

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

9 September 2017

Asia

## South Korea: Workers at public broadcasters MBC and KBS on strike

National Union of Media members at MBC and KBS, Korea's two biggest public TV networks, went on strike simultaneously on Monday to protest alleged management interference in news coverage and unfair labour practices. News broadcasts have been severely restricted and reruns of popular entertainment programs are being aired.

Around 1,800 workers at KBS and 2,000 at MBC have called for the removal of the networks' management and the restoration of independent, fair reporting. An arrest warrant has been issued for MBC president Kim Jang-gyeom following his refusal to attend questioning by the labor ministry on unfair labor practices at MBC.

The strike is an escalation of the action by 400 MBC reporters, TV producers, camera journalists and announcers at MBC who have been on strike since August 7 following revelations of an MBC "blacklist" which categorised journalists into different groups based on their involvement in a 170-day strike in 2012, their relations with the labour union, and "loyalty" to the company.

Over 300 MBC employees struck in 2012 in a dispute over political bias by management. Six journalists who were dismissed then as a consequence of the strike are still awaiting a final court ruling.

## GM Korea workers strike

Unionised workers at GM Korea downed tools for four hours during the day and night shifts on Tuesday in a dispute over a new contract. The action follows 18 rounds of failed wage talks since July 24.

Some 79 percent of GM workers voted in favour of striking in July but under instructions from the Korean Metal Workers Union (KMWU) they delayed strike action, as did other KMWU affiliated unions at Hyundai Motor and Kia Motors.

GM workers want an increased monthly wage of 154,883 won (US \$135.15) and 500 percent of their basic wages as a bonus, or 4.25 million won (US \$3,709). Other demands include the implementation of a salary system instead of receiving hourly wages and an 8+8 shift schedule, with an eight-hour second shift, rather than a nine-hour one, which would finish at 12:40 am.

GM has offered an increase of 50,000 won in the basic monthly salary and 4 million won in bonuses per worker. Last year, the company agreed to start the 8+8 system in June this year, but only one meeting has been held to discuss its implementation. The union wants this issue resolved in

current negotiations.

## Kia Motors ordered to pay withheld wages

The Seoul Central District Court on August 31 ruled in favour of workers at Kia Motors in a case concerning unpaid overtime, night and holiday pay. The court found that recurring bonuses and lunchtime meal expenses are fixed wages that are paid on a regular and uniform basis, and as such they are ordinary wages and should have been included in the base salary for calculation of overtime, shift and holiday pay. Kia Motors was ordered to pay its 27,400 workers 422.3 billion won (\$US376.16 million).

The ruling marks a shift from previous cases in which courts had sided with business and ruled that bonuses and other regular allowances should not be included as part of the basic wage. Kia said it would appeal the decision.

## Sacked Burmese garment workers blockade factory

Around 280 sacked workers from DJY Knitting Myanmar in industrial zone 3 at Hlaing Tharyar have built barricades around the factory following failed talks in the township arbitration group for their reinstatement. The factory employs almost 400 workers and over half of them are on strike. Factory management is locked inside but still refuses to talk to the workers.

The strike erupted on August 7 when the workers' leader was sacked for trying to form a union and making demands on their behalf. Striking workers were sacked when they refused to return to work. They want reinstatement of the leader and the right to form a union.

Management has flatly refused to reinstate the workers' leader, and said the sacked workers would have to reapply for entry-level jobs as new recruits. Workers demanded reinstatement to their former positions or compensation.

The dispute has been passed to the Yangon regional arbitration council. Workers said they would maintain the factory barricade until the dispute is settled.

## Cambodian garment workers strike

About 150 garment workers from the Teng Xun factory in Kampong Speu province walked off the job and demonstrated outside the factory on

Monday with six demands. These include more holiday time for pregnant workers, the cessation of pay deductions on sick days and injury days, an end to arbitrary firings, transparency in ownership changes and better contract negotiations.

Workers submitted a petition to the provincial labour department but were told to return to work before the department would consider their case.

### **Terminated Cambodian garment workers maintain picket**

Over 100 workers from the Nantai Garment Factory in Steung Meanchey commune are maintaining a 24-hour picket outside the plant in a dispute over severance pay following the closure of the factory. Some 660 workers were told the factory had changed ownership and that their contracts would not be renewed after September 1. Workers were only given \$60 as severance, which they claim is less than what they are owed under the Labour Law.

The ministry of labour told workers on September 1 that the factory owner had closed operations and disappeared. Workers have blockaded the factory gates to ensure the owner does not return and remove equipment before they are paid their full entitlements.

### **Philippines shipbuilding workers threaten to strike**

The Alyansa ng Manggagawang Pilipinong Organisado-Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (AMAPO-TUCP) has registered a strike notice with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board on behalf of workers at the shipbuilding giant Hanjin Heavy Industries and Construction Philippines (HHIC-Phil).

AMOPA-TUCP claims that it has organised unions in all 18 sub-contractors of Hanjin involving over 30,000 workers. It has accused Hanjin of stalling on a union certification election after several hostile meetings with workers' representatives at the Labor Office. Workers threatened to strike if talks scheduled to resume on September 5 fail.

The workers want their union certified so they can negotiate a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) with Hanjin management. The workers have accused Korean foremen and supervisors of abusive behaviour, unfair labour practices and sexual harassments of female employees.

### **India: Tamil Nadu film industry workers resume strike action**

The Film Employees Federation of South India (FEFSI), representing 24 craft unions in Tamil Nadu's film industry, resumed indefinite strike action on September 1 after failed talks with the Tamil Film Producers' Council (TFPC) over union membership for new recruits. Tamil film producers want to recruit non-union labour.

FEFSI called off a three-day strike over the same issue on August 3 following intervention from the government which demanded that both sides begin conciliation talks. The strike had stopped the production of 40 movies.

The union has demanded that only members of FEFSI-affiliated organisations be employed and that producers honour previous wage agreements. FEFSI and TFPC are also in dispute over working hours.

While the current work day is 8–9 hours, the TFPC wants it extended to 12 hours. FEFSI claimed that it would result in reduced wages for workers.

The strike was still active on Thursday with FEFSI waiting for a response from TFPC which indicated it would not resume talks until Saturday.

### **Pakistan: Lahore gas pipeline workers' protest in second week**

Several dozen contract workers at Sui Northern Gas Pipelines Ltd (SNGPL) are maintaining protests they began on August 28 outside the company's head office in Lahore. They are demanding reinstatement.

Many of the protesters are sub-engineers who allege that the termination of over 200 contract workers recruited in 2013 was in violation of their contracts. According to their contracts, SNGPL should have made them permanent after five years.

### **Government printers in Islamabad protest**

Workers from the state-run Printing Corporation of Pakistan (PCP) demonstrated on August 31 against the delay in paying wages. The protest was sparked when PCP failed to keep a promise to pay overdue wages to its 700 employees by August 28. Workers appealed to the government to make a supplementary grant to PCP to cover wages.

Under the three-year International Monetary Fund's (IMF) budget deficit bailout the Pakistan government agreed to implement budget austerity measures. Funds for provincial budgets have been severely cut, starving state-run enterprises of funds to pay wages.

## **Australia and the Pacific**

### **Australian childcare workers strike over low pay**

Around 3,000 workers from childcare centres around Australia walked off the job at 3.20 p.m. on Thursday to demand higher wages in the childhood education sector. The walkout was a protest over "gross underpayment" of what is a predominantly female workforce. Workers said that the time of the walkout signified the time of the week childcare staff effectively start working for free when their pay rate is compared to the average Australian salary.

United Voice, the union covering childcare workers, is appealing to the Turnbull Liberal government to bankroll a 35 percent pay increase. United Voice members attending demonstrations across Australia voted to take further industrial action.

A childcare worker with the mandated minimum of 18 months' training only earns \$42,218 or just \$3 an hour more than Australia's minimum wage. Four years' full time study costs about \$30,000 but Bachelor of Early Childhood Education graduates are only paid \$52,691 a year—\$27,864 less than the average Australian salary.

The strike followed a national walkout by 1,000 childcare workers on International Women's Day in March over the issue. While United Voice attempts to blame the low wages on the fact that over 80 percent of early

childhood educators are female, this ignores the broader trend across all industries towards falling or stagnant wages, as part of a general assault over several decades on workers' pay and conditions.

The Fair Work Commission (FWC) ruled in February that penalty rates for work on Sunday and public holidays will be reduced for full-time and part-time workers in the hospitality, retail and fast-food industries, reducing the annual wage in the sectors by up to \$6,000.

### **Child protection workers in Tasmania walk out**

About 60 staff from Child Safety Services (CSS) around Tasmania walked off the job on Wednesday and gathered in Hobart to protest against conditions they claim are forcing them to make "impossible decisions" about vulnerable children. The industrial action was coordinated by the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and the Health and Community Services Union (HCSU), which called on the government to increase funding to the sector.

A CPSU spokesperson said more staff were urgently needed and there were currently 30 vacant positions. The union claimed it raised their concerns with the government three-and-a-half years ago when experienced staff began resigning because of stress and leaving funded positions vacant for lengthy periods.

A Liberal state-government spokesperson indicated there would be no change to government policy in the sector claiming "child protection has never had as many staff, resources, recruitment and funding as what they have now."

### **Uber drivers hold Australia-wide strike**

Thousands of Uber registered drivers in capital cities across Australia on Monday participated in a call from the Ride Share Drivers United (RSDU) group for a "No Uber Monday" log-off protest. This was the fourth protest this year by drivers who are calling for higher rates and improved contracts.

The RSDU claims that the drivers are being financially squeezed and that under Uber contract arrangements they have no bargaining power. The drivers want an increase in minimum rates of pay, a limit of 12 hours per shift, and a softening of the deactivation policy which bans low-rated drivers from using the ride-share app.

These grievances have led to protest action by Uber drivers in other cities around the world. The company unilaterally determines basic pay rates and there is lack of clarity of drivers' employment status.

RSDU claimed that as a direct result of Monday's strike one of Uber's competitors GoCatch announced it would implement uniform sustainable base rates Australia wide.

### **Victorian GrainCorp workers accept new work agreement**

GrainCorp workers in Victoria voted in a secret ballot on September 1 to accept the company's proposed enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) by 81 to 47, ending five months of negotiations. The three-year deal, which includes 2-percent annual pay increases, was put to employees without the endorsement of the Australian Workers' Union (AWU).

Although GrainCorp had improved its pay offer—increasing it from zero to 2 percent—the AWU claimed it was concerned the deal would lead to increased use of contract labour hire and wanted the agreement to include a cap on external contractors.

The new agreement covers grain-handling workers at sites in the Western District, Central Victoria, the North East, the Southern Mallee and the Wimmera regions.

### **Brisbane City Council workers to vote on work agreement**

The Brisbane City Council (BCC) has ended negotiations with 11 unions and is directly appealing to its 7,500 employees to endorse its proposed enterprise agreement. Eleven months of negotiations and two months of industrial action by the city's bus drivers and limited action by other council workers have ended in deadlock.

The ballot will open on September 19 and workers will have until October 6 to vote by phone or online. The unions have not commented on the council's move.

BCC has refused to change its offer of 2.5 percent annual pay increases over three years, with a \$400 sign-on bonus. The unions want 3.5 percent annual pay increases, with an \$800 sign-on bonus. Bus drivers have called for replacement of the outdated pay structure and an increase in the hourly rates for lower-ranked drivers and input into rostering schedules.

The Services Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, the Electrical Trade Union, Professionals Australia, the Plumbers' Union, the Australian Workers Union, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union, Rail Tram and Bus Union and the Transport Workers Union are all involved in the council's enterprise agreement negotiations.

### **New Zealand Foodstuffs workers hold second strike**

Chilled food distribution workers for New Zealand's supermarket giant Foodstuffs, the owner of Pak 'n Save and New World supermarkets, walked out for the second time in four weeks on September 1. They were demanding permanency for hundreds of contract workers which they say are filling permanent jobs. The action involved 70 workers at the Foodstuffs-owned CTD Nesdale distribution centre in South Auckland.

Foodstuffs contract workers are employed on a minimum wage through a third-party labour-hire company. The FIRST union, which is seeking to boost its membership, claims to represent the company's contract workers. It is demanding guaranteed hours, more legal protections for their employment, and an end to workplace harassment from management over unavoidable absences such as calling in sick.

### **Fiji: Nadi air terminal workers to vote on strike**

About 600 Air Terminal Services workers at Nadi International Airport, on Fiji's main island Viti Levi, participated in a secret ballot on Wednesday over whether to strike after negotiations for a pay increase reached deadlock three weeks ago. A strike by the terminal workers would impact on flights and cargo movements into and out of Fiji.

A Federated Airlines Staff Association (FASA) representative said they had tried to reach agreement on several issues, including cost of living

adjustments (COLA) since 2007. He said the dispute had been held up in the Employment Relations Tribunal for ten years.

### **Fiji public servants forced onto short-term contracts**

Fiji's public servants on tenure or permanent basis have been forced to sign contracts limited to one or two years. Workers fear that it could be preparation by the government for mass job cuts. In what the union claimed was a cynical attempt to compensate workers for the move, the government increased overtime and meal allowances by 100 percent.

The government claimed its public service reforms, which were started after the 2006 military coup by the then head of the Fijian Military Forces and current Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama, were aimed at improving transparency and promoting appointments based on merit.



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