

Taiwan: LABOR GROUPS CALL ATTENTION TO LOW SALARIES AHEAD OF ELECTIONS

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ORGANIZED LABOR has sought to call attention to low salaries in Taiwan, with a recent demonstration by Autumn Struggle in late December calling for a raise in wages.

Autumn Struggle is historically one of the largest labor demonstrations in Taiwan, taking place in the fall or winter. Apart from International Workers' Day, known as May Day in other parts of the world, it is one of Taiwan's largest labor demonstrations.

Nevertheless, in past years, Autumn Struggle has been marked by controversy. This was the case after an Autumn Struggle demonstration in the lead-up to the 2020 elections became a de facto KMT rally.

With Autumn Struggle [taking a stance against](#) the Tsai administration lifting the barrier to pork imports from the US, KMT politicians embraced the labor demonstration in 2020, with then-KMT chair Johnny Chiang, former president Ma Ying-jeou, former New Taipei mayor Eric Chu, and former KMT chair Wu Den-yih among those to join. Subsequently, in 2021, Eric Chu, Johnny Chiang, and Ma Ying-jeou again [appeared at the rally](#), as did members of Ko Wen-je's TPP including Tsai Pi-ru and Chiu Chen-yuan. More recent demonstrations, as with in December, have maintained ties with left-wing pro-unification groups such as Parallel Government.

The two major presidential candidates, [Lai Ching-te of the DPP and Hou You-yi of the KMT, have both promised to raise wages](#). Lai promises to raise wages by 4%, while Hou has promised to raise wages by 25%. It is unlikely that Hou would raise wages by as high an amount as 25% if actually elected, however, as this would most likely result in pushback from industry groups.

In September, likely with its eye on the elections, the Tsai administration [announced a hike in the minimum wage](#) from the current 26,400 NT to 27,470 NT. This raised the minimum hourly salary from 176 NT to 184 NT.

This took place after a meeting by the Ministry of Labor's Minimum Wage Review Committee, which convenes annually to decide whether to increase the minimum wage or not. Ahead of this meeting each year, there is usually a great deal of speculation about if a minimum wage hike is imminent or not. Likewise, it is also standard that industry and business groups take a stand against a wage hike ahead of this meeting. But the move was not surprising given the election year.

It may not be surprising either that industry and business groups decried the wage hike, suggesting that the small-to-medium-sized enterprises that make up the backbone of the Taiwanese economy would be significantly affected by the rising cost for paying workers. Such groups suggested that the time was not right for a wage hike, in consideration of the effects of COVID-19 in the years prior. General Chamber of Commerce chair Paul Hsu has reacted, for example, [by calling on the government to subsidize the wage increase](#).

The wage hike was not as dramatic as the increase in the minimum wage from 20,008 NT to 26,400 NT last year. This increased the minimum hourly wage from 120 NT to 176 NT. For its part, the Tsai administration has tried to tout that the minimum wage rose for eight consecutive years during its election campaigning.

At the same time, questions are to be raised about the interest of politicians in labor except as a source of votes. For example, despite that all candidates have called for housing justice, the presidential candidates have also been criticized over property and real estate owned by them. With the KMT criticizing a home owned by DPP presidential candidate [Lai Ching-te which they accuse of being an illegal structure and which Lai has defended as a miners' home inherited from his parents](#), the DPP has focused fire on a student dormitory complex owned by Hou You-yi and farmland owned by Ko Wen-je. The latter was used as a parking lot for buses, which has been accused of potentially being a site of illegal dumping after construction refuse was found after the parking lot was excavated. Ko recently announced he would be selling the land.

To this extent, Terry Gou—one of Taiwan's richest men—was previously a candidate in the race. This did not prevent Gou from, similarly, criticizing social inequality in Taiwan. Likewise, Ko Wen-je's vice presidential candidate is Cynthia Wu, one of the heirs of the Shin Kong Group—one of Taiwan's largest conglomerates. When asked about Wu being on a joint ticket with him, in spite of his framing of himself as an anti-establishment candidate, Ko claimed that Shin Kong was not, [in fact, a conglomerate](#).

In the meantime, airline unions have suggested that they may strike in the near future. In particular, the Taoyuan Union of Pilots is [currently voting](#) on whether to strike over the Lunar New Year. This would be in response to rising costs as an effect of the COVID-19 pandemic but the refusal of the airline to increase salaries. Likewise, the Taoyuan Union of Pilots has taken issue with what it frames as the EVA management's hiring of foreign pilots over Taiwanese pilots.

The EVA management [has announced bonuses](#) for pilots equivalent to six months' pay. That being said, the Taoyuan Union of Pilots has stated that this will not affect voting on whether to strike or not.

There has been an increase in labor activity in the airline industry since the historic strike by [China Airlines flight attendants in 2016](#). After that, other airline workers such as pilots and flight attendants of other airlines, began to also organize to call for their rights. Moreover, there have been strikes in Taiwan's railway industry in past years against plans to [corporatize the Taiwan Railways Administration \(TRA\)](#), though this was not successful in preventing the corporatization of the TRA that took place this month. That being said, a recurring theme of such strikes have been calls on the central government to intervene in such labor struggles, given the investment of the central government in transportation companies and its significant presence as a stakeholder in the transportation industry. Consequently, there have been attempts to platform this issue ahead of the 2024 elections, to ensure that this is on the public agenda before the elections.

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