

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

29 December 2007

## Indian teachers protest

More than 200 public school teachers in India's Punjab state staged a rally on December 26 in Ludhiana City to demand that the state government end its practice of holding seminars during school holidays. The teachers, who resolved to boycott future seminars, were also protesting against suspected government plans to privatise public schools.

## Tamilnadu textile workers stage hunger strike

Hundreds of contract textile workers in Coimbatore district in the Indian state of Tamilnadu, held hunger strikes on December 24 over wages. The strikers were demanding "the same wage for the same work".

Contract textile workers are hired by the mill owners through labor contractors and therefore not direct mill employees. They are deprived of basic rights like paid leave and health facilities and are paid much less than permanent workers.

The Textile Workers Union plans another protest on January 8 in several cities, including Coimbatore, Tirpur, Dindigul and Madurai.

## Qantas aircraft engineers vote to strike

Almost 90 percent of Qantas's 1,700 licensed maintenance engineers voted on December 21 for strike action following the breakdown of enterprise negotiations between the airline and their union, the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA). The engineers want a pay rise of 5 percent and are concerned about growing casualisation of the workforce and the erosion of working conditions.

The strike, which is planned for January 9, is expected to eventually ground all Qantas aircraft because by law aircraft cannot be returned to service after maintenance unless certified by a licensed engineer.

Qantas is preparing strikebreaking, including advertising to rehire some of the 400 engineers it made

redundant last year when it outsourced some maintenance functions overseas. The new recruits are being offered a six-month contract with pay of \$100,000 or double that of existing engineers.

ALAEA federal secretary Stephen Purvinas said he expects ex-Qantas engineers will turn down the offer, but if Qantas takes action against the engineers before January 9 the union will bring the strike forward.

The dispute intensified last week after Qantas announced that it was negotiating a partnership with Malaysia Airlines to establish a heavy maintenance base in Asia.

## Victorian health workers lift bans

On December 24, the Victorian branch of the Health Services Union (HSU) announced it would suspend work bans in the state's public hospitals following an Australian Industrial Relations Commission (AIRC) ruling that its industrial actions was illegal. The union initially ignored the ruling but capitulated after hospital managers threatened to take it to the Federal Court. The bans had severely disrupted public health services.

Physiotherapists, social workers, radiographers and speech pathologists have been in dispute with the government since December 5 when 500 delegates voted for industrial action over a log of claims, which includes better pay, extra staff and a better career structure. To reinstate the bans the union will have to re-ballot its 4,000 members.

Kathy Jackson, state secretary of the HSU, warned if the dispute was not resolved by January 14 "more drastic action could follow".

## Strikes continue at Bunnings in New Zealand

On December 19, a dozen Bunnings workers at the company's Newtown store in Wellington held a one-hour lighting strike and picketed the premises. The pickets, members of the National Distribution Union (NDU), were immediately joined by other workers.

Bunnings workers at stores across New Zealand began industrial action on December 15 for a 75c per hour wage rise to be followed by a joint working party to develop a pay system to come in effect on June 1, 2008. Bunnings has been stalling on negotiations since May and has flatly refused to discuss a pay increase.

An NDU spokesman said Bunnings workers were some of the lowest paid in New Zealand and that more industrial action will occur after Christmas.

#### **New Zealand road service workers end strike**

About 130 striking automobile road service workers and vehicle inspectors employed by the NZ Automobile Association (AA) returned to work just before Christmas after their union, the Engineering, Plumbing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), secured a promise from AA to resume negotiations in January 2008.

The workers downed tools on December 17 when talks over annual leave entitlements and pay broke down. The workers want a pay rise above 5 percent but AA is only offering a 3.6 percent increase and wants employees to take a one-week cut in annual leave.

#### **New Zealand engineering disputes settled**

Engineering workers at Scott Automation in Christchurch and Dunedin have retained their long service leave following a three-week campaign of industrial action that involved a total overtime ban and a day of strike action. It comes on top of a 4.5 percent pay increase and redundancy protections. The deal was ratified overwhelmingly.

Workers at Atlas Engineering in Auckland have also ended strike action and ratified a new collective agreement. While 21 members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union secured a 4 percent pay rise they were unable to win an extra week's leave. A spokesman for the EPMU said that Atlas Engineering employees wanted to join the wider Metals agreement next year so the extra week's leave was still a "live issue."

#### **New Zealand port employees return to work**

Workers at the Port of Napier returned to work on December 21 after what they said was the successful negotiation of a dispute over jobs. While no details of the settlement have been released, the Maritime Union says it has successfully preserved "local jobs" at the port. The port was effectively shut down during the dispute.

On December 15, 75 staff employed by Hawke's Bay

Stevedoring Services struck and picketed the port fearing they would lose their jobs when the port contract was handed over to rival company, International Stevedoring Operations. Pickets were joined by dockers from Australia and supported by container handlers who refused to cross the picket line.



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