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.*

Strike shuts banks across India

A two-day national strike on September 24 by 900,000 public bank employees severely affected India's 28 state-owned banks and their 60,000 branches. United Forum of Bank Unions (UFBU) convener C. H. Venkatachalam said the strike was a success and that banking was paralysed. Clearing operations, foreign exchange transactions, treasury operations, remittances, trading and money market transactions were severely affected. Hundreds of automatic teller machines (ATMs) ran out of cash and huge queues formed at working machines.

The industrial action follows failed negotiations with the Chief Labour Commissioner and the UFBU over government plans to merge some state banks. Bank employees also want a wage revision, another option for the pension scheme and an end to outsourcing.

Last month, workers from the State Bank of India and its associate banks walked out in a failed attempt to stop its merger with the State Bank of Saurashtra.

Air India flights grounded after security guards attack pilot

Air India flights in and out of Kolkata (Calcutta) airport were grounded on September 23 after an Air India pilot was attacked by five Central Industrial Security Force (CISF) officers when he objected to questions about his cabin baggage.

The Indian Commercial Pilots Association members refused to fly in and out of the city until CISF officers apologised. Although Air India flights were being operated by airport management pilots and co-pilots on probation, airline services were severely disrupted until the issue was resolved late in the evening.

Port workers strike after CISF bashings

Movement of containers at Koch, one of India's major sea ports, has remained at a standstill since September 23 following strike action by private container trailer workers. The strike erupted after Central Industrial Security Force officers attacked workers during a dispute over trailer parking at the terminal.

The Coordinating Committee of Trailer Workers has vowed to maintain the strike until action is taken against the CISF personnel. Port management, however, has refused to discuss the issue until the strike is lifted. Ships are still unloading but containers are stranded on the dock.

Indian daily wage workers in Karnataka strike for land

Daily wage workers in Kodagu, Karnataka, began an indefinite strike on September 22 and demonstrated outside Kodagu Deputy Commissioner's district administration office in Madikeri. The workers, organised by the Democratic Youth Federation of India (DYFI), want land on which to build homes. Most cannot afford to pay rent and are living in flimsy shacks on the plantations where they work.

Karnataka irrigation workers demonstrate for pay

Irrigation department workers rallied outside Shimoga city council on September 22 to demand immediate payment of outstanding wages. Led by the Karnataka Government Daily Wage Workers' Federation, they then marched to the Upper Tunga Project chief engineer's office where they submitted a memorandum of their demands.

The demands include permanent employment of all daily wage workers at the Bhadra Reservoir Project, direct payment on the fifth of each month and not through the contractors, and immediate payment of eight-month wage arrears.

Karnataka council workers protest for minimum wage

Village council workers in Devangere district, Karnataka, held a sit-down protest outside the local labour office on September 22 to demand the minimum wage.

The protest was organised by the Devangere District Gram Panchayat Employees Union. The workers vowed to continue protesting until they are paid the correct monthly wage.

Telecom workers in Karnataka demonstrate

Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) casual and contract employees demonstrated at the company's Shimoga headquarters on September 19 to demand that the company follow local labour laws and that wages be increased to the official minimum rate. They also want all casual workers regularised, and statutory benefits, like the Employee Provident Fund and bonuses, to be paid.

The demonstration was organised by the Shimoga unit of the Karnataka State BSNL Non-Permanent Workers' Union.

Puducherry state government employees demonstrate

Puducherry state government employees in India demonstrated outside the capital's main post office on September 19 to demand strict implementation of minimum wage laws, adherence to working hours and guaranteed social security.

Central and State Government Employees' Association members raised banners urging the government to retain Class IV positions and condemning job contracting. Workers also want restoration of the old pension scheme, a new ceiling for bonuses, removal of efficiency criteria for annual increments and regularisation of daily wage employees.

Seoul Metro subway workers to strike

Seoul Metro union members voted by a 74 percent majority to strike on September 26 in protest against management plans to lay off over 2,000 employees, or 20 percent of its workforce. The decision comes after nine months of negotiations with the state-run commuter company. Management has inflamed the situation by outsourcing work at three of its lost-and-found bureaus.

Korean commuter transport law makes it virtually impossible for employees to strike. Workers are legally bound to maintain operations at 100 percent during peak commuting hours, 65 percent on weekdays and 50 percent on holidays. Management said it would recruit retired workers to maintain services during the strike and "use the full force of the law" if services are disrupted.

Indonesian riot police scuffle with KFC protesters

Over 300 fast food restaurant workers, organised by the Congress of Indonesian Labor Union Alliance, rallied outside the Surabaya Plaza shopping centre this week over the sacking of two contract workers at

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Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC) and under-payment of 20 of its 120 workers in an internship program.

Scuffles broke out between demonstrators and several dozen anti-riot police after protesting workers attempted to enter PT Fast Food Indonesia offices, which holds the KFC franchise in Indonesia. Police left after the management met with five workers' delegates, who agreed to reinstate the sacked workers and pay the legal wage.

The workers later marched to the Surabaya city council to demand it closely monitor manpower agencies and ensure that they adhere to the 2002 Child Protection Law, the 2003 Labor Law and the 2004 Education Law.

Philippines workers protest over mass sackings

Quezon City workers staged a series of protests at several company offices on September 17 accusing them of illegally firing workers. Pickets were held at the office of Kowloon West (restaurant franchiser) where 73 workers were sacked for holding an off-duty protest over back pay, and at Machine Bank, where union officers were fired for holding an off-duty picket for back pay.

The workers, who later moved their protest to the National Labor Relations Commission office, have been agitating since June to demand Metro Manila-based companies in Quezon City pay recent wage rises granted to Manila employees. The KMU (Kilusang Mayo Uno) organised the pickets after the Department of Labor and Employment sided with employers and ruled the sackings legal.

NT government uses anti-strike laws against teachers

The Northern Territory (NT) Labor government has used WorkChoices anti-union laws this week to ban teachers from striking for a wage rise. The ban, which was imposed by the NT Industrial Relations Commission on September 20, came two weeks after Australian Education Union (AEU) members voted down the government's last pay offer of 12 percent over three years. The offer is below the annual inflation rate of 4.5 percent.

AEU-NT president Nadine Williams told the media that the union was applying for voluntary mediation—which would have averted this week's strike—but the government chose to use WorkChoices to suspend all bargaining and industrial action until November 20.

Teachers rallied at Parliament House in Darwin on September 23 to protest the IRC decision. AEU members planned to strike from September 24 to 26 but can now be fined if they take industrial action.

Queensland power workers accept pay rise agreement

A long-running pay dispute between Queensland power workers and Powerlink was resolved on September 23 after two days of negotiations in the Australian Industrial Relations Commission.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and Powerlink, which operates the state's high-voltage transmission network, settled on an in-principle agreement that includes a 4.5 percent annual pay rise over three years, plus increases to allowances and improvements in working conditions.

The agreement will now be prepared for review and a vote by Powerlink employees.

Queensland public hospital workers walk out over pay

About 200 administrative staff at six public hospitals in far north Queensland walked off the job for four hours on September 23 in protest over an annual 3.25 percent government pay increase offer.

The Queensland Public Sector Union (QPSU) wants a 5 percent annual pay increase but the government has pegged all Queensland public servants' pay increases at 3.25 percent, unless trade-offs are negotiated.

Administrative workers in other Queensland hospitals also took industrial action but did not stop work. Dentists across the state were to begin industrial action over the government's policy on September 24, and doctors were expected to endorse the campaign this week.

Meanwhile, Queensland ambulance workers are threatening to take industrial action if the government does not make a higher pay offer. Jason Dutton, Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union state organiser, said paramedics want 6 percent per year over three years.

Victorian dairy workers maintain bans

Around 170 factory maintenance workers at seven Murray Goulburn dairy factories in Victoria have vowed to maintain bans imposed last week, even though the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the company will resume talks this week about an enterprise agreement. The union wants an improvement in the company's last pay offer of 12 percent over three years.

While Murray Goulburn management claims that a 24-hour strike and bans on overtime and call-outs had not affected milk collection, it is advertising for qualified farmers to place their names on an "emergency list" for maintenance work.

NSW Cochlear workers lobby federal politicians

Around 300 workers from hearing implant company, Cochlear, in Sydney, sent a delegation to federal parliament in Canberra this week to demand the Rudd government intervene to resolve a long-running industrial dispute over a collective agreement. Workers have sought a collective agreement with Cochlear management over the past 16 months but have been repeatedly ignored.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) delegate Cuong Nguyen told the media that the company wants to place workers on individual common law contracts.

Nguyen was suspended by the company on September 24 for talking to the media during his visit to Canberra. He was told this was a breach of company policy even though Nguyen was on leave at the time.

Auckland McDonald's workers strike over pay negotiations

Fast food workers at Otara McDonald's in South Auckland, New Zealand, struck on September 19. Six months of negotiations between the Unite union and the fast food giant over wage parity with other fast food restaurants broke down last week after McDonald's failed to meet the union deadline for a revised offer.

McDonald's workers are paid 52 cents an hour less than their major competitors and kept on contract with no fixed hours, thus allowing managers to cut employees' hours for any minor infraction. Experienced workers spend years on the minimum wage and several managers earn just $1.50 per week above the minimum wage.

The Unite union is planning rallies at McDonald's outlets over the next two weeks to gain public support for their demands.

Wellington bus drivers locked out

Bus drivers in Wellington, New Zealand's capital city, struck in the middle of the morning rush-hour on September 24 and two days after rejecting a 7 percent pay rise. Manufacturing and Construction Union members joined the action by refusing to refuel buses. The dispute immediately escalated, with the bus company Go Wellington announcing that it would lock out all 315 drivers the following morning and pull its 222 buses off the road indefinitely.

The strike followed three months of negotiations between Go Wellington and the Tramways Union, which wants pay increases of between 8 and 12 percent. The company says it has given drivers its "final offer" of a 7 percent pay increase for the first year, 3 percent the next year and a cash payment of $250.

Union president Nick Kelly said the company offer did not make up for the 19 percent pay cut the company forced on employees last year when it imposed shift rosters designed to restrict their access to penalty rates.

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