

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 October 2016

South Korean truck owner-drivers on strike

Around 15,000 members of Cargo Truckers Solidarity, affiliated with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, walked off the job on Monday to protest against the government's plan to allow more small freight trucks to operate. They fear that additional competition would lead to a cut in freight rates and job losses. Truckers said they would continue the strike until the government scraps the "cargo transport market development plan" and improves the law and institutions.

About a third of freight movements around the country are affected. The government has deployed 100 military container trucks and commandeered 200 unregistered private cargo trucks as strike-breakers, and has threatened to suspend truckers' fuel subsidies for six months if they remain on strike.

Cargo Truckers Solidarity wants the government to maintain the current entry barriers for small trucks carrying less than 1.5 tonnes in freight, implement the government's promise to enact the standard freight fee system, fulfil the presidential election pledge of a toll fee discount, and abrogate the registration of individual owners' trucks under a transportation company.

Korail workers' strike in third week

Adding to restrictions on cargo transport by striking truckers, nearly 7,500 unionised workers at the Korean Rail Corporation (Korail) are maintaining a strike begun on September 27. At least 40 percent of Korail workers are striking, taking out about half the nation's freight train capacity, while passenger services in Seoul have been reduced by 10 percent.

Korail workers, along with other government employees, are calling for President Park Geun-hye's government to drop its plan to expand a merit-based salary system for government employees. Salaries have been set by seniority in the past.

Hyundai and union strike wages deal

The trade union and management of Hyundai Motors, Korea's top automaker, reached a second tentative agreement on a wage increase on Wednesday, about two weeks after workers held their first full-day strike in 12 years after overwhelmingly rejecting a wage contract negotiated by the union. Workers, at the time, said the deal 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.

Under the latest deal, the union accepted a basic monthly pay increase of 72,000 won (\$US64), up from \$52 on the previous offer. None of the other offers were improved. These were a bonus of 350 percent and 3.3 million won in cash for each worker, along with other benefits. Management withdrew its demand for changes to the "wage peak" system, which workers strongly oppose. However, the union favours retention of the current wage peak arrangements, which impose a wage freeze on 59-year-olds and a 10 percent pay cut for 60-year-olds.

Workers were to vote on the new offer on Friday.

Indonesia: Freeport mine workers end strike

The 1,200 striking workers at PT Freeport Indonesia's (PFTI) Grasberg open pit gold and copper mine in Tembagapura, Papua returned to work on Monday after reaching an agreement with management. The workers walked off the job on September 28, demanding equal bonus distribution for workers in all departments. Strikers included heavy equipment operators and truck drivers, halting production at the pit. The company provided no details of the agreement reached with the All Indonesia Labor Union-PFTI unit.

Grasberg has been plagued by strikes, accidents and production problems in recent years. A three-month strike by 10,000 workers in 2011 that crippled production at the mine only ended after Freeport agreed to pay rises up to 24 percent. A wildcat strike in March 2015 over promotions closed the mine for six days.

Striking Sri Lankan tea plantation workers reject unions' sell-out deal

Thousands of plantation workers are maintaining a strike begun on September 27 to demand that the daily wage be increased from 620 rupees (\$US4.24) to 1,000 rupees. They ignored an order from their unions, in collaboration with the government and plantation owners, to return to work by October 5.

Workers have held demonstrations and pickets in 17 cities and towns in the Central and Uva provinces. They face continued harassment from the police, who have banned demonstrations in most areas.

In the collective agreement signed in 2013, daily minimum wages were set at 450 rupees. With attendance incentive and productivity targets, they reached 620 rupees. The due date for the next collective agreement was March 31, 2015 but plantation owners refused to negotiate a new agreement.

Workers rejected the latest proposal put to them, which would impose harsher backbreaking work for no guaranteed gain. Under the offer, which was accepted by their unions, the daily wage would increase to just 730 rupees for three days of the week, only if a worker achieved the near impossible task of plucking 24 kilograms of tea leaves. If a worker plucked less, the wage would remain at 632 rupees. The daily wage for the other three days would be set at 500 rupees, with a target of 15 kilograms of leaves. In addition, the full six days work for the daily-wage workers would not be guaranteed.

India: Uttarakhand water utility contract workers on strike

More than 2,000 contract water utility workers have been on hunger strike in Dehradun, Uttarakhand since September 29 to demand permanent jobs and to be paid directly by the government, not through a contractor. Workers claimed contractors were paid 15,000 rupees per worker a month but they received only a small fraction.

The workers, employed as linemen, drivers, plumbers, helpers and others, have been on a hunger strike since October 3. Management of the jal sansthan (water utility unit) and government agreed to meet with the strikers on October 17.

Honda motorcycle workers maintain protest

Five sacked workers from the Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) plant in Tapukara, Rajasthan were forced to end their 19-day hunger strike at Jantar Mantar, New Delhi last Saturday due to declining health. However, other workers have taken over in 24-hour relay hunger strikes, vowing to maintain their protest until the demands are met.

The hunger strikers have faced several police charges following a strike at the factory by 4,000 workers in February to demand the reinstatement of over 400 workers and registration of their union, the HMSI 2F Kamgar Union Tapukara. The hunger strikers 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 be guaranteed.

HMSI workers have been trying to register their union, without success, since August 2015. Prior to the February strike, the company systematically sacked over 800 workers accused of involvement in union activity.

Punjab government contract workers protest

Contract workers organised by the Punjab Contractual Employees Sangharsh Committee, demonstrated in Bathinda on Sunday, demanding job permanency and the filling of all vacant posts. Protesters included daily wage-workers, contract workers, rural health (anganwadi) workers, nurses, mid-day meal workers, teachers, transport workers and many others.

Protesters marched from the District Administration Complex to Fire Brigade Chawk, where they presented a memorandum to the fire commissioner. Other demands were clearance of outstanding salaries, revision of various allowances, an end to outsourcing of jobs and

distribution of allowances not paid since January.

The action followed a protest march two days earlier in Kothe Guruke village by contract workers which was attacked by police using water cannon and tear gas. At least 12 police and protesters were injured.

Punjab government call centre workers on strike

State government employees of the SUWIDHA centre (Single User-friendly Window Disposal and Help-line for Applicants) throughout Punjab have been on strike since September 7 to oppose the outsourcing of their jobs to a private company. They were given until October 3 to transfer to BSL Placement Limited or lose their jobs.

The Punjab government has brought in workers from BSL Placement as strike-breakers. The workers, organised by the Punjab State Suwidha Employees Union, said they would stay on strike until October 15.

New Delhi school guest teachers win pay increase pledge

New Delhi government school guest teachers, who have been demonstrating outside the chief minister's official residence in Manish Sisodia since October 1, have been promised a 100 percent pay increase. The teachers' long-pending demands included job permanency, fixed wages and re-appointment of guest teachers who were removed due to transfers.

The chief minister announced on Monday that 17,000 guest teachers currently engaged in government schools would get fixed monthly salaries of around 32,000 rupees to 34,000 rupees (\$US450 to \$500), pending approval from the cabinet. Teachers are currently paid 17,000 to 20,000 rupees a month. The minister said work would begin on making all guest teachers permanent.

Victorian oil refinery workers return to work

Some 400 employees and contract maintenance workers at Viva Energy's Corio refinery in Geelong, Victoria lifted a seven-day blockade at the plant on Tuesday afternoon after management and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) reached an agreement in mediation talks in the Fair Work Commission.

Workers decided to take the unprotected strike action on October 5 after Viva failed to respond to their concerns over safety, put to management in July. They maintained their strike and picket in defiance of a draconian state Supreme Court order that cautioned workers that anyone persisting with stopwork action would be liable for "imprisonment or sequestration of property."

Workers were concerned that hundreds of fire system faults had gone without repair at the refinery, and a new 84-metre diameter crude oil tank would be built without an automated firefighting system, while the plant's firefighting team had been reduced in size and operating hours. Viva has agreed to launch a "safety review" at the refinery that will involve the union and WorkSafe. No other details have been made public.

The Corio refinery, formerly owned by Shell, produces 50 percent of Victoria's fuel supplies, and is one of just four refineries left in Australia.

New Zealand: TV Shop workers hold more stoppages

Employees at the Avondale distribution centre of Brand Developers TV Shop in Auckland, walked off the job on Monday morning, following protests outside their workplace on Thursday and Friday last week. Workers at the company's call centre in Takapuna, Auckland walked out on September 17 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 the company 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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