

Volvo truck workers striking again in Virginia

Nearly 3,000 workers at a Volvo truck plant in southwest Virginia went back on strike Monday after they overwhelmingly rejected another tentative 6-year agreement over a wide range of concerns, the United Auto Workers said.

Meanwhile, it's back to the negotiating table for the union and management at the New River Valley plant. The workers' bargaining committee has requested a meeting to discuss open issues including the interview process for future hires, healthcare, wages, health and safety issues, working conditions, plant shift operations, contrac-

tual time off and wage progression, UAW said.

The plant's general manager, Franky Marchand, called the action "difficult to understand" on Monday, since the tentative agreement included economic improvements for all workers and a competitive benefits package.

"We remain committed to the collective bargaining process, and we are confident that we will ultimately arrive at a mutually beneficial agreement," his statement said.

Volvo says the 1.6 million square-foot Dublin plant is the largest manufacturer of

Volvo tractor-trailer trucks in the world. It is one of the largest private sector employers in the region, with approximately 3,300 employees, some 2,900 of whom are represented by the UAW.

Results posted Sunday by Local 2069 indicate that 90% voted no on both common language and hourly language in the contract proposal. On salary language, 91% voted no. No vote totals were released, just percentages.

The previous contract, reached in 2016, was to have expired in mid-March and negotiations began in February. (AP)

private equity firms buy Medline

A consortium of private equity firms has reached a deal - reportedly worth about \$34 billion - to acquire family-run Medline, the medical supply and equipment company announced Saturday.

The leveraged buyout's value was reported by The Wall Street Journal, which said the acquiring firms - Blackstone Group, Carlyle Group and Hellman & Friedman LLC - had beat out a rival bid from Brookfield Asset Management, a Canadian investing firm.

Northfield, Illinois-based Medline is a major producer and distributor of

everything from anesthesia to wheelchairs, beds and lab supplies used in hospitals and other healthcare centers in more than 110 countries. It also sells consumer products including the Curad line.

Medline said in a statement that the company will continue to be privately held and led by the family of Charlie Mills, the chief executive officer, and that it will remain the largest single shareholder.

It said the entire senior management team will remain in place. (AP)

Japan's economy shrinks 3.9% in Q1

Contraction less than initially estimated

TOKYO, June 8, (KUNA): Japan's economy shrank at an annualized pace of 3.9 percent in the January-March period, sliding less than initially estimated, thanks to smaller reduction in government consumption and public investment, government data showed Tuesday.

The world's No. 3 economy's gross domestic product (GDP) was revised upward from a preliminary figure of 5.1 percent contraction released last month, according to the Cabinet Office.

But it marked the first contraction of the GDP in three quarters amid the coronavirus pandemic following a 11.7 percent expansion in the October-December period of 2020.

On a quarterly basis, GDP dropped 1.0 percent in the three months ended March 31 from the previous quarter, instead of an initial reading of 1.3 percent slump.

The upward revision reflected the smaller-than-expected fall in government spending and public investment, which declined 1.1 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively, with both upgraded from 1.8 percent and 1.1 percent contraction in the initial report. GDP is the total value of goods and services produced domestically.

European firms optimistic about doing 'biz' in China

BRUSSELS, June 8, (KUNA): European companies operating in China have made quick recovery from the coronavirus crisis in 2020 despite the considerable drop in revenue numbers, according to a survey published Tuesday.

European companies remained steady in terms of generating profit. Roughly three in four companies still reported positive earnings before interest and tax, with another 14 percent breaking even and only 13 percent going into the red, according to a survey released today by the European Union Chamber of Commerce in China.

After two of the most pessimistic years recorded, Business Confidence Survey respondents to the "2021 survey were overwhelmingly optimistic about growth outlook for the coming two years, with two thirds reporting optimism, the highest since 2014."

European companies in China found themselves in a resurgent market after production went back online far quicker than had been initially anticipated. Though y-o-y (year-on-year) revenue shifts were the worst in a decade, 42 percent of respondents actually saw revenues increase in 2020, with the biggest surges in business-to-consumer (B2C) industries like retail and automotive, said the survey.

This was largely thanks to Chinese customers who, unable to

travel, used more of their disposable income to purchase cars, cosmetics and clothing instead. At the same time, a quarter of respondents saw revenues decrease, with the worst hit in service industries like legal and aviation.

Yet, despite the notable downward shift in y-o-y revenues, three out of four companies ended the year with positive earnings before interest and tax, the same share as have been profitable for the last five years, it notes.

China became a critical pillar in the global operations of many European multinationals, with 51 percent of companies reporting that their earnings before interest and tax margins in China were higher than their worldwide average, a 13-percentage point increase from the previous year.

Looking forward, 68 percent of European companies in China are now optimistic about growth, it opines.

A mere nine percent of European companies are considering moving any current or planned investment out of China.

The survey, however, voices "significant concern" that European companies are still being compelled to transfer technology in order to maintain market access.

Beyond market access restrictions, European companies report only a marginal improvement in terms of equal treatment.

ABK Offers 'Buy One, Get One Free' with VOX CINEMAS



Al Ahli Bank of Kuwait (ABK) is collaborating with VOX Cinemas to offer its debit card holders the opportunity to purchase one ticket and get an additional ticket for free.

To benefit from the offer, customers can simply book online via VOX mobile app, or through VOX Cinemas Kuwait's website and pay using

one of ABK's Private Banking Visa Signature, ELITE, Prestige, Al Raed, A+ Student Account, or Bedayati Kids Savings Visa debit cards. Two or more tickets need to be purchased to benefit from the offer. In addition, and at no additional charge, customers can upgrade their popcorn and beverage to a larger size. This offer will be available seven days a week.

Zain's Extraordinary General Assembly approves Board's recommendation to distribute quarterly or semi-annual dividends



Bader Al Kharafi and Ossama Matta



Zain Group, a leading telecom innovator in seven markets across the Middle East and Africa today held an Extraordinary General Assembly that witnessed the required approval of the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute interim dividends quarterly or on a semi-annual basis. The meeting also approved the addition of several articles and amendments in Zain's Memorandum and Articles of Association.

The approved articles and amendments are subject to official approvals from supervisory and regulatory authorities in Kuwait, as well as an approval from shareholders in a future Ordinary General Assembly.

In the presence of a quorum of 77.99% of shareholders, the Extraordinary General Meeting agreed among many other items, to add a new article, "Article 62" to Zain's Articles of Association, permitting the company to distribute interim dividends on a quarterly or semi-annual basis.

Article 62 stipulates that, "The company may, based on the proposal of the Board of Directors and the approval of the Ordinary General Assembly, distribute interim dividends at half yearly or quarterly periods, and for the validity of this distribution, it is required that they be real profits in accordance with generally accepted accounting principles, provided the distribution does not affect paid-up capital. The Ordinary General Assembly may authorize the Board of Directors, in a manner which does

not prejudice the company's paid-up capital, to distribute the interim profits as mentioned above."

It is worth noting that Zain's Ordinary General Assembly held in 2019 adopted the policy of distributing annual dividends at a value of 33 fils per share as a minimum, for a period of three years, commencing in 2019, in a move described as unprecedented at the time.

The development in 2019 reflected the financial strength and outlook enjoyed by Zain Group and its operations as the telecom operator transforms to become an ICT digital services provider. Zain continues to adopt an ambitious growth strategy across its footprint as it aims to go beyond the provision of traditional telecommunications services to diversify revenue sources and create shareholder wealth.

Bader Al-Kharafi, Vice-Chairman and CEO of Zain Group commented, "Zain has a loyal and solid base of shareholders, which has provided support faithfully throughout the course of the Group's historic achievements in the regional telecom space. We are pleased to obtain the approval of the Extraordinary General Assembly to distribute interim dividends quarterly or semi-annually, as this demonstrates Zain's ability to fulfill its commitments and provide greater confidence about its business growth plans and strategy to investors."

Al-Kharafi concluded, "The amendments and new provisions to the company's articles will help the Group in its '4Sight' growth strategy, providing the Board of Directors and executive management greater flexibility, while we focus on digital innovation and seek new lucrative opportunities in the ICT arena across the region and beyond."

The decisions taken by the Extraordinary General Assembly comply with global best practices in financial markets, and with the ongoing development and modernization of Boursa Kuwait.

Moreover, the amendments and new provisions of the Articles of Association are in conformity with the provisions of the Kuwait Commercial Companies Law and aligned with the rules and guidelines of the regulatory bodies and authorities, all aimed to protect and enhance shareholder value.

In its meeting, the General Assembly also approved Article 34 that "Applies to the quorum that must be available for the validity of the General Assembly's convening in its various capacities, and to the majority necessary to take decisions. The assembly may be attended by using modern communications means of communication for each of the shareholders through their agents, representatives of the relevant regulatory authorities, auditors and any party that is required to attend."

Furthermore, the General Assembly approved amendments to Article 5

extending the varied and multiple business objectives from nine to twenty-one objectives for which the company was established inside and outside Kuwait. The Assembly's

approved amendments also considered developments in technology and digital transformations being undertaken by commercial and financial entities across various sectors.

Zain is focused on the execution of its 4Sight strategy, introduced in 2019, to allow the Group to play a leading role in digital developments in the markets in which it operates, centered on evolving Zain's core telecom business to maximize value and build on its many strengths to selectively invest in growth verticals beyond standard mobile services in support of its vision of becoming a leading ICT and digital lifestyle provider.

Zain aims to become one of the leading pacemakers in the digital revolution within the region and provide customers an exceptional mobile experience. Innovation is part of the company's DNA, with Zain placing significant emphasis on the enterprise and the government sectors as important drivers of growth. Financial technology and e-health are other areas being invested in by Zain.

As a recap, earlier this year Zain's Ordinary General Assembly was held electronically on March 17, and it approved the Board of Directors' recommendation to distribute cash dividends of 33 fils per share, for the fiscal year ending December 31, 2020, which represented the second year of the dividend policy.

Citizens urged to be resilient

Kim plans to stabilize N. Korean 'economy'

SEOUL, June 8, (AP): North Korean leader Kim Jong Un presented economic plans to senior ruling party officials before an upcoming meeting to review efforts to overcome hardships brought about by the pandemic, state media said Tuesday.

The Korean Central News Agency said Kim held his consultations Monday in preparation for a meeting of the Workers' Party's powerful Central Committee at which they will discuss state affairs for the first half of 2021. The meeting was set for early June and could take place as early as this week.

Kim's plans were not specified but were described as intending to bring "tangible change" to stabilizing the economy and people's living conditions.

The North Korean economy has been crippled by decades of mismanagement, U.S.-led sanctions over Kim's nuclear weapons program and the coronavirus pandemic. South Korean officials say there are no signs North Korea is easing the border controls it imposed at the start of the pandemic or importing more industrial and agricultural materials to boost production.

The Workers' Party last held a plenary meeting of Central Committee members in February, when Kim ripped into state economic agencies for their "passive and self-protecting tendencies" in setting their annual goals.

Earlier in the year, at the party's first congress since 2016, Kim urged his people to be resilient in the struggle for economic self-reliance and called for reasserting greater state control over the economy, boosting agricultural production and prioritizing the development of chemicals and metal industries.

Those sectors have been critically depleted by sanctions and halted imports of factory materials amid the pandemic.

Decimated

Kim has shown unusual candor in addressing the North's economic problems in recent political speeches, saying that the country was facing its "worst ever" situation due to COVID-19, sanctions and heavy flooding last summer that decimated crops. He even called for his people to brace for another "arduous march," a term that had been used to describe a 1990s famine that killed hundreds of thousands.

In a meeting of the Workers' Party's political bureau last week, Kim expressed appreciation that a lot of economic works were being sped up thanks to the "ideological enthusiasm and fighting spirit of self-reliance" demonstrated by the party and his people. But he also said there was a need to correct unspecified "deflective matters," which he said would be discussed at Central Committee's plenary meeting.

While North Korea monitoring groups have yet to detect signs of mass starvation or major instability, some analysts say conditions could be aligning for a perfect storm that undercuts food and exchange markets and triggers public panic.

The Geneva-based Assessment Capacities Project, a non-profit that specializes in humanitarian needs assessment, said in May that it considers North Korea to be at high risk of a humanitarian crisis. It said poor economic governance, repressive political measures and an increasing dependence on internal production amid a cutback in imports have negatively impacted the country's population.

"Chronic food insecurity and limited access to basic services, such as health care and clean water, have left more than 10 million people in need of humanitarian assistance," the group said.

The economic setbacks have left Kim with nothing to show for his ambitious diplomacy with former President Donald Trump, which failed to bring the North sanctions relief, and the North has so far ignored the Biden administration's calls to resume dialogue.

Some experts say Kim could use the upcoming Central Committee meeting to address the stalled diplomatic efforts.