

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

## Australia and the Pacific

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*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

### Asia

#### Indian police attack sugar mill workers

On September 15, Chandigarh police officers in the Punjab district viciously attacked a rally by several hundred sugar mill workers, using water cannon, tear gas and wielding batons. Seventeen protesters were arrested, including Kashmir Singh Zira, chief adviser of the Co-operative Sugar Mills Workers Federation.

Police claimed they charged the workers for their own protection after some had threatened to set themselves alight. However, protesting worker Manjeet Singh said: "We were protesting peacefully but the police thrashed us."

The workers were from 15 mills in Punjab who came to demonstrate at the residence of the Punjab Cooperative Minister, Captain Kanwaljit Singh, over what they termed as non-acceptance of their demands, agreed to by the government in the past.

#### Indian bank employees protest for permanency

Sambalpur District Central Cooperative Bank employees demonstrated in front of the bank's head office on September 16, demanding it cease employing new recruits and instead offer existing casual staff permanent employment.

They also complained that the relevant government minister had termed the recruitment process illegal, but was doing nothing to stop it.

#### Sri Lankan railway workers strike

Thousands of railway employees, including engine drivers, technicians and signal officers, struck for 24 hours over salary and allowance issues on September 15. Members of the All Ceylon Railway Employees General Union (ACREGU), which represents 12 trade unions, said authorities had failed to address their salary and allowances anomalies for the past two years despite several interventions by workers.

The workers are demanding approval of distress loans applied for by 3,000 employees over the past two years, payment of incentive bonuses owed, and increased recruitment to fill 3,200 vacancies.

Management used non-union trainee workers to keep the trains running. The strikers vowed to fight until they won their demands.

#### Rubber workers maintain strike over sackings

Around 350 factory workers employed by the Elastomeric Group of Companies in the Horana Industrial Estate, 35 kilometres from Colombo, have been on strike since September 4, protesting the suspension of four co-workers for alleged lapses in the production process.

Despite harassment by police called in by management, the strikers, along with neighborhood supporters, are camping near the factory gates and picketing in front of the factory. Workers have put up posters around Horana to gain support.

Workers at a neighboring Elastomeric factory in Bokundara have refused to fulfill orders normally met by the striking workers and are providing financial assistance. The strikers are defying management's threats for them to return to work or be sacked. On September 14 the company placed newspaper ads to recruit new workers.

#### Philippines university workers protest over pay delay

Around 200 faculty members and non-academic workers of the University of the Philippines (UP) marched to its main campus in Dilman, Quezon City, on September 15 to protest the delay in payment of their 10 percent salary increase due from July 1. They carried placards and rallied at the Quezon Hall, where university officials were meeting.

UP president Emerlina Roman told the demonstrators their demand could not be met because the Department of Budget and Management declined to approve the budget for the wage hike. The wage increase was approved by the national government in April and all government departments have begun paying the higher rate.

#### Vietnam garment workers strike for better pay

More than 1,400 workers at the Taiwanese-owned garment factory Valley View Vietnam, in Da Nang, struck on September 11, demanding a monthly petrol allowance of 1,000 dong (\$US6) and a meal allowance increase.

Valley View management said they would negotiate if the workers returned to work but the workers said they would not return until all demands were met.

Meanwhile, 400 striking garment workers at South Korean-owned Daewoong and J Young, in the Ho Chi Minh City district of Hoc Man, are refusing to return to work until their demand for a 300,000 dong monthly pay increase is granted. Their current pay is 930,000 dong (\$US56) per month.

The Vietnam government has been struggling to curb double-digit inflation, which is causing increased pay disputes. Inflation rose to a monthly high of 1.6 percent in August (an annualised rate of 19.2 percent), up from 1.1 percent in July.

### Australia and the Pacific

#### Adelaide GM workers reject union pay deal

Shop stewards from General Motors Holden's Adelaide car plant have rejected an in-principle deal made between Holden and the Australian

Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU). Holden is offering its 5,000 workers only a 10 percent pay rise over the next three years.

Seeking to play down the rebuff, AMWU South Australian secretary John Camillo told the *Australian Financial Review* that workers believed the offer was slightly too low, when taking into account high inflation. "The members are saying quite clearly that the Consumer Price Index is running at about 4.2 percent, the cost of living is rising," he said.

#### **WA teachers reject pay offer**

Teachers have voted in a ballot conducted by the State School Teachers Union WA (SSTUWA) to reject the state government's proposed 2008 EBA (Enterprise Bargaining Agreement). The deal offered by the government on July 21 included a pay increase of between 15.84 percent and 21.67 percent over three years. Principals would get 17 percent over three years.

Teachers also want the EBA to address many other issues, including class sizes, country housing, recruitment, retention of teachers and cost of living allowances. The SSTUWA web site said the union would prepare for arbitration and seek an interim payment for its members.

#### **Queensland hospital workers impose bans**

Workers at four Queensland public hospitals began work bans on September 15. The bans by members of the Australian Workers Union (AWU) will affect theatre, x-ray security, portage, cleaning, catering, plaster, courier and linen services at Nambour, Gladstone QEII, Logan and Mackay Base hospitals.

The workers want a pay increase equivalent to or higher than the current annual inflation rate of 4.5 percent, but the health department (QHealth) is offering just 3.25 percent, with an additional 0.75 percent if workers trade off conditions, including removing restrictions on contracting out jobs.

This is the first action taken by QHealth workers during this year's collective bargaining campaign, and is expected to continue until negotiations are finished.

#### **Victorian building workers protest at court hearing**

On September 12, hundreds of building workers rallied outside the Geelong Magistrates Court, protesting over charges against Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) official Noel Washington. They marched to the office of local federal Labor MP, former Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) assistant secretary Richard Marles, accusing him of "not doing enough" for CFMEU officials.

Washington is facing a possible six-month jail sentence for refusing to attend a compulsive interview with the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) to answer questions about what occurred at a union meeting last year.

Workers summoned to appear before the ABCC have no right of silence during an interview and are sworn to secrecy after interviews. The commission operates like a police force with extensive coercive powers and secret investigations.

Marles brushed off the demonstrators, claiming that the Rudd government was already "tackling the problems facing the building union". The government intends to retain the ABCC until 2010, and retain draconian powers in a new agency.

#### **WA bus drivers threaten to strike**

Bus drivers for two of Western Australia's three major bus companies will hold 12-hour stoppages on September 19 and 22 in a bid to force the newly-elected Liberal state government to accept a pay deal secured with the outgoing Labor government.

Transport Workers Union (TWU) state secretary Jim McGiverson said the former Labor government did not formally sign the deal, which gave bus drivers an extra \$1 an hour every year for three years, because the government had been in caretaker mode.

The drivers are employed by private companies, Path and Southern Coast Transit, but their wages are paid by the government.

#### **Perth train drivers stop work to discuss wage deal**

Perth train services were suspended for eight hours on September 16 while drivers attended stopwork meetings called by the Rail, Tram and Bus Union to discuss pay negotiations in their push for a three-year pay deal with the Public Transport Authority. The Authority used replacement bus services in an attempt to minimise disruptions.

Drivers at the meeting supported a motion calling for an 8 percent annual pay increase for the next three years, but union secretary Phil Woodcock said the union would accept less if better conditions were offered. The government has offered 4.5 percent.

#### **St John paramedics continue industrial action**

St John Ambulance paramedics at a stopwork meeting in Perth on September 18 rejected a pay offer of 15 percent over three years and voted to continue industrial action, which includes bans on cleaning vehicles and paper work. The meeting voted to protest outside Premier Colin Barnett's office on September 19.

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) wants wage parity with other health professionals with similar education and training. Paramedics are paid a base yearly salary of \$48,000 (\$US43,600), well below a registered nurse on around \$60,000.

St John Ambulance chief executive officer Tony Ahern said wage parity would mean a 35 percent pay increase, and paramedics would have to trade in benefits such as superannuation and leave penalties if they wanted an improved offer.

#### **New Zealand oil and gas workers threaten strike action**

Around 250 workers at the New Plymouth-based Fitzroy Engineering Group which services New Zealand's oil and gas industry, including off-shore installations, have voted to issue the company with a 14-day notice of intention to strike. Greg O'Conner of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) said negotiations over a pay increase to bring its members into line with their counterparts in Australia would continue on September 18 but "the strike notice was a sign members were serious".

Workers are making a variety of claims, including a \$2.40 per hour increase for all staff, along with a 25 percent rise for offshore construction workers and a 15 percent increase for onshore construction workers. This week, workers turned down a company offer of pay rises ranging from 5 to 6.5 percent, as well as an increased hourly construction allowance and a \$500 one-off payment.

#### **Auckland port workers stop work to decide on pay offer**

Ports of Auckland workers were to stop work on September 17 to hear the company's latest offer in their long-running pay dispute. Negotiations between the port and the Maritime Union have been ongoing since September 2006 when the collective employment agreement expired.

When strikes were held last October, workers rejected the company offer of a 3.25 percent wage rise. The workers are demanding an increase between 4.5 and 4.9 percent. The company would not release details of its latest offer.

#### **NZ hospital workers petition parliament**

Staff in public hospitals who do essential administrative and clerical work presented a 6,000-signature petition at the New Zealand parliament on September 10, highlighting the low pay they receive. Some 70 hospital administration and clerical workers and Public Service Association (PSA) union officials presented the petition to government MP Sue Moroney.

Despite the fact that hospitals cannot run without these workers, their pay starts at just \$NZ26,000 (US\$19,800) a year, \$4,500 less than the starting pay for hospital cleaners, kitchen hands and orderlies. The PSA has not announced any industrial action.

#### **Fiji timber workers vote to strike**

About 170 workers at the biggest timber mill in Fiji's Northern Division, Fiji Forest Industry, voted in a secret ballot on September 15 to strike following failed negotiations over their 2007 log of claims. The workers are demanding a pay increase, overtime rates and stand-down pay

during wet spells.

The main sticking point is their demand for a 10 percent increase in COLA (cost of living adjustment) backdated from January 2007. After four attempts to negotiate a deal, the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) settled for a lesser amount of 3 percent, but the company only offered to backdate the payment from last November last year, a proposal that the union rejected.

The mill management said the strike would not affect production because half its workers are members of the Vanua Levu Fijian Workers Union, which is not participating in the strike.

#### **University of South Pacific staff walk out**

Staff at the University South Pacific (USP) in Fiji planned to walk off the job on September 19 during the university's graduation ceremony, to protest the sudden closing of the university's media centre, which will affect 29 staff. In a secret ballot at the beginning of the week, union members voted to issue the university with a 21-day strike notice.

However, the USP Staff Union is not opposing the closure. Union secretary Litiana Waqalevu it did not oppose change if the university gave adequate notice and it was "done in the proper manner," through the union. The USP administration has filed a trade dispute with the Ministry of Labour.

#### **Air Fiji workers vote to strike over pay cut**

Fiji Transport Workers Union general secretary Kamlesh Kumar announced on September 15 that 80 percent of its members with Air Fiji had voted in favour of a strike. Some 120 Air Fiji workers are protesting over a company restructure, which includes a 15 percent pay cut implemented on August 4, redundancies and the outsourcing of jobs.

Kumar said a strike date had not been set but gave the airline board one week to respond.



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