants.

The company claimed the stoppage had cost it about 94 billion won (\$US78 million) in lost revenue. Some 1,200 riot police have been deployed to the company's plant in Gwangju where around 3,000 workers are demonstrating. The company employs around 3,400 people at its plants.

At the 16th round of negotiations last weekend, management offered a 4.6 percent wage increase, and 3 million won compensation for each worker in return for the company instituting the so-called peak-wage system next year. The system, which gradually cuts salaries years before retirement, is one of the labour market reforms pushed by the Park Geun-hye administration. Retirement age is to be lifted from 58 to 60.

The union has called for an unconditional 8.3 percent salary rise, performance-based pay for 2014 and want compensation for salary and bonus cuts when the company was under debt reconstruction from 2009 to 2012. The union claimed that the pay cuts were up to 40 percent during this period.

South Korean shipbuilding workers on strike

Workers at three of South Korea's six shipbuilding companies—Daewoo Shipbuilding and Marine Engineering (DSME), Hyundai Heavy Industries (HHI) and Samho Heavy Industries (SHI)—started partial strike action on Wednesday. The shipbuilding workers are striking for four hours each day for a week.

Workers from the other companies, including Samsung Heavy Industries and Hyundai Mipo Dockyard, are still negotiating next year's wages. Workers at Hanjin Heavy Industries are participating in the walkouts.

DSME's union announced on Wednesday that its members would hold a hunger strike to demand the company's creditor, Korea Development Bank, invest more in the company.

HHI, SHI and DSME announced a wage freeze following reported losses totalling \$US4 billion in this year's second quarter. HHI

management have offered 100 percent of the monthly wage as a bonus, plus 1 million won compensation for the freeze. The unions have asked for a 127,560-won increase in the base salary plus a 250 percent bonus increase.

Hyundai Motor workers vote to strike

Workers at Hyundai Motor on Thursday voted for strike action in their pay dispute with the nation's number one car maker. The union and management agreed to resume negotiations over reforms to its pay structure, but workers could go on strike as early as September 14. The union represents more than 48,000 workers and about 78 percent of the 89 percent that voted supported the strike action.

The union wants a 7.8 percent increase in workers' monthly basic wage, guaranteed job security until age 65 and bonuses worth 30 percent of the carmaker's net profit for last year. Workers strongly oppose management's decision to implement the peak-wage system next year.

South Korean discount supermarket workers protest

Some 600 unionised employees of Homeplus, South Korea's second largest discount supermarket chain, walked off the job on Tuesday and demonstrated outside the company's headquarters in Seoul to demand job security following acquisition of the firm by private equity fund MBK Partners. Homeplus, which was previously owned by British retailer Tesco, employs nearly 26,000 people at more than 800 outlets across the country.

A union spokesman said MBK's promise of job security was insufficient to dispel workers' concerns. He said the private equity fund had made similar pledges in previous acquisitions, but ended up breaking their promises in an effort to lift the value of companies it took over before selling them.

Philippines public school teachers continue action

As part of an ongoing nationwide campaign, public school teachers in Cagayan de Oro City held their third sit-down strike on Tuesday in their dispute for an overdue salary increase. Their action, which included demonstrations in other cities, followed nationwide one-day strikes in November and February and a demonstration last week in Manila outside

the Department of Budget and Management.

Teachers said that their salaries have been stagnant for five years. According to the Salary Standardization Law, their pay should be reviewed every three years.

The Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) wants teachers paid 25,000 pesos (\$US557) per month, up from the current 18,549 pesos, and 15,000 pesos per month for non-teaching personnel, up from 9,000 pesos. Philippines President Benigno S. Aquino is delaying signing House Bill 245, which provides for salary increases for teaching and non-teaching personnel, falsely claiming that the government does not have enough funds.

The ACT has also called for the immediate implementation of Republic Act 4670, which mandates that public school teachers' salaries "shall compare favourably with those paid in other occupations requiring equivalent or similar qualifications, trainings and abilities."

India: Police attack protesting government workers in Chandigarh

At least 12 government employees were injured, two seriously, when police attacked their demonstration on September 6 in Chandigarh, the capital of the states of Punjab and Haryana. The assault occurred when workers tried to march towards the Union Territory government office to press their demand for accommodation. Around 4,000 government workers were falsely promised apartments in 2008.

Karnataka resident doctors maintain strike

Resident doctors and house surgeons at three major hospitals in Karnataka—K.R. Hospital and Cheluvamba Hospital in Mysore and VIMS Hospital in Bellary—are on strike for a salary increase. Doctors at VIMS walked out on August 31, while doctors at the other hospitals struck on Monday. Currently all services, including out-patient and emergency departments, are running without residents and interns. Elective procedures have been put on hold.

Karnataka resident doctors have not had a pay revision since 2011. At least 300 members of the Karnataka Association of Resident Doctors are involved. They first raised the issue with the government in February 2014 and held limited protests. The government has refused to hold talks.

Karnataka sanitation workers hold more protests

Some 185 sanitation workers in Mandya, Karnataka walked off the job on September 6 to demand four months' unpaid wages. At least 40 strikers protested on the Bangalore-Mysore Highway the following day. They dumped garbage on the road. Their action followed a walkout in April, also over unpaid wages. Workers want a guarantee that wages will be paid regularly each month.

Kerala tea plantation workers on wildcat strike

Some 4,000 workers from the government-owned Kannan Devan Hills Plantations walked off the job on September 6 and are maintaining a protest in the nearby town of Munnar to demand better wages and living conditions. Their ranks were swelled by 7,000 supporters on Tuesday who marched through the streets bringing the tourist town to a standstill.

The workers have barred All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC), Centre of India Trade Unions (CITU) and Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) officials from any involvement in their action. Last Saturday workers attacked trade union offices, accusing them of siding with the plantation management and ignoring workers' demands.

The tea plantation workers, mostly women, want their daily wage lifted and a 20 percent bonus increase. Plantation management has only offered a 10 percent bonus increase, which, the workers allege, was agreed to by the unions.

Communicable disease nurses in Tamil Nadu fight sackings

Contract communicable diseases nurses in Tamil Nadu demonstrated in Coimbatore and Thiruvannamalai on September 7 to defend their jobs. Up to 2,000 nurses will be sacked if the government goes ahead with its plan to end their contracts on September 15.

Sri Lankan nurses end strike over transfers

Nurses attached to 45 health institutions, including Kuliypatiya, Nikaweratiya, Dambadeniya and Marawila Base Hospitals, in Sri Lanka's North Western province ended a five-day strike on Monday after the government agreed to their demands. Nurses walked out on September 3 to oppose the sudden transfer of 378 nurses to new locations. All surgeries and regular services were halted as a result of the strike. The Government Nursing Officers' Association (GNOA) called off the strike after the provincial government ordered hospital authorities to suspend the transfers.

Pakistan: Islamabad police attack protesting hospital medical staff

Islamabad police brutally attacked 1,000 government hospital doctors and paramedics demonstrating for the restoration of the Health Risk Allowance on Tuesday. The health workers were attempting to march to the Prime Minister's secretariat building. At least 30 protesters were injured and 15 arrested. The Joint Action Committee moved the protest to another location after the assault.

The protest was part of an ongoing campaign by 10,000 workers at five major Islamabad public hospitals—the Pakistan Institute of Medical Sciences, Polyclinic, Capital Hospital, Federal Government General Hospital and National Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine—to restore the health risk allowance which constitutes a major part of their monthly income. Grade 17 employees' monthly take-home pay is reduced by 7,000 rupees (\$US68) without the allowance.

Government hospital employees won the allowance in 2011, after a 35-day protest outside parliament. The benefit covers the risk of exposure to blood-borne and radiation-related diseases, such as cancer, hepatitis B and C, tuberculosis and needle injuries. The government increased the

salary of federal employees by seven percent earlier in the year but froze the health risk allowance for medical workers.

Australia and the Pacific

Western Australian construction workers accept wage deal

Around 1,800 construction workers on Chevron's Barrow Island \$55 billion Gorgon LNG project off Western Australia's north-west coast called off strike action planned for Friday after contractor CB&I agreed to a 5 percent pay rise and improved roster arrangements in a new enterprise agreement.

Members of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Electrical Trades Union (ETU) had voted for strike action after CB&I management rejected union demands that the existing fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) shift arrangement be changed from 26 days on, 9 days off, to 20 days on, 10 days off.

Workers have endorsed the CB&I/unions deal of 23 days on, 10 days off even though their demand for a 20/10 roster was consistent with the recommendations of shorter rosters made by the recent WA Parliamentary Inquiry into the mental health impacts of FIFO work. The inquiry revealed widespread depression amongst FIFO workers, relationship breakdowns and suicides.

Esso oil and gas lockouts continue in Victoria

Esso Australia is continuing to lock out workers at its Longford and Long Island Point oil and gas plants in Victoria in a dispute over a new enterprise agreement. The lockouts, which began on July 30, were in response to bans on overtime and callouts by Australian Workers Union (AWU), ETU and AMWU members.

About 200 electrical and instrumentation maintenance staff are subject to two-hour daily afternoon lockouts, while offshore maintenance staff are being locked out for three hours a day.

The refinery workers have overwhelmingly rejected Esso's demands. The company wants to reduce the number of operators at the Longford plant, which workers oppose for safety reasons, and increase the shift roster for off-shore workers from one-week rotations to two-weeks-on and two-weeks-off. The enterprise agreement expired ten months ago, with negotiations ongoing for over a year.

New Zealand Meat Workers Union isolates locked out members

Around 250 members of the NZ Meat Workers Union (MWU) at the AFFCO Talley's meat processing plant in Wairoa, on New Zealand's North Island, have been locked out for refusing to sign punitive new individual agreements as a precondition to returning to work after the seasonal lay-off.

Wairoa is the fourth AFFCO plant where management has made these demands in the last three months. Workers at other plants walked out when AFFCO quit mediation around renewal of the collective agreement

and sought to have the Employment Authority end the bargaining in the 18-month dispute. The union called off a two-day strike planned for AFFCO's eight plants last month and sent striking employees at the Rangiora, Imlay and Manawatu plants back to work.

The union says that a "climate of fear, of managerial dictate and punishment" dominates the AFFCO plants, while skilled workers with years of service are being forced out because of unreasonable shift arrangements and uncertain income.

The MWU is responsible for imposing these conditions by shutting down any attempts by workers to mobilise and fight the company while dragging three separate disputes with AFFCO through the courts. In order to impose a solution, the union has worked closely with the indigenous Maori pro-business organization, the Iwi Leaders Group, to persuade the largely Maori workforce to call off industrial action.

Solomon Islands health workers walk out

Government employees, including nurses' aides, domestic workers, grounds men, drivers, security and microscopist workers, at the Kilu'ufi Hospital in Auki, Malaita province in the Solomon Islands walked off the job on Wednesday to demand payment of outstanding allowances. An official of the Health Direct Employees Union said the hospital breached the memorandum of understanding (MOU) signed in March 2013 in which it agreed to pay dirty allowances, danger allowances and special duties allowances.

Workers returned to work after an hour when management agreed to discuss revision of the MOUs of 2013 and 2010. The workers warned that they would issue a 14-day strike notice if there was no early resolution.



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