

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 October 2007

## Asia

### **Nepal teachers strike for improvements**

Teachers at all government and private schools up to higher secondary level across Nepal went on strike on September 30. They were demanding implementation of a 25-point agreement signed off in March this year to provide better facilities and permanent status to all teachers. All schools in the capital Kathmandu were closed by the strike.

The agreement between the Republican Education Forum (REF) and the government included granting all temporary teachers permanent status through internal competition, awarding private school teachers facilities on par with those in government schools, and gradually making temporary teachers in government schools permanent. Other demands include the creation of vacancies for non-teaching staff in schools and the enforcement of a democratic education system.

### **Indian cigarette workers demand pay revision**

Beedi packers and other local cigarette factory workers in North Telangana districts in the southern state of Andhra Pradesh held a sit-down protest in Nizamabad on October 15. The protest was for a pay revision and an increase in pay rates for daily wage workers.

The Andhra Pradesh Beedi Workers Union members are demanding that wages be increased by 40 percent in view of the increasing cost of essential commodities. The pay revision for packers and monthly wage employees, such as clerks and watchmen, has been pending since April 2000.

### **Indian unorganised sector workers demand festival bonus**

Thousands of workers from the unorganised sector, including a large number of female employees, as well as auto-rickshaw drivers, domestic workers, construction workers, tailors, coir workers, cooks, and salesmen demonstrated near the State Assembly in Puducherry on October 12.

They were demanding a 2,000 rupee per head Deepavali (festival) payment. The government only provided a 400 rupee Deepavali incentive last year.

### **Indian tax workers protest jobs cut**

Sales tax employees in the southern state of Tamil Nadu demonstrated in Cuddalore on October 11 urging the department to reverse its decision to axe 520 jobs, including 261 junior assistant and 259 typist positions. They called for the filling of over 3,000 vacancies and the regularisation of the

services of computer assistants and of inspection employees. The protest was called by the Tamil Nadu Sales Tax Employees' Association.

In separate dispute, workers at the Sirpur Paper Plant in Chennai went on strike on October 12 over annual bonuses. The strike brought all production to a standstill.

### **Indian public sector contract workers want pay increase**

Field assistants, technical assistants and computer operators working under the A.P. Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme held a sit-down protest outside the District Water Management Agency director's office in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh on October 10. The workers want a pay increase, job security and improved facilities. Technical operators are seeking a standard 8,500 rupees (\$US223) monthly wage and field assistants 8,000 rupees.

On October 15, midday meal workers held a sit-down protest in front of the Collectorate in Kakinada in Andhra Pradesh to demand prompt reimbursement of money required to meet bills, the issuing of identity cards and the abolition of an illegal system use to dismiss workers.

### **Strike highlights doctor shortage at Sri Lankan hospital**

Doctors in the outdoor department of the Amparai Base Hospital in Sri Lanka's Eastern Province went on strike on October 12 protesting staff shortages and authorities' refusal to fill vacancies. They claim the hospital has a shortfall of 34 doctors and that there is only seven to service the outdoor department, even though the required number is 15. The strike was organised by the Government Medical Officers Association.

In another dispute, National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) workers picketed the company office in Kurunegala in the North Western Province on October 18. They were protesting over several issues, including delays in the implementation of a new salary system, limits to the hourly overtime rate, the curtailing of a one-year distress loan and a discriminatory salary structure for new recruits.

The NWSDB office in Matara, in the Southern Province, was also picketed on October 9 over the same issues. The Trade Union Alliance of the NWSDB has threatened to call a strike within a month if the issues are not resolved.

## **Australia and the Pacific**

### **Nurses take action for improved pay offer**

Nurses throughout the Australian state of Victoria began industrial action last week in an attempt to force the state Labor government to better its latest wage offer. The nurses, members of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), have imposed work bans closing more than 450 beds and forcing the cancellation of 100 elective surgery procedures.

The nurses rejected the government's 3.35 percent over five years pay offer and are seeking a 6 percent rise annually over the term of a new workplace enterprise bargaining agreement. They are also demanding changes to the nurse-to-patient ratio to improve patient care and to ease workloads.

The state government has used provisions in WorkChoices, the Howard government's new industrial relations laws, to dock the pay of nurses involved in industrial action. Nurses have reported numerous threats by hospital managers to sack or fine them if they maintain the work bans. They face individual fines of \$6,900 if they walk out during the dispute.

Up to 146 health-service providers have made an application to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) to have the nurse's action deemed illegal. A spokesperson for the ANF declared its members will defy any attempt by the AIRC to end their action.

#### **Public school teachers in Tasmania to strike**

Teachers in 20 Tasmanian public schools will begin indefinite rolling strikes of one and a half hour duration from October 22. The action by members of the Australian Education Union will see schools open late at 10.30 a.m., one day each fortnight.

The teachers want a pay rise, smaller class sizes and more resources for dealing with high-need students and those with behavioural problems. The government wants teachers to work one or two days more a year in return for a pay rise that will bring them in line with teachers' pay rates in other Australian states.

The Labor government's education minister, David Bartlett, claimed the state could not afford to meet all the teachers' demands. "The offer of the salary nexus is in the table. That is the government's final offer," he said. The union declared it will not call off the campaign of rolling stoppages until the government agrees to all demands.

#### **Taxi drivers protest police assault**

Sydney taxi drivers held a snap strike on October 16 in protest against the Australian Federal Police (AFP) using capsicum spray on one of their colleagues, 39-year-old driver Zahi Nakhle, at the city's international airport.

Nakhle was attacked by police on the same day after he was ordered to move his taxi. He said he had driven his Silver Service cab half way into a taxi queue at the airport when an Australian Federal Police officer ordered him to leave, saying the car was blocking part of an exit.

The driver claims that he was already moving forward, after taxis in front of him began to move but the AFP officer ordered him to leave the line. He alleged an argument broke out when the officer kicked the back of the taxi denting it.

#### **New Zealand teachers to meet over contract settlement**

After weeks of negotiations, the New Zealand Ministry of Education and the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) have reached agreement on a collective employment contract for 16,000 secondary school teachers. The PPTA last month called off strike action at the last moment after the government came up with an improved offer closer to the union's original claim of a 12 percent pay increase over three years, plus improvements to allowances and conditions. The union's claim for limits on class sizes has not been met.

The agreement will be put to a series of union stop-work meetings scheduled from October 23 to November 2. If ratified, the settlement will flow through to primary and pre-school teachers via a pay parity agreement.

#### **New Caledonia strike closes ports and domestic airport**

A one-day strike by New Caledonia's transport workers on October 11 closed ports and forced the cancellation of all domestic flights. The strike, part of a campaign of industrial action, was called by the Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE) to protest the high cost of living.

Noumea's domestic airport was closed to all scheduled flights while security forces were deployed at the international airport, north of the capital. Some offices in the city were picketed by the USTKE. The strike coincided with a visit to New Caledonia by the French minister of overseas territories Christian Estrosi.

#### **Agreement ends Air Tahiti Nui strike**

French Polynesia-based airline Air Tahiti Nui and the union representing ground personnel signed an agreement on October 11 ending a strike that began earlier the same day and which caused several changes to flight arrival and departure times. No details of the settlement were announced but the tourism minister said he was satisfied that a "tourist crisis" had been avoided. A union official claimed the union had obtained "nearly" all of its wage demands.



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