

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 September 2007

## Asia

### Hong Kong construction workers end 36-day strike

On September 12, union officials persuaded representatives of more than 1,000 striking construction industry metalworkers to end their 36-day strike and accept a \$HK860 daily wage deal from the Hong Kong Bar-bending Contractors Association. The offer falls far short of the \$950 (\$US122) workers wanted.

Striking members of the Construction Industry Bar-Bending Workers Union had previously rejected union appeals that they accept an employers' offer for a 9-hour day and \$850 per day immediately and \$950 in August 2008. The metal workers currently earn between \$600 to \$800 for a 10-hour day.

The Hong Kong Construction Industry Employees' General Union (CIEGU) and the Federation of Trade Unions, the chief negotiators, pushed for the compromise deal, which included an 8-hour day. CIEGU president Choi Chun-wa claimed that although the offer was not good enough, it was "the best that we could get at this moment."

### Thai garment workers protest for severance pay

About 300 former employees of the Inter Moda garment factory in Rangsit, Bangkok began demonstrating outside government house on September 10 to demand the government intervene and secure outstanding severance payment following closure of the factory on August 26. Over 3,000 employees are affected.

Some of the protestors wrapped themselves in banners while others burnt their uniforms. They want the government to pay the sacked workers 24 million baht (\$US705,000) in outstanding entitlements and then collect the money from the owners.

The company claims the closure is temporary and has offered to pay workers 50 percent of lost wages when the factory reopens. But employees, after witnessing equipment being removed from the plant, do not believe the factory will reopen.

Government minister Apai Chanthahulaka said he would arrange a meeting between the employer, employees and the government to discuss compensation. About 160 garment factories have closed due to lost orders in the last month. Apai said that the government has intervened in 145 of the troubled plants.

### Striking Indian mine workers arrested

Around 1,800 striking contract workers at the Neyvelli Lignite Corporation (NLC) were arrested on September 12 outside the company's Mine-II site, near Cuddalore in south Indian state of Tamilnadu. The striking workers, who were defying a police ban, were taken into custody as they approached Mine-II.

The protest was part of indefinite strike action by nearly 13,000

contract workers which began on September 8 for 10-point charter. Their demands include a salary increase, disbursement of bonuses, and for outstanding arrears from a previous wage revision to be directly paid by NLC management instead of through contractors.

Employees are also protesting over the suspension of All India Trade Union Congress president S. Dhandapani and treasurer K. Ponnusamy for allegedly instigating the strike action.

The strike, which followed a fasting protest outside Mine II on August 23, was in response to broken promises by NLC that it would meet workers demands when they ended a strike on July 18.

### Indian municipal workers end 25-day strike

Bhanjanagar Notified Area Council (NAC) employees in Ganjam district called off their 25-day long strike on September 11, after the council promised to revise pay scales in line with pay commission recommendations.

The NAC administration was forced to meet workers' demands after sanitary conditions in the town became life threatening. Employees' Association of Bhanjanagar NAC secretary Ashok Kumar Dalbehera said workers' pay scales had not been adjusted since 2003.

### Indian noon-meal school workers protest

Education Department and Directorate of School Education part-time workers in Puducherry staged a sit-down protest (dharna) on September 10 to demand employment regularisation. The low-paid workers are employed as meal carriers, cooks, assistants and watchmen in the state's Noon-Meal Scheme for schools.

The protesting part-time employees alleged that they have worked for more than four years and that their wages are very low. They have formed an alliance—"Future Government Staff Federation"—to take forward their demands.

### Indian railway workers demonstrate

Tamilnadu railway workers demonstrated outside the Moore Market Complex in Chennai on September 10 over moves to privatise railway operations. They condemned the rail ministry's decision to hand over computerised ticket reservation to post offices and petrol banks.

Southern Railway Mazdoor Union members accused the ministry of breaking a promise to only provide reservation facilities to remote area post offices. The ministry has begun handing over these services to post offices in metropolitan cities. The union has denounced the move as an attempt to privatise railway operations.

**Sri Lankan Coca Cola workers' hunger protest enters third week**

At least 62 laid off Coca Cola employees are maintaining a hunger protest begun on August 27. Up to 30 workers have completed 20 years service. The hunger strikers have threatened to spread their protests to other work places if their demands are not met. The company has responded by informing around 40 of the laid off workers that their gratuity payments have been withdrawn.

#### **Philippines telecommunications workers petition for strike**

The Philippines Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has intervened to stop strike action by Philippines Long Distance Telephone Company (PLDT) employees over mass redundancies. About 3,700 rank and file workers planned to strike over company proposals to axe 575 personnel by September 15. The workers have accused PLDP of using redundancies to replace workers with contract labour.

On September 6, DOLE rejected a union petition to strike and ordered “compulsory arbitration”. The order, however, does not restrain PLDP from going ahead with the redundancies. KMP, the telecommunications union, said that staff will already have been sacked before their dispute is arbitrated. It planned an after-hours rally outside PLDT offices for September 11.

#### **Indonesian aircraft workers rally over jobs**

More than 1,000 employees of the state-owned aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) rallied outside the company in Bandung, West Java, on September 10 over a commercial court verdict declaring the company bankrupt. The workers chanted “Turn down the bankruptcy verdict” and held banners denouncing the court decision.

PLDT was brought to the commercial court because 6,500 former employees are owed 200 billion rupiahs (\$US22.2 million) in pension payments. The company currently employs around 3,700 people.

#### **Australia and the Pacific**

##### **Victorian teachers to vote for strike**

The Victorian branch of the Australian Education Union (AEU) announced September 7 that it would apply to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission for a “protected action” strike ballot by state school teachers on November 21.

A press release by the AEU branch council said that there had been no progress in negotiations with the state Labor government over claims for a 30 percent pay increase over three years for its 25,000 members. The state government has pegged all public-sector wages increases at 3.25 percent per year. It insists that anything above this amount would have to be based on productivity trade-offs. The union has warned that these would have to be funded by individual schools rather than the government.

Union president Mary Bluett said that teachers had no choice to strike given that no progress had been made on teachers’ claims during six months of weekly negotiations with the government.

##### **New Zealand teachers union calls off national strike**

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA), representing around 15,000 secondary school teachers across the country, called off a planned national strike this week claiming the latest pay offer was sufficient. A union spokesman said most of the “substantive issues” had been resolved during negotiations at the weekend.

The Ministry of Education agreed to a pay rise of 12 percent

over three years and a \$750 (\$US590) bonus for every teacher. The total cost to the government, including the flow-on to about 30,000 primary and early childhood teachers, is estimated at around \$750 million.

Teachers were seeking improved pay and conditions, with a pay increase of 7.5 percent over one year. They had rejected, by a 99 percent majority, two earlier government offers of 9 percent and 10 percent each over 3 years. A settlement package will be presented for a ratification vote at a series of stop work meetings to be held after the forthcoming school holidays.

##### **New Zealand health workers serve strike notice**

Sixty Christchurch District Health Board (DHB) workers have issued notice for a week-long strike commencing on September 17, after the DHB refused to address the chronic low pay in the sector. The workers, who are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), the Building Trades Union and the Amalgamated Workers Union, provide maintenance services for the DHB and have rejected a pay offer of 4.5 percent over 18 months.

An EPMU spokesman said workers at the DHB have had their wages eroded over the last few years. People with 20 years’ experience are leaving because of the low wages and the DHB is struggling to replace them and is using contractors to fill the gaps. While emergency cover will be provided during the strike it is expected there will be disruption to hospital services.

##### **NZ Post workers recover docked pay**

The New Zealand Employment Relations Authority (ERA) has ordered NZ Post to repay docked wages to a group of postal workers who staged a “secret strike” last year. The Postal Workers Association said the company was found to have breached the Employment Relations Act over the industrial action which was limited to not delivering some non-essential mail.

NZ Post was ordered to pay wages docked for all the hours worked on the day of the strike action and for hours worked on the next working shift up to the time that they were issued with suspension notices.

##### **Former PNG Airlink workers protest**

About 30 former employees of the now-grounded third-level Papua New Guinea airline Airlink staged a protest in Madang last week calling for the government to intervene in their plight. The workers are stranded in Madang and are yet to receive entitlements from the company which is going into liquidation. Some workers living in properties rented by Airlink have already been evicted.

Employees want the government to put pressure on the company to pay outstanding entitlements and to repatriate them to their points of hire or home provinces.



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