

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.

Police attack communication workers in Nepal

Around 40 workers were arrested and nearly a dozen injured last week when police attacked a protest by United Telecom (UTL) employees in Kathmandu. UTL is the county's first private communications operator.

The workers began campaigning on August 29 with daily sit-down protests outside UTL headquarters in Putalisadak. They are demanding improved work facilities, permanency of employment for workers with more than 240 days service, an insurance and medical scheme and education for employees' children.

Indian casual power workers demand permanency

On September 1, hundreds of workers from Bharat Heavy Electricals Limited (BHEL), together with family members, marched from the Tiruchi manufacturing facility in Tamilnadu to the district collectorate.

Many protesters carried empty plates to symbolise contractor employees' poverty-level wages, which have improved little over 28 years. They are demanding permanent employment status.

The company currently employs over 1,300 contractors, including welders, fitters, turners, machinists, drivers, computer operators, security men and gardeners. They perform the same duties as more highly paid permanent employees but are only paid the specified minimum.

Tamilnadu power-loom workers seek pay rise

About 200 workers from power-loom units in Mangalam and Palladam in Coimbatore demonstrated on September 2 for a 100 percent wage increase. Their three-year work agreement expired this year. Some 200,000 are employed in power-loom units in Coimbatore district with many required to work 12 hours a day.

Bangladesh power-loom workers protest power cuts

On September 3, around 700 power-loom workers in Narsingdi, Bangladesh occupied the compound and offices of local utility company Chouala Palli Bidyut Samit-2 for over an hour before being dispersed by police. Nine motorcycles, two pickup trucks and a jeep were set on fire

during the protest.

The workers were protesting over frequent power cuts, which interrupt production and impact on wages. They have been demanding for the last two months that the electricity company provide uninterrupted power. Loom workers blockaded the company's office and put up barricades on the busy Dhaka-Sylhet Highway on August 24 to highlight their demand.

Hyundai union offers to help boost production

Hyundai auto union in Korea ended a six-week campaign of rolling strikes this week and signed off on a wages and conditions agreement covering 45,000 workers.

The agreement provides an 85,000 won (\$US74.7) monthly salary rise, a 3 million won bonus and a one-off payment equivalent to three months' pay. Hyundai also agreed to reduce working hours on the morning and afternoon shifts from ten to eight and nine hours respectively without a reduction in wages but on the condition that output levels are maintained.

In exchange, the union has agreed to help boost production and decrease the hours required to produce a vehicle. Last year, 30.3 hours were required to produce a single car at Hyundai's Korean facilities compared with 20.62 hours at the company's Alabama plant in the US. At Toyota, Hyundai's competitor, it takes 22.4 hours to produce a vehicle.

Indonesian bus drivers strike for wages

Hundreds of bus drivers at PT Transbatavia went on strike on September 1, affecting services on routes in Jakarta used by around 57,000 commuters.

The drivers rallied outside the company's bus depot in East Jakarta calling for a 100 percent pay rise and demanding the company stop deducting penalties for absenteeism and involvement in accidents from wages. The drivers currently receive 1.05 million rupiah (\$US114) per month plus 40,000 rupiah per shift.

The company refused a pay increase but drivers returned to work after management agreed to drop penalties for accidents and to give at least three warnings before deducting wages for absenteeism.

Philippines government employees protest over insurance

Hundreds of public servants, including teachers, hospital employees and other workers, marched in Iloilo City on September 3, rallying outside the Government Services Insurance System (GSIS) regional office.

The Alliance of Public Sector Employees (APSE) members were protesting over irregularities in GSIS records. They carried streamers and placards condemning GSIS president and general manager Winston Garcia for alleged corruption and called for his resignation.

An APSE coordinator claimed that errors in computer records of retirees and employees had not been corrected and that files had not been upgraded for four years. Many employees claim that the records show they still owe money on loans that they had already paid.

NSW teachers vote for more industrial action in pay dispute

An estimated 70,000 public school teachers and TAFE college teachers in New South Wales (NSW) stopped work for two hours on September 2 to demand a 16 percent pay increase over three years.

The government has imposed a 2.5 percent cap on pay increases for public sector workers, below the current 4.5 percent inflation rate, and is demanding productivity trade-offs for anything above the set amount. A NSW Teachers Federation spokesperson said: "This would mean trade-offs including a loss of conditions or increased workload."

The majority of the 20,000 teachers who attended stop-work meetings on Tuesday voted in favour of taking further strike action between October this year and January next year unless the state government agreed to the pay demand.

Teachers' union reduces pay demand

The Australian Education Union has brokered a deal with the Northern Territory Labor government to end a 12-month pay dispute. While teachers demanded a 15 percent pay increase over two-and-a-half years the union is now recommending they accept a 12 percent pay rise over three years. The NT government has reportedly agreed to establish an extra salary level for executive teachers.

Mediation fails to resolve New Zealand health care dispute

Negotiations last week failed to resolve a pay dispute involving 1,200 community support workers employed by Healthcare NZ. Public Service Association (PSA) members have been campaigning for a 23 percent pay increase. Home visit co-ordinators and team leaders who run community houses are also preparing to take industrial action.

The support workers are employed in community houses that cater for some 500 people with severe disabilities and require 24-hour support. They also visit and assist

incapacitated people in their homes.

The hourly starting pay for workers employed in community houses is \$NZ12.50 an hour, just 50 cents above the minimum wage, while those doing home visits are paid \$12.96 an hour. After three months of negotiations, the company is offering a 1.5 percent pay rise for workers in community houses, or just 19 cents an hour.

The PSA wants wage parity for employees performing similar roles in the public sector and starting pay to be lifted to \$15. The union, however, has stated that it would accept the increase being spread over three years. It has also agreed not to issue further strike notices for three weeks to allow the employer "time to work with other parties to try and resolve the issue".

A Healthcare NZ spokesperson, however, said that the Ministry of Health has offered a 1.5 percent funding increase this year and that the organisation was facing a serious funding shortfall. "Our sector is on the verge of a crisis" and funding from the Ministry of Health "is simply not going to meet those (pay) demands," she said.

Wellington bus drivers stop work in pay dispute

Bus drivers in Wellington, New Zealand's capital, stopped work for four hours on September 3 to attend a Tramways Union meeting over contract negotiations.

The company offered an 11 percent pay increase in August but the figure included shift payments. After these were deducted the actual increase amounted to only 5.3 percent, 2 percent lower than a previous offer from the company.

The drivers are also opposing the company's attempt to strip back penalty rates. In 2007 the drivers suffered substantial cuts to take-home pay from shift changes that slashed overtime.



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