

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

8 November 2008

Cab drivers in China stop work

As many as 9,000 taxi drivers struck in Chongqing on November 3 over high company fees and fuel shortages. They slowly began returning to work the next day after city officials agreed to reduce by 70 yuan the 440 yuan (\$US64) daily fee that they have to pay their management companies. The city also agreed to increase the supply of compressed natural gas available for taxis by 100,000 cubic metres per day.

Taxi strikes have broken out sporadically around China over similar issues.

China Daily reported on November 5 that only 4,000 cabs in Chongqing had returned to the roads. The other drivers are remaining off the road, protesting against the high number of fines imposed on drivers after new regulations were imposed on October 27.

Fifty-year-old taxi driver Liu Xuequan told *China Daily*: "Some drivers are fined five or six times a day and the amount of money they have to pay is huge. That was the real trigger for the strike."

Bo Xilai, secretary of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Chongqing Municipal Committee, announced he will meet with drivers and citizens' representatives and the talks will be broadcast live by Chongqing Television and other news portals.

Indian construction workers demonstrate

Hundreds of construction workers across the state of Tamilnadu attended a rally in Chennai on November 2 organised by the Construction Workers Federation of India (CWFI). Speakers at the rally called for the government to increase funding to labour welfare boards, which provide compensation and pensions.

Currently 1.9 million workers have registered with the Construction Workers Welfare Board. The demonstrators demanded transparency in its functioning and the removal of limits on the number of workers who can join the welfare scheme.

A conference of some 600 CWFI delegates in Chennai on November 4 called for increased compensation for natural death, maternity leave and pension benefits and a pension for women workers when they reached the age of 50.

Karnataka garment workers strike for pay

Garment workers across the Indian state of Karnataka struck on November 5, urging the state government to increase minimum wages.

Garments Karmikara Sangha general secretary N M Mutthappa said the present minimum wages were 101.21 rupees a day for those working in Bangalore city and 91.91 rupees in other urban areas. The union is demanding that minimum wages are fixed at 6,000 rupees (\$US132) a month, with a 10 percent annual increase.

Indian mine workers resume agitation for travel allowance

On November 1, Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) workers in Mine I in Cuddalore, Tamilnadu, staged a stay-in strike demanding the continuation of a pick-up service or a raise in their travel allowance.

NLC management responded by suspending the area vice-president of the Labour Progressive Front (LPF) and served a charge memo on another official. The workers resumed work in the evening.

The latest action follows a one-day hunger strike by LPF members at the mine on October 10 to demand that the travel allowance be increased from 635 rupees to 1,950 rupees.

Engineering college teachers in India protest for wages

Engineering college teachers at Malnad Engineering College in Hassane, Karnataka, took industrial action on October 30 after the All-India Council of Technical Education (AICTE) refused to set up a pay review committee. The government granted improved pay and conditions recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission report for Central Government Employees on January 1, 2006, but teachers at engineering colleges were left out.

Members of the Federation of Engineering College Teachers' Associations of Karnataka will hold a one-day demonstration in front of the AICTE regional office in Hassane on November 10.

Indian teachers plan indefinite strike

After launching a series of protests, various teachers' organisations representing 7,000 teachers in Puducherry have agreed to strike on November 5 to put forward their demands. These include the implementation of the recommendations of the Sixth Pay Commission without any pre-conditions.

The general secretary of the Federation of Puducherry Government Employees' Association, T R Seshachalam, said the review committee appointed by the government wants to impose pre-conditions such as qualifications, years of service or experience.

Indonesian workers protest decree on minimum wage

Hundreds of workers from the Indonesian Federation of Labor Unions staged a rally at the Presidential Palace in Jakarta on October 29 to demand that the government repudiate the recent joint ministerial decree limiting minimum statutory wage rises.

The decree strips local authorities of their power to set minimum pay rates, giving individual employers a free hand in determining wages.

Industry Minister Fahmi Idris claimed regional standards were a burden on companies in "these difficult times... That is why we now require companies to directly negotiate wage increases with their own workers".

Queensland paramedics push for pay and conditions

About 100 paramedics and call centre workers parked 20 ambulances in George Street on November 3 during a protest outside the Brisbane CBD office of Queensland's premier Anna Bligh. Stop-work meetings were also held in Bundaberg, Townsville, Rockhampton, Cairns and in other regional centres across the state.

The paramedics, members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU), are campaigning against the government's pay offer of 4.5 percent next year, and just 4 percent in each of the following two years. They are demanding an immediate 6 percent increase and better working conditions in the hope of retaining more staff and reducing their current workload. Officers frequently work 22-hour shifts.

Queensland Emergency Services Minister Neil Roberts is refusing to negotiate any further and said the matter will now be left to the state's Arbitration Commission to resolve.

Australian telecommunications workers plan strike action

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), which covers over 10,000 technicians and linesmen in Australia's telecommunications giant Telstra, applied to the Industrial Relations Commission this week for permission to hold a secret ballot of its members to vote on strike action.

Telstra has rejected a union-negotiated collective agreement for CEPU members. The telco has de-unionised most of its 32,000 workforce by signing them up to individual contracts, and is now promoting a non-union collective deal for the rest.

Under the previous government's Work Choices laws, which are still in operation, employers are not obliged to recognise unions in bargaining. Ed Husic, national president of the CEPU, said: "We've been trying to get Telstra back to the table for many months, but they've ignored us." The union is hoping industrial action will force Telstra into negotiations.

New Zealand dairy workers to strike

Around 4,500 workers at New Zealand's dairy giant Fonterra are planning industrial action after six days of negotiations for a new collective agreement ended in a deadlock.

The Dairy Workers Union (DWU) is seeking a pay increase of 8 percent this year and an increase in the following year based on the Consumer Price Index (CPI) plus 1 percent. Fonterra has offered a much smaller rise and wants to withdraw a bonus, which has been in operation for the last five years and has been worth an extra 2 percent on average.

Dairying is designated an "essential industry" and both sides are required to attend mediation before industrial action can be taken. The union has given two weeks' notice of "work to rule" action, saying it will begin industrial action on November 17.

Distribution workers in Auckland strike

Distribution workers at the Auckland head office of international beauty product company L'Oreal struck on October 31 and picketed the company's yearly corporate product sale at Mt Smart Stadium. The company ordered staff not to speak to the media. The workers are protesting against a "worthless" new pay scale due to begin next year.

The National Distribution Union is demanding L'Oreal pay a minimum rate of \$15 an hour to existing employees, who currently get just \$13 an hour—\$5 less than what other distribution workers in the city are paid.

New Zealand McDonald's workers protest

New Zealand McDonald's workers protested outside a meeting of their bosses in Auckland on November 5. Over 80 Unite union members from around 20 restaurants in Auckland and Hamilton marched on the hotel where the meeting was taking place to emphasise their anger over work and pay conditions. McDonald's workers in Wellington also held a rally outside the Lambton Quay store.

The latest action is part of an ongoing campaign for improved pay and conditions. Hundreds of workers at 28 McDonald's restaurants across the country have taken over 40 strikes in the past month. The union is seeking a 50 cents per hour pay increase and secure working hours.

NZ Teletech workers ratify deal

Workers at international outsourcing company Teletech New Zealand have unanimously ratified a deal struck by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union. The deal settles a collective contract after more than seven months of negotiations, which included strike action last month. It provides a pay increase of 3 percent over the next five months and the introduction of overtime rates. Teletech operates Telecom's 018 directory services via the Yellow Pages group.

PNG hospital workers protest over accommodation

On November 3, workers at the Port Moresby General Hospital called a meeting, which included nurses, doctors, community health workers, allied health workers and casuals, to protest over management's failure to settle outstanding bills with PNG Power. Electricity to their residences has been disconnected since October 31.

President of the PNG Nurses Association, Eimi Kaptigau, said the hospital had an outstanding electricity bill of 71,000 kina (\$US26,300). The protesting workers delivered a petition demanding that management pay and said that if they don't get a favourable response they will hold "stop-work protests".



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