

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 September 2016

South Korea: Hyundai Motor workers hold more strikes

Thousands of workers at South Korea's largest automaker Hyundai Motor walked off the job this week in a dispute over annual wage negotiations. Workers struck for eight hours on Wednesday, twelve hours on Thursday and eight hours on Friday. It was the 16th round of walkouts since wage negotiations began on May 17.

While the union and management struck a provisional wage contract late last month, the deal was overwhelmingly rejected by workers. The company offered a monthly pay increase of 58,000 won (\$52), a one-off payment of 3.3 million won to each worker, bonuses and incentive payments worth 3½ times their basic monthly wage and 10 Hyundai shares. Workers said that it was less than last year's offer and were also concerned about company plans to slash the wages of all workers aged 59 and 60 by 10 percent.

The union wants retention of the current "wage peak system" arrangements, which impose a wage freeze on 59-year-olds and a 10 percent pay cut for 60-year-olds. The company union claims that the lower wage offer was a "compromise" in exchange for maintenance of the current wage-peak system.

South Korean bank workers strike

Members of the 100,000-strong Korean Financial Industry Union (KFIU) walked out yesterday and rallied at the Seoul World Cup Stadium in protest against expansion of the merit-based pay system in the financial sector. Almost 96 percent of the 82,000 who participated in a KFIU-run ballot voted for strike action.

Finance workers are concerned that their transformation from permanent to full-time contract employees and the imposition of a merit-based pay system will make it easy for management to sack staff. The government, which said it intends to proceed with the merit-based system, has threatened strikers that the "no work, no pay" principle would apply and that the union would be held legally responsible for financial damages caused by the strike.

Taiwan railway workers continue protests

Taiwan Railway Union (TRU) members held an overnight sit-in at Taipei Main Station on September 15 in their ongoing dispute over working conditions. The union, which represents train conductors, station workers and other operational staff, occupied the station's central plaza.

Their action followed a demonstration outside the Executive Yuan in Taipei on September 10 when workers presented officials with a petition signed by 1,800 union members. The petition called on Taiwan Railways Administration (TRA) to increase overtime pay and provide a higher allowance for workers forced to work overnight away from home. TRA has around 4,000 employees.

Workers also want staffing levels increased or the number of passenger and cargo services reduced. A union spokesman told the media that if workers' demands were not met there would further action, including overtime bans and strike action during the Chinese New Year holidays.

Taiwan power utility workers protest against privatisation

About 1,000 Taiwan Power Company (Taipower) employees marched to the Executive Yuan in Taipei on Monday to protest a planned amendment to the Electricity Act. The amendment aims to open up the power market and separate the industry into three categories: power generation, power distribution and energy brokerage.

Workers launched their own anti-privatisation campaign after the company union accepted a modified government plan on September 5. The protesting power workers said the proposed privatisation would only benefit large businesses, increase electricity prices and threaten job security.

India: Jammu & Kashmir water utility workers' strike in 27th week

Over 23,000 Jammu Public Health Engineering (PHE) Department daily wage and temporary workers remain on strike after walking out on March 21 to demand unpaid wages. The PHE workers allege they have not been paid wages for almost three years. Several workers were injured and 27 detained on Monday when police tried to break up a demonstration and march on PHE headquarters in Jammu. The workers are members of the All J&K PHE Daily Wagers, ITI Trained & CP Workers Association.

While some water pumping stations and tube wells are being operated by temporary public health staff and non-strike PHE permanent employees, many areas are without water as a result of the strike. The government has refused to meet the strikers and refused to organise any alternate water supply for residents in the region.

Honda motorcycle workers on hunger strike in Rajasthan

Five sacked workers from the Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) plant in Tapukara, Rajasthan launched an indefinite hunger strike at Jantar Mantar in New Delhi on Monday. The protesters, who are members of the Honda 2F Kamgaar Union (HKU), are facing several police charges following a strike at the factory in February.

The hunger strikers were sacked for participating in strike action, along with 4,000 other workers who occupied the factory on February 16. They were demanding re-instatement of 10 permanent workers and the re-employment of 400 contract workers whose terms had ended.

Police violently attacked workers in the plant causing many injuries. More than a hundred strikers were arrested and charges were concocted against the union leaders ranging from attempted murder and looting and rioting. At least 100 permanent and 2,000 contract workers were sacked.

HMSI workers have been trying to register a union, without success, since August 2015. Factory management systematically sacked workers accused of involvement in union activity.

The five hunger strikers were supported by 400 workers from different factories in the Gurgaon-Manesar-Dhruhera industrial belt. The workers issued a statement listing three demands: that all suspended and terminated Honda workers be reinstated, all criminal charges be immediately withdrawn and all trade union rights guaranteed.

Punjab bus workers walk out

Contract employees from the government-run PUNBUS company at the Shaheed-e-Azam Sardar Bhagat Singh Interstate Bus Terminal struck for 24 hours on September 17 over demands for permanency. No buses were allowed to leave the terminal during the industrial action.

A spokesman from the Punjab Roadways/PUNBUS Contractor Workers Unions said around 4,000 PUNBUS contract employees had been protesting against the contractual system for the past nine years. He said the government had agreed to the workers' demands on various occasions but nothing had been done even though the law states that workers had to be made permanent within 240 days of recruitment.

Indefinite strike by Uttar Pradesh hospital technicians

Hundreds of pharmacists, technicians and other support staff at government hospitals in Uttar Pradesh began indefinite strike action on September 16 to demand implementation of the 7th Pay Commission recommendations. A representative from the Pharmacists Association said the government had ignored workers' 11-point memorandum of demands. Unions involved in the action included the Diploma Pharmacists Association (DPA) and the Rajkiya Nursing Sangh.

Many hospitals have been hit by the industrial action with professional staff, including diploma pharmacists, lab technicians, dental hygienists, nurses, ECG technicians, physiotherapists and X-ray technicians, demanding equal allowances, restoration of the aged pension system and qualification determined pay scales. A spokesman from the workers said the strike was called after the government repeatedly refused to enter talks.

Union ends Haryana government hospital technicians' strike

The Haryana State Laboratory Technicians Association called off a two-day statewide strike on Tuesday evening without reaching any resolution on its demands following the suspension of eight striking hospital lab technicians and the sacking of two striking contract technicians.

Lab technicians in hospitals across the state walked out on Monday to demand higher pay and revision of pay anomalies, implementation of the Indian government's promotion scales and permanent jobs for contract employees. There are 657 regular and 1,000 contracted lab technicians in Haryana's state-run hospitals and clinics.

While the government agreed to reinstate the suspended and sacked technicians it told the union that the pending inquiry against the technicians would continue.

Kerala telecommunications workers protest

BSNL Employees Union members held a one-day demonstration outside the chief general manager's office in Thiruvananthapuram on September 21 with 24 demands. These included a minimum bonus and the revision of salary and promotion issues. Workers at the government-owned telecommunications provider accused the Indian government of privatising the company by stealth by giving large-scale support to private companies competing against BSNL.

Pakistan: Khyber Pakhtunkhwa teachers and civil servants strike

About 3,500 contract teachers at 48 state-run Working Folks Grammar Schools in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa walked off the job for an indefinite period on Tuesday demanding seven months' unpaid wages and job permanency. A spokesman from the Worker Welfare Board-Open Union said the teachers would not return to work until they were paid. Some 45,000 students at Primary, Middle, High and Higher Secondary schools run by the Workers Welfare Board are affected.

On the same day other Workers Welfare Board contract employees demonstrated outside the Peshawar Press Club and marched to the Provincial Assembly demanding seven months' unpaid wages. Their other demands included job permanency and reinstatement of sacked workers. The protest was called by the Workers Welfare Board Employees Union.

The Supreme Court of Pakistan has issued orders to the provincial government calling for the payment of salaries and permanency for contract staff who have completed one year's tenure.

Sri Lankan government labour office workers strike

Workers attached to the Sri Lankan Labour Department have ignored a government ultimatum to return to work by September 15 and are maintaining their state-wide strike begun on September 7. The 360 striking workers are demanding a wage increase via revised salary scales.

Victorian potato chip workers hold rolling stoppages

Workers at the McCain potato chip manufacturing plant in Ballarat, Victoria have been holding rolling stoppages since Tuesday for a new enterprise agreement. McCain has transferred workers from an interstate plant and New Zealand to maintain production. More than 400 workers are employed at the Ballarat plant, which primarily produces frozen potato products such as french fries for the McDonald's fast food chain.

The company has presented a revised proposal for workers to vote on by October 4. It includes an 8 percent pay increase over three years but is combined with the introduction of 12-hour shifts. An Australian Manufacturing Workers Union representative told the media that McCain employees had already rejected the proposed agreement and want better job security and guaranteed entitlements.

Power workers in Victoria threaten strike action

The Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), representing workers at the Loy Yang A power generating plant in Victoria's Latrobe Valley, has threatened industrial action after members rejected the latest proposed enterprise agreement.

Almost 70 percent of the 530 workers balloted have rejected a proposal recommended by the Fair Work Commission in the 13-month dispute. Under the proposal, workers would receive four annual 5 percent wage rises and no changes to superannuation or long-service leave entitlements. Workers are concerned, however, that AGL wants to remove minimum staffing levels, change restrictions on some work practices and introduce various cost-cutting measures that endanger health and safety. The union has told the media that the proposed agreement could result in 36 jobs being lost.

AGL responded to the workers' rejection by announcing it would move to have the current expired enterprise agreement terminated which, if successful, would see sharp cuts to pay and conditions. Management has also threatened to impose a lockout if power workers take industrial action.

New Zealand: TV Shop workers walk out

Employees at general goods retailer TV Shop walked out on September 17 and demonstrated in front of the company's office in Takapuna, Auckland to demand better pay and conditions. TV Shop retails a large range of household products through television infomercials.

First Union has been in negotiations with TV Shop since July last year. Workers want a pay rise, regular hours and a "no redundancy" package in their new work agreement. A union spokesman said TV Shop workers are paid the minimum wage on rosters that vary from week to week according to management whims. Many workers have not had a pay increase for several years.



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