

GM Korea workers strike for higher pay; thousands of Sri Lankan teachers continue national walkout; Australian tugboat workers resume rolling strikes

## Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

23 July 2021

### Asia

#### GM Korea workers strike for higher wages

Unionised workers at GM Korea took limited strike action at three South Korean plants on Wednesday to demand higher wages and job security, following a series of employer- and union-imposed wage freezes last year. GM Korea and its union, a branch of the Korean Metal Workers Union, have had 13 rounds of negotiations over wages since May.

The union has lodged a claim for a 99,000 won (\$US86) increase in monthly base pay, a cash bonus equal to 150 percent of the ordinary monthly wage and a special bonus of four million won. The demands are worth approximately 10 million won in total per worker. In response to previous job cuts they are also demanding the production of new vehicle models at the plant in Bupyeong, in Incheon.

The company has only offered a 26,000-won increase in basic pay and 4 million won worth of performance-related pay and bonuses and refused to make any commitment about new vehicle production.

#### Hong Kong: Foodpanda delivery workers protest

On July 15, food delivery drivers in Hong Kong protested outside the company headquarters of Foodpanda against exploitation. Drivers held slogans that read, “Shameless Foodpanda” and “Repay my hard-earned money.”

The delivery drivers want an increase in the delivery base rate, a complaint mechanism for order acceptance rates, a halt to unreasonable termination of staff contracts, abolition of the cash-on-delivery system and improved personal accident insurance coverage.

The drivers said they decided to take collective action because the company had continuously stonewalled their demands. They also alleged that the company has infiltrated rider communication groups and then fired those who expressed frustration with the company.

#### Over 200,000 Sri Lankan teachers continue national strike action

About 242,000 teachers and 16,000 school principals from 14 unions are maintaining an island-wide strike of online classes they began on July 12. In-school classes were officially suspended in April and replaced with online teaching in response to an upsurge in COVID-19 infections.

The striking educators were protesting the detention of union leaders following a demonstration opposing the government’s plans to privatise university education. While union officials were released from quarantine detention last weekend, the industrial action is continued this week and was joined by teachers from Catholic schools.

Teachers and principals are demanding resolution of long-outstanding teacher-principal salary anomalies and the withdrawal of the Kotalawala Defence University (KDU) Act, which will privatise the military run Kotalawala Defence University giving it the same powers as universities under the University Grants Commission.

The KDU will also be allowed to set up a network of universities and offer courses to non-military students on a large range of subjects. While the KDU will function like other universities, it will be governed by the military and be subject to its culture and ethics

#### Sri Lanka: Brunswick Estate tea plantation workers on strike

Plantation workers from the Brunswick Estate in Maskeliya struck work this week to oppose the imposition of higher workloads on the highly exploited, low paid workers. Workers said that management has lifted the daily tea leaf plucking target by 4kg, from 16kg to 20kg. Workers who fail to reach the new target are not to be paid the officially mandated 1,000 rupees (\$US5) per day. Sri Lankan estate workers have held several national strikes and numerous protests in recent years to try and secure the 1,000-rupee daily rate.

#### India: Jammu and Kashmir medical science college workers on indefinite strike

Workers from the Acharya Shri Chander College of Medical Sciences and Hospital (ASCOMS) in Jammu, the winter capital of Jammu and Kashmir, began an indefinite strike on July 15 to payment of outstanding

arrears. The ASCOMS Employees Welfare Association (AEWA) said hospital management is yet to implement payments agreed to in 2019.

Strikers called on the general public to back them and avoid visiting the hospital for any kind of treatment until they win their demands. Workers told the media that they consistently worked during the COVID-19 crisis and that one senior colleague died after being infected with the virus.

### **Tamil Nadu university teachers protest**

Around 50 members of the Madurai Kamaraj University College and Constituent Colleges guest faculty association demonstrated outside the Madurai Kamaraj University (MKU) on July 19 to demand a pay increase. They said that 60 faculty members recruited in 2019, based on the University Grants Commission qualification guidelines, are still only being paid 15,000 rupees (\$US201) per month. They want this increased to 20,000 rupees.

They also want pay increases determined by experience, the issuing of employee identity cards and their inclusion in the employees' state insurance and provident fund schemes.

### **Karnataka government contract paramedical staff demand permanent jobs**

State government contract paramedical staff held a three-hour demonstration outside the District Medical and Health Office in Kakinada, Karnataka on July 19 to demand permanent jobs. The demonstration was supported by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and other trade unions.

### **Punjab municipal administrative workers strike**

Administrative workers from the Ludhiana Municipal Corporation (LMC) in Punjab stopped work for three hours on July 15 over the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations. Workers held sit-down protests at all four LMC zones. They were organised by the Municipal Employees' Sangharsh Committee.

The workers submitted memorandums to the mayor and LMC commissioner on July 14. They said a decision regarding further strikes will be taken after consultation with the state-level employees' unions.

Workers from several other Punjab state government departments stopped work for two days on June 22 and again on July 8 over the Sixth Pay Commission's recommendations. They complained that demands they submitted to the commission had been ignored.

Doctors and health workers also held a protest march at Hoshiarpur in Punjab on July 14 over a cut in the non-practicing allowance--from 25 percent to 20 percent--following the Sixth Pay Commission's report. The protest was called by the Joint Government Doctors' Coordination Committee and other health professional organisations who have an indefinite strike over the issue.

### **Tamil Nadu government workers demand COVID-19 vaccinations**

Tamil Nadu government department workers demonstrated in Chennai on July 15 to demand COVID-19 vaccinations be made free and five million-rupees (\$US67,087) compensation be paid to families of COVID-19 victims, including a government job to a member of such families.

They also want all government department vacancies to be filled through open recruitment and for a new socially regressive pension system (NPS) to be replaced with the previous 1995 scheme.

The NPS, a defined contribution scheme that does not guarantee a fixed or minimum pension on retirement, was introduced by the Indian government in 2004 and implemented by most state governments. Workers are required to pay 10 percent of their wages into the scheme, which is matched by the government, and currently invested in equity shares.

Under the previous system, the entire pension amount was covered by the government and paid a pension based on 50 percent of the last drawn salary by the employee.

### **Tamil Nadu conservancy workers in Salem demand unpaid wages**

Conservancy workers in Salem staged a sit-in-protest at the Municipal Corporation's office on July 14 to demand outstanding wages. Workers said salaries were not paid to 2,500 permanent workers for the past three months. They also accused the corporation of taking regular deductions towards their Provident Fund but not crediting it to their accounts.

### **Australia and the Pacific**

#### **Svitzer tugboat workers at Australian ports resume rolling strikes**

Some 240 members of the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA), a division of the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union (CFMMEU), employed by tugboat operator Svitzer Australia have resumed strike action following a six month pause. The workers are opposing Svitzer's proposed new enterprise agreement.

Following a series of 24-hour stoppages in January at Australia's major ports, MUA members resumed strike action at Port Melbourne, Victoria on July 9 with a 12-hour stoppage and a 48-hour strike at the Fremantle Port in Western Australia on July 15. An MUA spokesman told a rally in Melbourne on July 9 that strikes were planned for Melbourne, Sydney, Fremantle, Adelaide, Newcastle coal terminals and Port Kembla.

Svitzer is part of the Maersk international shipping group, one of two main tugboat operators responsible for hauling ships into port, with a fleet of more than 100 tugs and more than 1,000 seafarers. The union has put a 24-hour ban on any Maersk vessel entering Australian ports.

The MUA has accused Svitzer of attempting to strip away workers' rights and conditions. It claimed that despite being close to finalising a new workplace agreement earlier last year, Svitzer management decided to use the COVID-19 crisis to introduce 30 new claims that would slash workers' rights, conditions and job security. It also wants to reduce fixed crew levels which it claims adds to substantial costs.

#### **Union calls off strike at Woodside's LNG operations in Western**

## Australia

The Offshore Alliance (OA), made up of the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia, called off industrial action on Monday by members at Woodside's Burrup LNG processing plant and its offshore platforms Ngujima Yin and Okha. The workers are employed by maintenance contractors Applus (at the Burrup plant) and Legeneering (on the offshore platforms).

Applus workers began a month of rolling strike action on June 18 while the Legeneering workers began a month of rolling strike action on June 25 in opposition to the employers' proposed enterprise agreements. In calling off the strikes, OA claimed it had made significant progress in bargaining over the course of the last week but did not first consult members. OA has not yet revealed the deals it has accepted.

Legeneering and Applus workers over the past six months have consistently rejected the company's proposed enterprise agreements. Legeneering workers want industry standard wages, negotiations on rosters and reduction of Legeneering's casual workforce. Applus workers want their agreement to include secure rosters and the reversal of cuts in non-union employment contracts imposed by the company two years ago.

### GrainCorp workers in Victoria vote to strike

On July 16, workers at GrainCorp food processing plants in Victoria overwhelmingly voted for strike action to secure an improved enterprise agreement from the company. GrainCorp supplies produces margarine and supplies large fast food outlets, such as KFC and McDonald's with frying oil. The workers are demanding job security for long-term casuals, some of whom have been casual for more than 12 years, a fair pay rise and improved conditions.

### Mater Hospital maintenance workers in Brisbane strike again

For the second time in six weeks, 25 maintenance workers from the privately-owned Mater Hospital in Brisbane, the Queensland state capital, walked out for 24 hours on July 16 and protested outside the hospital in opposition to management's proposed enterprise agreement.

The workers are members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union, Plumbers Union and the Construction Forestry Maritime Mining and Energy Union.

The workers voted for industrial action in April after rejecting a management agreement that contained a two-year pay freeze followed by a meagre 1 percent pay increase in the third year with reduced conditions, equating to more than a 4 percent pay cut.

Early last month, the workers struck for 24 hours after rejecting the hospital's revised pay offer of annual increases of 1.8, 1.8 and 2 percent in a three-year agreement. Management is still refusing to resume negotiations. Workers want annual pay increases of 3.5 percent to bring them on par with public hospital workers doing the same job, no loss of conditions, and consultation on rosters.

### McCain food processing workers in Tasmania locked out

About 90 workers from the McCain food processing plant in Smithton, Tasmania were locked out on Thursday morning. Management announced the lockout after workers gave notice that they would begin limited strike action for improved pay, following a wage cut endorsed by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) last year during the coronavirus pandemic.

The workers who make potato chip products want pay equity with McCain workers on the Australian mainland and workers doing the same work at nearby food manufacturer Simplot who are paid 15 percent more. The union says that the wages of McCain workers in Smithton have not kept pace with the cost of living increases over the past four years.

### Country Road warehouse workers in Victoria vote to strike

United Workers Union (UWU) members at the Country Road Group warehouse in Victoria have overwhelmingly voted to take industrial action in their dispute for an improved enterprise agreement offer.

The Country Road Group owns high-fashion brands Witchery, Politix, Mimco and Trenery. The UWU claimed that the warehouse workers are paid between \$22 and \$25 an hour—well below other workers in the industry. Workers are demanding a pay rise that will bring them closer to industry standards, a pathway for casuals to permanent work, and the right to organise as union members on-site.

### Papua New Guinea power workers strike

Power blackouts were experienced in Port Moresby and parts of Papua New Guinea on Thursday when PNG Power workers staged a sit-in protest.

Energy Workers' Union president Eddie Gisa and union secretary Santee Margis told the *Post Courier* newspaper that workers want PNG Power and the government to grant demands workers outlined in a petition handed to the PNG Power's board on Wednesday.

PNG Power managing director Flagon Bekker addressed the workers outside company headquarters in Hohola promising to "look into" their grievances and appealing to them to return to work. Neither the newspaper nor the union reported on the union's demands.



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