

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

Indian railway workers demand immediate pay increase

Railway workers in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated in several key cities on February 11 to demand a salary increase to compensate for steep price rises in essential commodities. They also want their provident fund to increase the interest paid on savings from the present 8 percent to 12 percent and for management to fill all rail vacancies and introduce other measures to reduce the growing workload.

The workers called for the immediate payment of 1,000 rupees (\$US20) until base salaries are increased and demanded that the government end plans to privatise rail services.

Members of the Southern Railway Employees Sangh and the South Central Railway Mazdoor Sangh demonstrated outside the signal and telecommunications workshop at Podnur near Coimbatore, Cuddapah railway station and the Tiruchi railway junction.

Workers picket over privatisation

Power workers in Sri Lanka picketed the Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) head office on February 16. They were opposing plans to transform the CEB into eight separate organisations as a part of a move to privatisation. They also demanded permanent employment for 1,030 contract workers, many of whom have over 10 years service, and jobs for CEB employees' children. The protest also called for welfare relief for CEB staff affected by the tsunami.

On the same day, workers employed by the recently privatised CWE supermarket chain picketed the company's stores across the country. They want the government to resume control of the enterprise, which is currently owned by three private companies.

Estate workers strike for pay and jobs

Tea estate workers in Sri Lanka began strike action on February 10 to demand payment of monthly salary and wage arrears from July last year. The strike hit estates in Lulkandura, Rukwood Hope, Rahanthugoda, Monaragala Kumarawatte in Hanguranketha and Monaragala.

Besides the non-payment of wages, workers allege that the management has failed over many years to pay employees' provident and trust fund. They are threatening to widen the struggle if their demands are not resolved quickly.

In a separate dispute, hundreds of tea estate workers went on

strike for three days on February 14 in opposition to government moves to acquire 37 acres of land from the Glanvil Estate in Badulla. The government wants to build a university on the land and workers fear that the development will lead to the destruction of at least 200 jobs on the estate.

Security guards on hunger strike for permanency

Fisheries Harbour Corporation security guards in Sri Lanka began a hunger strike on the roof their guard post on February 9, after protesting outside the Ministry of Fisheries and Water Resources. The guards, who have been employed by the corporation for eight years, are demanding permanency. They also complain that their present salary of 3,360 rupees (\$US33) is inadequate and does not even cover the cost of essential food items.

About 30 discussions have been held between the guards and the fisheries minister but the issue remains unresolved. The minister and his deputy are members of the JVP, the second largest party in the United Peoples Freedom Alliance (UPFA) government, but have refused to assist the striking workers even though they are members of a JVP-led union.

Steel factory explosion in China

Ten workers were killed and six others injured in an explosion last week at the Zhaoxin Metallurgy Factory. The plant is in Nanguanzhuang in China's northern Shanxi province.

The explosion occurred when molten iron leaked from a blast furnace. Seven workers were killed instantly and three later died in hospital from their injuries. More than 10,530 workers died in China's notoriously unsafe manufacturing industries in the first nine months of last year.

Australia and the Pacific

West Australian nurses to strike on eve of state election

Nurses in Western Australia (WA) voted this week to strike for half-day on February 23 after discussions for improved wages and working conditions broke down. With the state election just one week away, the state Labor government headed by Premier Geoff Gallop is attempting to intimidate the nurses into dropping the strike threat.

A spokesman for the WA Health Minister Jim McGinty declared that the strike action was "political action with a view to embarrassing the government". Gallop claimed that the nurses were "being used as political pawns" by Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) secretary Mark Olson and state Liberal-National Party Coalition leader Colin Barnett.

The truth is that nurses have been in dispute with the Labor

government for the past 11 months. While the government has offered a 14.7 percent pay increase over three years, it has refused to make any substantial improvement in working conditions. Nurses in WA are among some of the lowest paid in Australia.

This week the Coalition matched the government's pay offer and promised that if elected it would provide an extra \$50 million to improve working conditions. The ANF said it would call off industrial action if Labor matched the Coalition's offer. A spokesman for the government said it "flatly refused to sign an agreement with the ANF while in caretaker mode".

If elected, Barnett could well withdraw his offer which has already come under fire by sections of big business. In a February 1 interview with the *West Australian*, WA Chamber of Commerce and Industry director Bruce Williams said that the Coalition should not be "drawn into a bidding war by the ANF to settle a pay claim" warning that the deal "could flow on to the private sector".

Construction workers rally for entitlements

Hundreds of building workers from failed German-owned Walter Construction Group rallied outside the company's Australian headquarters in Sydney on February 15, to demand payment of all entitlements, including severance, holiday and long-service pay.

The company collapsed and went into liquidation earlier this month after revealing that it had debts of \$100 million and only \$10 million to meet them. So far, entitlements have only been guaranteed for workers and the payment of subcontractors at a Bondi sewerage plant construction for Sydney Water. A question mark still remains over the entitlements of hundreds of workers employed on Walter's other sewerage projects in the Sydney suburbs of Liverpool and Warwick Farm, as well as in the Illawarra on New South Wales' south coast.

University staff protest parking fees

Staff at the University of Western Sydney (UWS), supported by students, held a protest rally on February 16 outside the UWS Board of Trustees meeting. They were opposing the management's decision to introduce parking fees at another five campuses and to increase existing fees in other areas.

A Community & Public Sector Union statement said that staff and students were "furious" and regarded the changes as "targeting them as a revenue source". Public transport to the university in Werrington is inadequate so cars are the main means of transport for staff, students and visitors. Hundreds have signed a petition demanding withdrawal of the fee changes.

Tyre workers strike over sacking

Some 500 workers at tyre-manufacturer Bridgestone in Salisbury, South Australia, walked off the job for 48 hours on February 16. The strike erupted when management instantly sacked a worker who had been involved in an altercation with a supervisor.

Workers claim that the supervisor, Heinz Gremmert, "racially bullied" people on the job. In November last year Gremmert opposed employees observing a minute's silence on Remembrance Day and then goaded them with a Nazi salute.

Lawyers for Bridgestone applied to the Industrial Relations Commission to stop any strike action over the sacking but colleagues in the dismissed worker's section called a stop-work

meeting and then initiated a plant-wide strike.

Local government workers defend conditions

About 100 local government workers employed by the Whakatane District Council in New Zealand have been involved in industrial action over stalled pay negotiations. On the afternoon of February 14 they ceased work early in protest, having walked off the job the previous week. They are incensed by a management statement that they are "overpaid and under-performing". The Whakatane District Council Employees' Association offered to provide sufficient staff to keep the offices open but management rejected the overture.

The council wants to remove long-established entitlements in return for a small pay rise. This includes an increase in the working week from 37.5 to 40 hours, scrapping a three-day leave entitlement between Christmas and New Year and reduction of redundancy entitlements from a maximum of 42 weeks' pay to 26 weeks. It also wants to lengthen the qualifying period for long-service leave and dump a gratuity entitlement. Workers unanimously rejected the council's proposals.

Council employees have not had a pay rise since mid-2003 and are demanding a 3-percent cost-of-living increase backdated to July. A union delegate said that stress levels were high, morale low and that a number of long-serving senior employees had resigned during negotiations that have dragged on for eight months.

Saipan garment workers demand back wages

For the second time in three weeks, garment workers at La Mode Incorporated in Saipan—the capital city of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI))—have downed tools in protest over unpaid wages amounting to between \$US1,500 and \$US2,000.

About 60 La Mode also workers marched to the Department of Labor office seeking "job transfer relief" to allow them to seek other employment in the city. Since then, the department has issued 40 memoranda allowing former La Mode workers to transfer to other factories.

Even so, the department's top officials have refused to meet with workers. A spokesman for the workers—who is owed \$1,500—said: "They are not giving us answers. They told us to wait...but last time, like three or four weeks ago, they told us they were investigating. Now they can't tell us anything." None of the 100 workers are currently receiving an income and rely on friends for food and shelter.



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