

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

10 November 2007

## Asia

### Indian power-loom workers reject pay offer

A strike by power-loom weavers in Erode in the southern state of Tamil Nadu entered its eleventh day on November 6. The weavers are demanding a 20 percent bonus for the Divali festival, a 30 percent wage increase together with provident fund and other benefits. The strike has cut into textile production normally worth 300 million rupees (\$US7.6 million) a day.

Power-loom owners offered to raise wages by just 7 percent and to grant an 8.15 percent bonus. While some union leaders agreed to the meagre increase, it was rejected by a majority of loom workers who are determined to continue the strike until their demands are met.

### Indian sanitary workers protest

Sanitary workers held a sit-down protest and hunger strike in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh, on November 6 demanding a reduction in muster times. The workers are currently required to muster at base four times daily but want this reduced to two.

Workers alleged they are being harassed by sanitary inspectors and insist that a reduction in mustering times would create the conditions for improved sanitation in the city.

### Thailand rail workers strike against privatisation

Train services in Thailand were brought to a standstill nationwide on October 31 after 200 drivers booked in sick. Many other employees walked off the job or failed to report for work. State Railway Workers Union of Thailand members struck in opposition to the government's plan to privatise State Railways of Thailand (SRT) and introduce a program of restructuring and to amend the railway act.

The workers returned the following day, after six hours of negotiations between the union, the Transport Ministry and the railway board of management. The three parties signed an agreement that includes the dropping of amendments to the railway act and the restructuring scheme.

The union, however, agreed to further negotiations over restructuring and said it would discuss allowing private operators running SRT's freight transport if the freight workers were made permanent and given the same conditions as SRT employees.

### Indonesian railway workers call for strike over pension scheme

The Indonesian Railway Workers' Union (SPKA) resolved to call a two-day strike by its 28,000 members in state-owned railway facilities on December 3. The decision, which was taken on November 2, follows the government's failure to approve a new pension scheme for railway workers by September 2007. The move would entitle retired railway workers to a higher pension as well as health and other benefits usually reserved for retired civil servants.

The latest action follows six years of sporadic protests, strikes and negotiations by railway unions since the government stripped rail workers' civil service status in 2000—a move that severely cut pensions and other entitlements. Civil service status was restored in August 2005 but the government failed to reinstate pension benefits.

Strike notices have been posted in all eight operational areas of Jakarta, Bandung, Cirebon, Semarang, Purwokerto, Yogyakarta, Madiun and at the railway operator's headquarters (PT Kereta Api) in Bandung.

### Indonesian labourers protest for minimum wage rise

Around 300 members of the National Workers Union protested at City Hall in Semarang City, Java, on November 6. They were opposing the city administration's recent decision to set the minimum monthly wage for 2008 at 715,700 rupiahs (\$US78.20). The minimum monthly wage in other Indonesian cities is much higher at around 900,000 rupiahs. The protesters demanded a minimum monthly wage of 1.1 million rupiahs.

### South Korean railway workers set to strike

Railway and logistics workers employed by state-run KORAIL are set to take joint strike action on November 16. The rail workers, members of the Korean Railway Workers Union, want a 5 percent wage rise, reinstatement of 46 fired workers, the withdrawal of plans for layoffs and permanent status for casual workers.

The decision to strike came after 11 failed meetings over a three-month period between the union and KORAIL management. The National Labor Relations Commission declared that any strike action would be "illegal".

KORAIL's strike-breaking plan includes the use of management, retirees and some military personal. The company claims to have 7,000 non-union staff lined up to work at stations and related facilities.

### Filipino crew take over fishing vessel

The *Manila Times* reported on November 6 that nine Filipinos on a fishing vessel occupied a Taiwan fishing vessel near Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. The crew are protesting ill treatment by the ship's captain. They claim they were not provided with sufficient food and other supplies. A Philippines diplomatic officer is attempting to resolve the standoff.

### **Australian and the Pacific**

#### **Tasmanian nurses continue industrial action**

Nurses throughout the Australian state of Tasmania are continuing a month-long campaign for better wages and conditions.

Recent meetings between the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF) and the Tasmanian state Labor government have failed to produce an agreement. The nurses have rejected the government's offer of a 10.5 percent wage increase over three years which is conditional on changes to staffing models.

Work bans have closed more than 20 percent of the state's public hospital beds and all non-urgent elective surgery has been cancelled.

In another action by health-care workers, psychiatric nurses throughout Gippsland in regional Victoria held a four stop-work on November 8 to demand safer working conditions and more staff to keep up with the increasing demand for services.

#### **New Zealand doctors to vote on action**

Industrial action by New Zealand senior doctors looks increasingly likely after a unanimous vote for a national ballot on the issue. Clinicians have accused the District Health Boards (DHBs) of treating them with "disdain" during their 17-month pay dispute. A member of the doctors' negotiating team described the pay talks, which have dragged on since last May, as "toxic". A spokesman for the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists also said that the DHB management is in a permanent state of denial over the medical workforce retention crisis.

The union wants a two-year term with average salary increases of 5 percent, increased remuneration for on-call work and continuing medical education costs. Doctors have turned down a four-year offer which the DHBs claim amounts to a \$45,000 increase for a typical senior doctor. The postal ballot will start later this month and doctors could begin industrial action early next year.

#### **NZ tertiary education workers take second day of strike action**

Workers at the EastBay REAP (Rural Education Activities Programmes) based in Whakatane, Opotiki and Kawerau struck for a second day on November 5 to protest the employer's refusal to shift in bargaining. Members of the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) went on strike for one day last week.

A spokesperson for the workers said they had been reluctant to strike because of the impact on the small communities they served but felt that they had no option as pay and conditions would fall further behind that paid to colleagues in the same

### **Fiji public sector strike looms**

The threat of industrial action by some public sector unions in Fiji is again looming over the issue of a 5 percent pay cut imposed in March this year. In order to counteract an earlier national public sector strike, the Fiji's military regime's "interim administration" struck an agreement with public sector unions for the restoration of 1 percent of the pay cut in December and backdated to March. The government is now reportedly unwilling to give a timeline for the restoration of the remaining 4 percent or if it will be backdated to March.

The unions, which quickly closed down the earlier strike, say the agreement was made on provision that the funds for the 4 percent restoration would be included in the 2008 budget to be announced on November 23. Fiji Public Service Association general secretary of the Rajeshwar Singh said the unions are willing to negotiate "at any time".

### **Strike at New Caledonian cement plant ends**

New Caledonia's Union of Kanak and Exploited Workers (USTKE) has accepted a mediated settlement to end a six-week pay dispute by 14 workers at the Holcim cement plant. Workers at the territory's only cement plant struck again on October 31 demanding better wages and working conditions after a partial return to work the previous week. The series of strikes during the dispute caused cement shortages that shut down the country's entire building industry.

### **Solomon Islands security workers issue strike notice**

Workers at the Solomon Security Services have threatened to strike over pay rates. A general meeting of security workers last week unanimously voted to issue a 28-day notice of strike that will expire on November 26. The National Union of Workers had already signed a collective agreement with the security firm during the last financial year but it is now up for review.

Most workers are unhappy with current pay rates which are below standards. Employees do not receive night allowances or housing allowances. Most of the security personnel are assigned duty at the UK, New Zealand and Australian embassies. The company is partly Australian-owned.



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