

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

26 September 2015

Hyundai Motor workers in South Korea strike

Some 48,000 unionised workers at Hyundai Motor began a series of rolling stoppages on Wednesday that continued through to Friday after the 29th round of wage negotiations failed to reach agreement. Production at the company's three plants in Ulsan, Asan and Jeonju was cut by 10,000 cars.

The union wants a 7.8 percent increase in workers' monthly basic wage, guaranteed job security for both regular and irregular workers 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 which reduces salary in return for extending retirement age. When workers reach the age of 59 their pay would be reduced by 10 percent. It is one of the labour market reforms demanded by the Park Geun-hye administration.

South Korean tire union shuts down strike

The union representing workers at Kumho Tire, South Korea's second-biggest tire maker, has shut down the one-month strike action by over 3,000 workers at the company's three production facilities south of Seoul. The union claimed that this was necessary in order to elect a new union leader. The company resumed full production on Monday.

Workers walked off the job on August 17 and were locked out on September 7, after rejecting the company's latest offer, which followed 16 rounds of talks. The company offered a 4.6 percent wage increase, and 3 million won compensation for each worker in return for the company instituting the peak-wage system next year. 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 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 discount supermarket workers strike

Around 2,000 unionised employees of Homeplus, South Korea's second largest discount supermarket chain, walked off the job on Wednesday and demonstrated outside the company's headquarters in Seoul to demand job security following acquisition of the firm by private equity fund MBK Partners. Their action followed a one-day walkout by 600 unionised

workers on September 3 over the issue.

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.

MBK has refused to meet workers' representatives over the issue. Homeplus, which was previously owned by British retailer Tesco, employs nearly 26,000 people at more than 800 outlets across the country.

South Korean workers protest union deal on industrial reform

Over 5,500 workers held a one-day rally in Seoul on Wednesday in protest against a tripartite labour market reform deal between the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU), employers and the government. The rally was organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) which opposes the deal for its own tactical reasons.

According to the KCTU, the FKTU has accepted the government's and employers' position on all issues, including on general dismissals, employment rules, irregular worker policies, the wage-peak system, and phased-in reductions in working hours. The new regulations will allow easier layoffs, the lowering of wages and increase the use of non-regular workers.

The KCTU has not called for any industrial action and instead has threatened to hold a 100,000-strong rally on November 14.

Filipino distillery workers maintain protest

More than 200 contract workers at the Tanduay Distillery plant in Cabuyao, Laguna, south of Manila are picketing the plant to win their jobs back. On Tuesday, they were viciously attacked by police and company security.

Police fired several shots in the direction of the workers in an attempt to break up the picket. An unknown number of workers were injured and a picket tent and makeshift quarters were destroyed when they were blasted by water cannon.

Tanduay Distillery, owned by Lucio Tan, a billionaire and the country's second wealthiest individual, sacked the workers on May 18 to head off their bid for job permanency.

The retrenched workers are among 397 who have been employed for years, some more than a decade, under labour-only contracts with Global Skills Providers Multi-Purpose Cooperative and HD Manpower Service Cooperative. There is only one regular employee for every five workers in

all three plants of Tanduay Distillers in the Philippines.

The company has ignored several directives by the Department of Labor and Employment to classify the workers as regular employees and rehire them.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

More than 500 Bloomsfield Knitters workers in Kampong Tralach district in central Cambodia are on strike, accusing management of firing 25 workers as revenge for striking in August. Around 200 strikers protested at the National Assembly and Ministry of Labour in Phnom Penh on Monday demanding that government officials intervene in their dispute.

A spokesman from the Free Trade Union said the Hong Kong-owned factory, which produces men's and women's knitted sweaters, only contracts for one to three months and that most workers are terminated if they fail to meet production targets or work extra hours. The workers action follows a strike last month and in June 2014 over sudden sackings, including the termination of pregnant employees without paying compensation as mandated by law.

Bangladesh: Garment workers in Chittagong demand wages

Kelvin Fashion factory workers in Chittagong city demonstrated on the Bayezid Bostami Road on September 17 to demand immediate payment of salary arrears and the Eid religious holiday bonus. Chittagong industrial and metropolitan police officers were deployed to the area. Workers ended the protest after management agreed to pay last month's salary by September 24 and current month's salary and Eid bonus by Sunday.

Chittagong jute mill workers protest

Around 2,000 workers of state-owned Amin Jute Mills Ltd in Chittagong demonstrated on Wednesday demanding for nine weeks' unpaid wages. They blocked the Chittagong-Hathazari road for three hours. Workers ended the protest after authorities, in the presence of the police, agreed to pay one week's wages immediately.

Gazipur textile workers stop work

Paradise Spinning Mills workers in Sreepur of Gazipur, a district of Dhaka, stopped work and demonstrated on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway on September 18 to demand salaries for September and the Eid bonus. Their action was sparked after management announced that the mill would continue operating during the Eid holiday and that wages and the Eid bonus would not be paid until the end of September.

Pakistan: Karachi government teachers fight for wages

Karachi Metropolitan Corporation (KMC) education department teachers protested on Monday for the immediate settlement of four months' pay for and an official inquiry into the withholding of wages. The protest was called off later in the day after KMC officials agreed to address their issues. Over 8,000 teachers are affected.

KMC claimed that teachers wage payments were suspended because of an ongoing inquiry into "ghost employees" claiming salaries.

Unpaid wages are commonplace in Pakistan across all industry sectors. In Sindh province Succur district council workers have been on hunger strike since September 15 protesting against the council administration's failure to pay them for 17 months.

Faisalabad power-loom workers locked out again

For the second time in two months, around 5,000 operators of 25,000 textile power-looms in Faisalabad, Punjab province have been locked out by loom factory owners. Council of Loomowners Association members locked their factories on September 12 accusing the loom operators' union, the National Workers Movement (LQM), of "extortion" by organising workers to strike. Workers marched to the Chief Ministers house in Faisalabad on September 17 to protest the lockout.

LQM has been running a campaign over wages, safety and issuance of social security cards which sparked a lockout in August. Workers also want the owners to employ additional workers to oil, clean and load the machines, which they claim is mandated in a legal agreement.

Karachi government health workers end strike

Young Doctors' Association called off four-day strike by paramedical staff and nurses at the Jinnah Postgraduate Medical Centre and the National Institute of Child Health reluctantly on September 17. The strike was shut down after the union accepted a written assurance from the Sindh government that their demands would be met.

Doctors and paramedical staff walked out on September 14 to demand the government honour its commitment to increase wages and a health allowance. The strike forced the closure of the out-patient department and disrupted ward services. Paramedics have accused their representatives of a sell-out for calling the strike off.

India: HML tea plantations strike continues

Women workers at four plantation estates of Harrison Malayalam Limited (HML) in India's southern state Kerala are maintaining the strike begun on September 13 to demand higher wages and bonuses. They have accused their unions of betrayal and barred them from negotiating for them.

The estate workers want a 20 percent bonus and a 500-rupee (\$US7.55) daily wage. Strikers said they would form a separate union with four representatives from each estate. HML has nine plantations in Kerala.

Earlier in the month, women tea plantation workers in Munnar struck for nine days. They also barred their unions from negotiations, accusing them of collusion with estate management after doing a deal that paid only a 10 percent bonus and no pay increase. The women successfully negotiated a

20 percent bonus with further meetings for pay increase.

Kerala agricultural workers on strike

Close to 600 Aralam Farming Corporation workers began an indefinite strike on Monday over wages and permanency for casual workers. Aralam Farming employs 189 agricultural workers and 33 rubber plantation workers as well as 367 casual workers.

The strike was called by a joint action committee representing three farm workers' unions affiliated to the Stalinist Centre for Indian Trade Unions (CITU), Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC) and All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC). The unions want wages increased to same levels paid to workers at government agricultural farms and permanency for all casual employees who have completed the mandatory 240 days' service.

Karnataka village daily wage workers demand wages

Shimoga local government daily wage workers demonstrated on September 22 to protest non-payment of wages for nine months. They marched from the Shimoga post office to the district administrative office and presented a memorandum to the executive. Workers warned that they would go on strike from October 14 if their demands were not met. The workers are affiliated with the CITU.

Tamil Nadu paper mill workers protest

Some 400 contract workers of Tami Nadu Newsprint and Paper Limited in Karur held a hunger protest in Chennai on September 20 to demand permanency. At least 1,400 workers at the company have been employed on contract for more than 20 years. Contract workers are only paid 10,000 rupees (\$US151) a month, while permanent workers are paid up to 50,000 rupees a month.

New Zealand hardware workers begin rolling stoppages

Workers at Bunnings, the Australian-owned hardware retailer, on Thursday began a series of two-hour rolling stoppages that will continue over the next fortnight at outlets across New Zealand. The dispute is over a proposed collective agreement. The FIRST Union Retail and Finance sector claimed that the company is attempting to lock workers into insecure contracts.

Bunnings is proposing a roster change that will remove workers' rights to determine their start and finish times. The union claims that under the current collective agreement Bunnings can only alter start and finish times under mutual agreement with workers. The firm now wants to insert a clause that will allow individual store management to change the start and finish times at will.

Some 99 percent of the Bunnings' workforce have voted against the proposed collective agreement.

Solomon Islands municipal workers issue strike notice

Following a walkout last week over delays in paying wages, city council workers in Honiara, the Solomon Islands capital, have issued a 28-day strike notice to the council administration. The Workers Union Solomon Islands (WUSI) said the notice will lapse on October 12 and that workers would strike the following day if their demands are not met.

The union is demanding regular payment of fortnightly wages and for an audit of the Honiara City Council (HCC) finances, particularly in the collection and disbursement of revenue and contracted jobs. Over 95 percent of the Honiara Central Market, Works Division and the Law Enforcement Office employees voted for strike action.



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