

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.

Korean rail and subway workers call off strike

On November 20 union officials representing 5,500 workers at the state-run Korea Railroad Corporation (KORAIL) and 9,300 employees from the city-funded Seoul Metro called off a mass strike planned that day to protest plans by both companies to partially privatise and axe jobs.

After 11 hours of talks into the early hours of November 20, Seoul Metro management agreed to withdraw its plan to cut 20 percent of subway employees and allow private firms to operate some subway stations.

Korean Railway Workers' Union at (KORAIL), which operates inter-city services and some commuter lines linking Seoul with satellite cities, also suspended its stoppage, which it planned to hold in unison with Seoul Metro workers.

KORAIL workers are demanding that management re-hire 47 workers fired in 2003 and scrap a major restructuring program. The railway plans to lay off up to 4,000 workers, or 10 percent of all employees, by 2012 to reduce mounting deficits. It also wants to privatise management of some facilities such as stations.

Korean bus manufacturing workers maintain strike action

Office workers at Daewoo Bus Corporation, South Korea's No. 2 bus manufacturer, entered the tenth day of their walkout on November 14. The strike erupted after the company announced that it planned to slash 30 percent of its workforce. At least 237 out of 670 blue-collar jobs are to be eliminated along with 80 out of 300 office positions. A company spokesman said the cuts were in response to a significant reduction in luxury bus sales.

Japanese aviation workers call off strike

On November 18 unions covering workers at Japan Airlines (JAL) and All Nippon Airways (ANA) called off a strike scheduled for November 20. The media was given no reason for the decision.

The planned one-day strike by pilots, cabin attendants and other workers

was to protest a 5 percent pay cut and reduced bonuses imposed by JAL last month. ANA is planning to slash 4 billion yen (\$US41 million) in bonuses this year.

Television workers in India resume work

Thousands of television studio employees at Bollywood in Mumbai returned to work on November 19, ending an eight-day strike that stopped production of television serials, cost production companies 1 million rupee (\$US20,400) per day and forced Indian TV channels to broadcast reruns.

Federation of Western India Cine Employees (FWICE) members struck, claiming that production companies had reneged on an agreement reached last month that included a 20 percent pay increase, shift allowances and a reduction of shift times from 12 to 8 hours. There are few details available on the new agreement between FWICE and production companies that ended the walkout, only that set assistants, often referred to as spot boys, will now receive just over \$US300 per month.

Sri Lankan zoo workers picket for conditions

Zoological Gardens workers in Dehiwala, Colombo picketed their workplace on November 15 to demand a proper system of promotions, regularisation of casual workers, an end to corruption in procurement, and provision for the employment of sons of zoo workers. Several unions and workers organisations, such as the Workers Action Committee of the Zoological Gardens, organised the protest.

Sri Lankan prison workers stop work

Welikada prison workers in Colombo walked off the job on November 14 to demand the payment of allowances and over-time accrued over the past three months. All work was affected, including the transport of prisoners to court and prisoners' work schedules.

Vietnam garment workers strike for wages

More than 600 employees of Dai Cat Tuong Garment Company at Quang Ngai Province's Tinh Phong Industrial Zone have been on strike since November 11 over the non-payment of salaries for three months. Last week the company paid each worker 400,000 dong (\$US24), but this falls far short of their monthly salary of 1.5 million dong.

The Social Insurance Agency said the company owed it more than VND600 million (\$US25,384) in workers' insurance fees.

Garment factory closures in Vietnam leave employees stranded

About 200 garment workers at Quang Sung Vina Company have had no income since the company director disappeared three months ago. Many of the workers stay onsite each night to guard the machines, fearful the landlord will seize the equipment. The workers want the company liquidated to pay their salaries.

Directors of three other garment factories—Quang Sung Vina, Vietnam Garment Technology Company and Vina Haeng Woon Industry—have also vanished. The companies have not paid employees' salaries or insurance contributions for some time.

In other cases, workers have had their salaries substantially cut after their companies announced temporary shutdowns following a slump in demand caused by the global financial crisis.

Newcastle hospital administration employees return to work

Around 30 administration staff at the John Hunter public hospital in Newcastle ended a four-day strike and returned to work on November 18. The walkout followed long-running complaints over mould on files in the medical records department. Employees blamed the mould for rashes, respiratory problems and headaches that they have experienced.

Health Services Union members ended their strike after Hunter New England Health agreed to investigate workers' claims and provide protective clothing while the mould is contained.

NSW teachers stop work for better pay

New South Wales teachers held two-hour stop-work meetings across the state on November 19 protesting the latest wages and conditions offer from the state government.

Thousands of public schools and TAFE college teachers voted to strike for two days at the beginning of the new school term in 2009 unless the government increased its offer of a 2.5 percent annual pay increase to 5 percent.

The NSW Teachers Federation and government began mediation in the Industrial Relations Commission on November 19.

South Australian teachers call off strike

The Australian Education Union-SA cancelled a state-wide strike scheduled for November 20, following mediation talks the previous day in

the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). SA teachers are campaigning for an 18 percent pay increase over three years.

The state Labor government is adamant that it will not increase its latest offer—a rise of 13.6 percent which compounds to 14.2 percent. Earlier this week the IRC ruled that the planned strike was illegal. The union said it will appeal the commissioner's ruling and will meet over the weekend to decide on future action.

NT teachers accept pay offer in a close vote

After 15 months of negotiations, Northern Territory Education Union members voted this week to accept a government's pay offer that will deliver a 12 percent annual pay increase over three years, plus an extra one hour of non-contact work per week for primary school teachers.

Just 55 percent of teachers accepted the union negotiated pay offer, which is well below the union's original demand for 20 percent over three years. The increase will be backdated from September 2007.

Ambulance workers in rural Victoria protest

Ambulance Employees Association (AEA) members in the Victorian regional town of Warrnambool protested on November 19 over the state government's latest pay offer of a 12 percent wage rise over four years linked to cuts in conditions. The protest was part of a state-wide campaign by ambulance officers to improve wages, conditions and staffing levels.

On November 11 more than 100 ambulance officers gathered at Parliament House in Melbourne carrying a coffin of more than 5,000 postcards supporting their campaign. The union claims there is a state-wide shortage of more than 350 paramedics, forcing officers on average to work 11 weeks in overtime a year.

New Zealand aged care workers strike over wages

Aged care workers at Maddison Residential Care in Wellington struck last weekend following a breakdown in negotiations for a new collective agreement. They were supported on a picket by residents protesting alleged bullying of staff and residents by management.

The main sticking point in the eight months of negotiations with the Unite union and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation has been management's refusal to give ground on union demands for a minimum start rate of \$15 an hour. Caregivers at Maddison are paid only \$14 an hour. Further strike action is planned.

New Zealand hazardous waste workers threaten to strike

Workers at Interwaste in Auckland are threatening to take further industrial action after the airport waste management company rebuffed a settlement offer from the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) this week. The five union members are now seeking mediation.

Employees first walked out late last month after negotiations for a new

collective agreement failed. The company wanted to halve sick leave, reduce their redundancy entitlements and offered a pay increase of 3 percent, which is 2 percent below the annual rate of inflation. A major sticking point is the redundancy package, which the company claims is too generous and "above market rates".

Ports of Auckland strike to proceed

Over 300 workers at New Zealand's busiest port will strike on December 3 despite a last-ditch attempt to end a long-running contract dispute. Talks on November 17 between Ports of Auckland managers and Maritime Union officials broke down with the main issue being the use of casual labour. The current collective employment agreement expired in 2006.

The one-day strike is expected to affect cargo loading, and road, rail, shuttle and engineering services.

NZ dairy workers strike called off

A planned strike for November 17 by 4,000 dairy workers of Fonterra over pay was called off last week after the Dairy Workers Union reached a settlement with the company. The union, which represents factory workers and drivers, was seeking an 8 percent pay rise. Fonterra was only offering 5 percent. Details have not been publicly released, but the proposed deal will be voted on by union members during the next three weeks.

NZ kindergarten teachers hold stop-work meetings

New Zealand kindergarten teachers have been attending stop-work meetings around the country to vote on a pay claim to take into negotiations next year. They want an increase to maintain pay parity with primary school teachers.

The NZ Educational Institute says the claim is justified as many kindergartens are re-organising into full-day services. Some 46 union meetings are being held until the end of November. Negotiations on a new employment agreement are scheduled to start at the beginning of next year.

Thousands strike and protest pension cuts in French Pacific territories

Thousands of public sector employees in French Polynesia took to the streets of Papeete, Tahiti's capital, on November 12 to launch an indefinite strike against the French government's plan to cut pensions in its overseas territories. The strike paralysed many government institutions, shutting down the courts, customs offices and the airport. Fishermen also blocked Papeete port.

In an unprecedented move, the French high commissioner was restricted to his quarters and unable to travel to New Caledonia, where opposition to the reforms also saw public servants take to the streets last week. The reforms aim to phase out the top-up of pensions offered to French public

servants who retire in the colonies. Under a system introduced in 1952, pensions can be boosted by up to 75 percent to compensate for consumer prices that are often 300 percent higher than in France.

The action came as the French senate in Paris moved to finalise the pension cuts, which the French Assembly has already approved. Public sector unions, however, are not opposing the reforms outright, but demanding that the cuts be deferred for a year and "consultations" held.

Five days later on November 17, French Polynesian hospital doctors walked out after a last-minute contract agreement was rejected. While the health minister appeared to have sealed a deal to avoid a stoppage, the unions questioned the agreement because they feared that the public sector minister could delay its application. Strike action is also continuing at Papeete's Sheraton Hotel over the dismissal of 18 staff members.

Solomon Islands construction workers end strike

A four-week strike in the Solomon Islands, which has halted the development of a multi-million dollar hotel project, ended last week after the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) and the Heritage Park Hotel reached agreement on improved wages and increases in holiday and housing allowances. Other issues included housing, danger, transport, overtime and holiday allowances, as well as improved conditions for holiday and maternity leave.

Since construction started in August 2007, the company had paid unskilled workers a minimum wage of \$SB4 (\$US0.52) per hour with skilled workers receiving a minimum of \$SB7.

The company has now agreed to pay a minimum wage of \$SB5 for unskilled workers and \$SB10 for qualified employees, which will be backdated to July 1. The deal also provides for extra expenses for workers travelling on holiday and improved housing allowances ranging from \$SB50 to \$SB80 per fortnight.

The Heritage Park Hotel is a subsidiary of Papua New Guinea-based Lamana Hotel Group.



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