

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

11 October 2008

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

## Bollywood strike ends

Strike action by Bollywood movie workers in India ended on October 3 after unions struck a tentative agreement with producers for better pay and working conditions. The three-day walkout by actors, lighting technicians, camera operators and dancers over low wages, late pay and long hours shut down all studios and stopped production of 100 films.

The producers agreed to only employ members of the Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FIWCE), limit shifts to a maximum of 12 hours per day and to pay outstanding wages within 15 days. Film and television employees are paid between 500 and 600 rupees (\$US12.50) per day and often forced to work 30 hours straight without overtime pay.

## Police attack demonstrating teachers

Over 20 teachers were injured and more than 50 arrested when police attacked a rally by 1,500 Parent Teacher Association (PTA) appointee teachers on October 6, in Shimla, in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh. Police, wielding truncheons, attempted to disperse teachers protesting outside the state secretariat.

The teachers were demanding withdrawal of a government inquiry into PTA appointments which had led to the sacking of hundreds of teachers. Teachers claim that the government is victimising them on political grounds.

Chief minister Prem Kumar Dhumal left the state secretariat building without meeting the teachers.

## Indian telecom workers continue demonstrations

Telecom contract workers for Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) in Tuticorin, Tamilnadu, marched on October 5 demanding minimum wages for contract workers and regularisation of temporary employees. The Tamil Nadu Telecom Contract Workers' Union also wants an Employees' Provident Fund (EPF), an Employees' Insurance Scheme and bonus payments.

The official minimum daily wage is 120 rupees (\$US2.50) per day and is supplemented by a dearness (cost of living) allowance. Contract workers are paid only 50 rupees per day and do not receive benefits granted to permanent employees.

Last month BSNL contract workers in Karnataka state demonstrated at the company's Shimoga headquarters making the same demands.

## Sri Lanka railway workers end strike over faulty signals

The Locomotive Operators Association and the Railway Guards Association called their members back to work on October 7 ending a four-day strike that severely reduced train services by 95 percent in Galle, Kandy and Kalutara along the main Colombo lines.

The strike followed the suspension of several workers during an investigation into the cause of a train crash last week at Ganemulla station on the Colombo-Kandy line. One passenger was killed and 43 were injured.

The unions claim a faulty signal system is behind the accident and have accused the Railway Department of trying to blame workers. Railway Guards' Union president D.G. J. Welikala said: "Even if the administration reinstates the railway workers, we will not stop until the administration takes action to rectify the faulty signal system."

The unions have not released details of their talks with the Minister of Transport, which ended the strike action.

## Seoul television reporters sacked over industrial action

Korean cable news channel YTN has fired six reporters, suspended six for up to six months, cut the salaries of eight for three months, and issued disciplinary warnings to another 13. The punitive action was in response to a hunger strike protest by 55 junior reporters on September 29.

The hunger strikers were protesting the appointment of Koo Bon-hong as president of the news channel and claim that he is politically biased toward the South Korean President Lee Myung-bak and will compromise the channel's political neutrality. They were also demanding withdrawal of disciplinary measures against 33 union members, the cancellation of lawsuits against 12 unionists and the job transfer of various employees.

A union spokesman said the reporters would hold rallies to prevent Koo from entering his office and were prepared to take stronger action, including a walkout if management did not scrap the punitive measures.

## Rio Tinto train drivers in Western Australia to strike

Thirty-nine locomotive drivers for mining giant Rio Tinto in WA's Pilbara region will begin a series of walkouts from October 11 for new Australian Workplace Agreements. The drivers want the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) to negotiate an agreement but Rio Tinto Iron Ore is refusing, offering only a non-union collective agreement.

The strikers are only a small portion of the 315 locomotive drivers

employed by the company, but the union believes it can disrupt up to four of Rio's 16 trains arriving daily at Dampier and Cape Lambert, which would cost the company \$8 million a day.

The drivers want guaranteed annual pay rises in line with inflation, access to an independent umpire in disciplinary matters and assurances that their income will not be affected by Rio Tinto's plans to introduce automated trains in 2012.

Train drivers' spokesman Justin Parry told the media that he and his colleagues sought the help of the CFMEU last September because they were unhappy with individual agreements. "This has come from the workers, not from the union," he said.

### **WA teachers granted interim pay rise**

Public school teachers in Western Australia on October 6 were granted an immediate 6 percent pay rise, on top of a three-year deal still being negotiated, as the newly elected Barnett-Liberal government tries to end a 12-month pay dispute.

The teachers' pay battle with the previous Labor government was marked by rallies, strike action and a union campaign targeting Labor MPs in marginal seats. Teachers last month rejected a pay offer of between 15 and 22 per cent over three years.

WA Premier Colin Barnett claimed the pay rise, backdated to September 5, would make teachers in Western Australia the highest paid in the country and add between \$2,900 and \$4,250 a year to teachers' pay.

State School Teachers Union president Ann Gibson said Western Australia faced massive challenges trying to retain teachers, let alone attracting new ones. "It is a problem that is going to creep across Australia, and one where we are going to be increasingly in competition with each other for teachers," she said.

### **Sydney Harbour Bridge toll collectors strike**

Sydney Harbour Bridge toll workers walked off the job on October 9 in protest against the bridge becoming cashless by January next year. The move by the New South Wales Roads and Transport Authority (RTA) could eliminate 50 jobs.

Public Service Association members held a one-hour stop work meeting but decided to strike for 24 hours after learning that the RTA intended to replace them with contract workers while they met.

While the RTA claims it will find jobs for any displaced workers, PSA official Steve Turner said there had not been any guarantees. "The workers want to see some concrete proposals on the table and they'd like to see some of this in writing so it's guaranteed and they can feel that their families and mortgages are safe," he said.

### **Melbourne office cleaners protest over pay**

Office cleaners in Melbourne's CBD began a week-long series of protests on October 6 outside office buildings serviced by specific cleaning contractors. The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) has been trying to negotiate a new five-year wage agreement for Melbourne's 2000 office cleaners over the past 12 months.

LHMU state secretary Jess Walsh said that if employers did not return to

the negotiating table "in the next couple of weeks" the union will go to the Australian Industrial Relations Commission and apply for a ballot to strike. She said cleaners did not want to inconvenience the public but could not survive on average wages of just \$300 a week.

### **Queensland paramedics impose work bans**

Queensland's paramedics implemented statewide work bans on October 8 in support of a pay increase. LHMU spokesman Jason Dutton said the bans were on administrative work and patient transfers out of hospitals. Emergency cases will not be affected.

Dutton said the government's current 3.5 percent pay offer was unacceptable and far short of the state's annual inflation rate of 5.1 percent. The union wants a 6 percent base rate each year for three years and incremental payments that will recognise the level of care provided.

### **New Zealand retail staff protest pay offer**

Farmers retail chain employees demonstrated outside the company's Queen St branch in the Auckland CBD on October 6.

The workers were protesting over what they describe as an "insulting" 20 cents an hour pay rise from the company. They distributed leaflets explaining their demands to customers and later letter-boxed the affluent Remuera neighborhood where the company's owners live.

The National Distribution Union (NDU) said the workers were offered between nothing and 60 cents, with most offered a 20 cent rise on their \$13.50 an hour wage (the minimum wage is \$12). The NDU is demanding their wage be increased to \$15 an hour.

### **Wellington bus drivers accept revised pay offer**

Go Wellington bus drivers accepted a new collective employment agreement between the company and the Tramways Union and the Manufacturing and Construction Workers Union at a stop-work meeting on October 7. The 311 drivers agreed to a 7.5 percent wage increase in the first year, 3.5 per cent from next May and a \$300 gross cash payment.

Drivers walked off the job for an hour two weeks ago to demand an 8.6 percent increase. The company was offering 7 percent. Go Wellington retaliated by locking out the drivers the next day. Services were restored to normal after the unions agreed to withdraw their notice of strike action and return to the negotiating table.

### **New Zealand telecom workers protest**

Workers from Telecom's broadband contractor Transfield picketed Telecom's AGM in Wellington on October 2. The protest was over Telecom's refusal to adequately fund Transfield, threatening the job security of 1,400 workers nationwide. About 30 workers attended the picket, which was the start of national action. The following day, a protest was held in Hamilton, followed by a picket at the city's Transfield depot.

Telecom is New Zealand's major telecommunications provider while Transfield is responsible for installing and maintaining nearly half of the country's phone lines and internet connections. Transfield announced 170 redundancies because of uncertainty created by its dispute with Telecom.

The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, which represents Transfield employees, said it will take every opportunity to "put pressure on Telecom and Transfield until a deal is reached".

### **New Zealand McDonald's strikes widen**

Workers from all five McDonald's restaurants at Auckland Airport went on strike on October 7 to demand pay parity with KFC, Starbucks and Pizza Hut. McDonald's fast food workers began industrial action three

weeks ago in Auckland for a new collective agreement. Rolling strikes are also occurring in Hamilton with walkouts beginning on October 3.

McDonald's refused to make a new wage offer until some time in November, after employees rejected an earlier proposal of 25 cents per hour. It has been six months since their collective contract expired.

Striking workers at the Airport last week were harassed by security staff and police who physically threatened them and issued a trespass notice against a union organiser.

Workers have spoken out about long hours, no breaks, double shifts without overtime and lack of training for promotion. Crew and managers stopped work at four McDonald's restaurants last week in protest against contract provisions that allow the employer to use shift rosters as a form of bullying and control. Last month a manager demanded that a 17-year-old worker finish her shift following an accident at the restaurant.

Most customers are supporting the rolling strikes by refusing to cross the pickets.

### **More strikes likely at New Zealand polytechnic**

Protest action taken by support staff at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) is likely to escalate following the failure of mediation talks. Tertiary Institutes Allied Staff Association (TIASA) members have voted overwhelmingly to reject an offer by NMIT, which would have union members receiving 0.2 percent less than non-union staff.

A TIASA spokesman said the institute management's attitude to the negotiations, which included a list of 80 employer claims, was "provocative".

### **New Caledonian public servants protest pension reforms**

Around 1,000 government employees on October 7 rallied in Noumea, the New Caledonian capital, in protest over French government plans to reform the pension system.

The reforms aim to phase out the top-up of pensions offered to French public servants who retire in its colonies, where consumer prices can be 300 percent higher than in France. Under a system introduced in 1952, pensions can be boosted by up to 75 percent.

The French government claims the cuts apply to no more than 4,000 people in the territory, but unions organising the rally claim that the proposed cuts will cause hardship for about 10,000 people.



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