

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: editor@wsws.org

Asia

Chinese female workers strike for improved wages and conditions

A group of female workers at the Uniden Factory in Shenshen have been on strike since December 10. The Japanese-owned wireless phone manufacturer employs 12,000 workers and is a major supplier to American retail giant Wal-Mart.

The workers, mainly young women brought from China's poor interior provinces, are demanding improvements in wages and working conditions. They work an 11-hour day, including three hours mandatory overtime, and are paid just 484 yuan (about \$US58) a month.

The employer deducts half of the workers' wage to pay for accommodation in the company's dormitories. Liu Shuangyan from Hunan Province told media that since working at Uniden she had not been able to save any money. "You have to eat. You buy a few clothes, and then there's nothing left." She said: "If you get sick, they (the company) won't give you leave unless it is very serious."

A Chinese manager for the company said the workers were no longer on strike because they had been terminated when their contracts ran out. The workers continue to protest outside the factory watched by plainclothes agents. When a foreign journalist attempted to photograph the protest, police were called to remove him.

Chinese authorities, anticipating increasing unrest among workers, recently advised Wal-Mart to insist that the suppliers allow their employees to join government-sanctioned unions. The official unions in China act to contain industrial unrest and defend the interests of the employers.

South Korean rail union hit with massive fine

On December 20, the Seoul Central District Court ordered the Korean Railway Worker's Union to pay the government the equivalent of \$US1.8 million in damages caused by what it termed an "illegal" five-day strike in June last year.

The court ruled that the rail union's demand that the government repeal its decision to privatise the Korea National Railroad was not a "labor matter" and that workers did not have the right to strike to change government policy.

The court also said that the strike had been called without a vote of union members. Rail workers, however, responded overwhelmingly to the strike call causing widespread disruption to freight and passenger trains services.

The court rejected an application for legal action against the company for breach of agreement. The application for damages against the rail union is part of a crackdown by the government of President Roh Moo-hyan to intimidate workers to stop them opposing regressive legislation.

In November, the government used thousands of riot police to stop public servants voting at polling booths for a strike against legislation denying them the right to strike. The government then threatened to sack

all those who participated in the stoppage and laid charges against 457 union representatives.

Indian insurance workers strike for pay

Workers in public sector general insurance companies in India launched a national strike on December 21 for a decent pay increase and other demands. Workers have rejected an 8.5 percent pay rise as "not enough". General insurance companies enjoy an 84-percent market share and have enjoyed a 15-percent growth in business. Profits have increased by 100 percent.

The strikers' demands also include withdrawal of the present unfair transfer policy, the implementation of a promotions scheme, and the abandonment of "anti-employee" recommendations brought down by the Fergusson Committee. They also opposed the growth of foreign investment in the country's insurance sector and further privatisation.

On December 21, insurance workers in the southern state of Tamilnadu outside United India Insurance's regional office Madurai while their colleagues in Tiruchi rallied at the offices of the National Insurance Company. On the same day, workers from four public sector general insurance companies—New India Assurance Co, National Insurance Co. Ltd, Oriental Insurance Co and United India Insurance Co Ltd—in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh protested at the regional offices of the New India Assurance Co before holding a march.

Airport workers demand outstanding salaries

Workers at Sri Lanka's Bandaranaike International Air Port held a lunch-hour protest at the airport on December 20. They are demanding a 250,000-rupee increase (\$US25) in the annual bonus and outstanding wages. About 75 percent of airport employees have not received regular pay due on December 18.

Workers claim that even though company revenue has been steadily growing from 1999, the annual bonus amount has not increased. They are threatening to step up industrial action if their demands are not promptly met.

Sri Lankan health sector hit by industrial action

Health workers, including medical officers, at the Peradeniya Teaching Hospital in Peradeniya, 110 kilometres from Colombo, went on strike on December 15. They are demanding payment for overtime and holiday pay owing since September. Hospital services were crippled by the strike.

Health workers at hospitals in the Gampaha District in the country's Western Province struck on December 17 demanding a backlog of overtime payments from October and threatened further industrial action.

Assistant Medical Officers and Registered Medical Officers across Sri Lanka began a sick note campaign from December 22 over outstanding salary anomalies. The campaign will see services continually disrupted as medical officers stay away from work. The action was taken after 18 rounds of discussions between the health workers union and medical authorities failed to resolve the issue.

Pakistani workers demonstrate against government policies

Hundreds of Pakistani workers demonstrated on December 20 outside the Lahore Press Club. The action, called by the Pakistani Workers

Confederation, is to oppose the government's failure to check growing unemployment, price-hikes, retrenchment of industrial units and restrictions on trade union rights. The protestors burnt effigies representing the demons of inflation and privatisation.

Speakers at the demonstration demanded an increase in the minimum wage to compensate for rises in the cost of living and repeal of the draconian Industrial Relations Ordinance. They also criticised government restrictions on collective bargaining rights and its support for employers violating labour laws. They also condemned the government for implementing World Bank and IMF demands for the privatisation of public sector units.

Australia and the Pacific

Oil and gas workers protest roster changes

Offshore oil and gas workers and their families traveled from Gippsland to Melbourne to protest against proposed roster changes. Contractors to Esso, which employ the workers on the offshore platforms, are attempting to change the current seven days on seven days off roster to 14 days on and 14 days off.

The more than 150 protestors rallied at busy Federation Square in the heart of Melbourne and then marched to Esso headquarters at Southbank. A spokesman for the Australian Metalworkers Union said that given the close proximity of the Bass Strait rigs to the shore it was unreasonable to ask workers to stay away from their families for 14 days straight.

When on the rig, workers live four to a room measuring 3.3 by 3 metres. The union spokesman said these conditions were "not conducive for workers being alert on an oil rig" and that this could have "safety implications".

New Zealand nurses offered pay rise

Some 20,000 New Zealand public sector nurses and midwives have been offered pay rises of 20 to 30 percent in a deal covering the country's 21 district health boards. This means that registered nurses on the top scale will see their base pay rise from \$45,000 to \$54,000 by July 2006. New graduates would be paid \$40,000. It is the first national pay deal since 1991 and brings together 15 collective contracts into one document.

New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) negotiators have accepted the offer that will run for two and half years and be backdated to July. They will seek ratification from union members in February. In September nurses rejected a \$329 million "take it or leave it" offer from the 21 health boards that would have given members rises of 6.1 to 27 percent over three years. At the time union officials said the offer was about "three-quarters of the way to what might be an acceptable settlement" but nurses instructed them to get a better deal or give notice of industrial action.

The proposed deal is expected to cost \$380 million above the boards' present funding. By agreeing to provide the extra funding the government has avoided the prospect of nationwide nurses' strikes in an election year. According to the NZNO, there are outstanding contract issues that still needed resolving, including government-subsidised superannuation schemes and nurse to patient ratios. A settlement of the nurses' dispute is likely to see similar claims from other health workers early next year.

NZ retirement village workers reject pay offer

Healthcare workers employed at Summerset retirement villages are "withdrawing good will" and will vote next week on possible strike action after rejecting the employer's offer of just 1 percent over two years. The workers are employed in villages in Wanganui, Levin, Paraparaumu, Waikanae, Trentham, Palmerston North, Havelock North and Taradale.

Workers are angry that even though Summerset's business is booming they are being offered an increase of \$NZ5 a week for caregivers and \$7.74 a week for registered nurses. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation and Service and Food Workers Union are demanding a 5 percent increase.

Although the sector faces a funding crisis, a few providers are making substantial profits from property development. Summerset has developed into a chain worth tens of millions of dollars and is now embarking on

several multi-million building and development projects.

So far the unions are restricting industrial action to work bans, such as authorised rest and meal breaks, prioritising work and going home on time. Workers are also collecting signatures on a petition supporting their demands and wearing distinctive armbands to work.

Vote for national salary bargaining in NZ universities

Association of University Staff (AUS) members have voted by a 90 percent majority to support negotiation of national collective employment agreements in the next bargaining round beginning in February. The ballot, conducted on a university-by-university basis, endorsed a recommendation by the AUS and other university unions to move from enterprise-based bargaining at each university campus to securing one national collective agreement for academic staff and another for general staff employed in the seven traditional universities.

The AUS leadership abandoned national bargaining earlier this year after opposition from university employers. AUS secretary Helen Kelly said that the government had given a signal that national employment agreements could be used as a mechanism to ensure that any additional public funding delivered to universities would be used to address salary disparities.

Ignoring university employers' earlier determined opposition to national bargaining, Kelly said she now hoped they would recognise that the salary crisis in the sector was an issue that would only be resolved on a national basis and with the "co-operation of university employers, unions and the government".

Fiji bank workers vote to strike

More than 1,000 employees at three Fiji banks are set to go on strike because their employers' failure to meet demands for a pay increase. ANZ Bank employees, members of the Fiji Bank and Finance Union, voted on December 17 in a secret ballot for industrial action for a 10 percent pay rise. On December 19 worker at the Colonial National Bank (CNB) and Colonial Insurance Bank voted for industrial action in support of a 6 percent pay rise.

The union's national secretary Pramod Rae said all three banks had failed to meet a deadline to reply to employees' demands and therefore strike action would go ahead. Rae said CNB had paid a reduced COLA (Cost Of Living Adjustment) based on last year, but this was not adequate. The bank has refused to negotiate further with the union.

Mariana Islands emergency workers still waiting for overtime payments

An estimated 100 emergency shelter workers are still waiting to be paid for hundreds of hours of overtime they accrued when super cyclones ravished the Mariana Islands in June and August this year. Some workers are owed over \$US2,000. The emergency shelter workers are mostly public school system employees who man temporary shelters during tropical storms and typhoons, and assist residents who are seeking refuge at the centres.

The daily paper *Marianas Variety* contacted the CNMI (Commonwealth of Northern Marianas Islands) government press secretary who gave an assurance that checks will be released to the workers on January 2.



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