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 workers oppose labour law revision

About 33,000 workers rallied in Seoul's Yeouido district on November 29 against government changes to job security laws for part-time and temporary employees.

Under the law, which came into effect last year, employers are required to hire irregular workers as regular employees after two years. The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions, which organised the rally, is opposing new moves to extend that period to four years.

The original legislation triggered a 434-day strike by New Core Department Store workers when the company tried to outsource its temporary employees before the law was enacted.

According to government data, South Korea has some 5.5 million irregular workers, about three times higher than the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development average.

Chinese smelter workers demand new contract

Around 200 employees of Shaoguan Smelting Factory in Shaoguan City, Guangdong demonstrated outside the plant on December 2 against the company's refusal to renew labour contracts, which expire at the end of the year. Workers blocked national highway 106, halting traffic for two hours. They dispersed after management agreed to sign new contracts.

Indian construction workers demonstrate

About 150 construction workers protested in front of the District Collectorate in Krishnagiri, Tamilnadu on December 1 over wages and conditions. Their demands included job security for unorganised labourers and their inclusion in the Employees State Insurance Corporation, regularisation of wages, a minimum pension of 2,000 rupees ($US40) per month and the implementation of government welfare measures through the unions.

The Construction Workers Association is planning another demonstration in Chennai on December 9 and outside parliament on December 10 to 12.

Karnataka council workers begin hunger strike

City Municipal Daily Wage Employees' Union members, who have been picketing the Raichur city council in Karnataka since November 19, began an indefinite fast on December 1. They want the government to regularise their services and provide equal benefits with other government workers.

More than 120 daily-wage workers are employed by the municipality to maintain drinking water supply, sanitation and the underground drainage system. According to the union, about 80 of them have worked for the municipal corporation for 15 years but are still treated as daily-wage employees. Many are only paid half the official minimum wage with no health care or protective clothing.

Telecom workers demonstrate in Andhra Pradesh

Members of the National Federation of Telecom Employees protested outside the BNSL general manager's office in Andhra Pradesh on December 2 with an 11-point charter of demands. BSNL is the state-owned telecommunications provider.

Workers' demands included an interim pay relief of 5,000 rupee per month, back-dated from January 1, 2007. They also opposed moves to privatise BSNL and a proposed merger with Indian Telephone Industries Limited.

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Pakistan oil and gas workers oppose privatisation

Thousands of Oil & Gas Development Company Limited (OGDCL) employees began a hunger strike on November 19 in opposition to a government decision to privatise the Qadirpur gas fields. Hundreds of Dhodhak oil field workers blocked the Taunsa Sharif-Dera Ismail Khan road for four hours, demanding that the government reverse its decision.

OGDCL Labour Union President Chaudhry Mohammad Akram said: "The Qadirpur gas field is a profit-earning entity, making over $US182 million for the state each year." The government is expecting to receive between $3 and $4 billion from the sale. Many commentators value the assets at more than $12 billion.

Elsewhere in Pakistan, WAPDA Hydro Electric Central Labour Union members demonstrated against recent price hikes and unemployment.

Indonesian labourers protest against minimum wage decree

About 1,000 workers rallied outside the North Sumatra legislative council building in Medan on December 1 to demand the government revoke a recent joint ministerial decree allowing companies to determine minimum wages. The protest was organised by the United Laborers Movement to Fight Slavery (Gebrak).

The Independent Laborers Association of Indonesia, which is affiliated with Gebrak, also wants the North Sumatra governor to review the 2009 regional monthly minimum wage and increase it from 905,000 rupiah ($US77) to 2 million rupiah.

Australian workers demonstrate against building watchdog

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members and their supporters attended street rallies in Australian state capitals and in the regional cities of Newcastle and Wollongong on December 2 to protest against the Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC). The rallies were aimed at pressuring the federal Labor government to honour an election promise to dismantle the ABCC.

About 2,000 workers demonstrated in Brisbane's CBD and carried a coffin to Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's office, while 2,500 protesters marched in Sydney's CBD. In Melbourne, 2,000 rallied outside the ABCC's offices, while in Perth hundreds attended a meeting outside the Western Australian state parliament.

The $44 million government-run ABCC has been labelled the secret police of the construction industry. ABCC investigators can interrogate and charge workers. Those brought before the commission are prohibited from publicly discussing the case and are denied the right to choose a lawyer.

The nationwide protests were sparked after Victorian CFMEU organiser Noel Washington was charged for refusing to answer ABCC questions or appear before the commission. He faced six months' jail. The charges against Washington were suddenly dropped on November 25, a week before the rallies.

The Rudd government says it will retain the ABCC until 2010, despite strong opposition from workers who voted Labor into power in November 2007.

Western Australian public school teachers accept pay offer

WA teachers have accepted the latest pay offer from the newly elected state Liberal government. The agreement, which delivers pay increases of more than 20 percent over three years, ends a stand-off of more than a year between teachers and the previous state Labor government.

WA State School Teachers Union president Anne Gisborne said 93 percent of the union's 6,500 members voted for the deal. It increases the number of teachers eligible for the $5,000 country teaching allowance and adds 13 new schools to the program. The agreement also abolishes the 15 hours a year of unpaid professional development in teachers' own time.

Catholic school teachers in Australia stop work

Teachers at 600 Catholic schools New South Wales held one-hour stop work meetings on December 2 for a 5 percent pay rise. The Catholic School Board has offered the teachers a 2.5 percent interim increase from January 2009. This has been rejected by members of the Independent Education Union, who are concerned they could lose existing working conditions under a new 2009 agreement.

Union general secretary Dick Shearman said teachers would consider further action, including a one-day strike in February, if they do not achieve a satisfactory outcome.

South Australian TAFE teachers protest pay and privatisation

TAFE (technical and further education) teachers rallied in Adelaide on December 4 rejecting the South Australian government's latest pay offer. They also accused the government of trying to privatise the state's TAFE college system.

Australian Education Union official Correna Haythorpe told the demonstration that an enterprise bargaining offer and plans for more

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outsourcing of courses were designed to undermine the TAFE system. She claimed a 13 percent pay rise offer over three years was designed to create division between TAFE and state school teachers, who have been offered 14.2 percent increase.

Victorian university staff vote for industrial action

Over 98 percent of National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at Victoria University voted on November 28 to take industrial action following the university's decision last month to slash about 250 jobs across its 11 campuses. The union says students will face the worst student-teacher ratios in the country.

The ballot result authorises legally protected industrial action, including strikes, overtime bans and work restrictions on the transmission of student examination results. The NTEU is still to decide what action will be taken and when.

NSW north coast protests over planned health job cuts

Hundreds of health workers and residents protested on November 29 at Coffs Harbour, Maclean, Casino, Lismore and Tweed Heads over a state government proposal to shed 400 jobs from the North Coast Area Health Service aimed at saving $200 million over the next four years.

Dr Jay Ruthnam from the Coffs Harbour Base Hospital medical staff council said the proposed job cuts were "senseless" and came when the economic downturn was already forcing poorer patients to attend public hospitals rather than private practitioners.

New Zealand port workers strike

Three hundred Ports of Auckland workers walked off the job for 24 hours on December 2, preventing the unloading of four container ships and affecting all container terminal stevedoring, road, rail, shuttle and engineering services work. It was the sixth strike over the past year, in a two-year-old pay dispute.

The company is offering a 4 percent pay increase in the first year and an additional 3.1 percent to offset the removal of some allowances. It also includes a 4.5 percent rise in the second year, and 4 percent in the third year.

A Maritime Union spokesman said the pay was less of an issue than the company's insistence on using more casual workers on the first two days of each week, forcing permanent staff to work more weekends. He said the main aim of the strike was to give members enough time to debate a "multitude of issues".

Auckland retail workers picket

Pak'n Save grocery workers picketed the company's Lincoln Road outlet in Auckland on November 29 to demand an improved contract. They held banners saying, "We're not discount workers" and "Pay up Pack'n Save". Police unsuccessfully tried to convince the picketers to disperse.

The Pak'n Save site was unionised last year by the National Distribution Union and the collective agreement is currently up for renewal. The company, however, is refusing to negotiate and tried to issue trespass orders against union officials.

Wellington college staff protest against forced redundancies

Staff at Victoria University of Wellington's College of Education began legal action and implemented an "information boycott" on November 28 over college moves to impose forced redundancies. The action follows college plans to terminate 18 jobs and the discovery by 18 staff that they had little or no teaching workload allocated for 2009.

Voluntary redundancies were implemented in July this year with the college management promising that there would be no need for any forced redundancies. The tertiary sector unions have not announced any support action.

Hazardous waste workers enter mediation

A dispute at Interwaste, a hazardous waste service contractor at Auckland airport, entered mediation last week, after the company accepted an offer by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) to avert another strike. Five EPMU members at Interwaste have been involved in industrial action over the company's attempts to cut sick leave and redundancy entitlements.

Interwaste employees first walked out in October, after negotiations for a new collective agreement failed. The company wanted to halve sick leave, reduce redundancy payouts and offered a pay increase of 3 percent, which is 2 percent below the annual rate of inflation. The company claims that the redundancy package "is too generous and above market rates".

Papua New Guinea Telikom workers walk out

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Communication Workers Union members at Telikom PNG Ltd in Port Moresby walked off the job on December 1, following failed negotiations for a new pay deal. Telikom technicians and engineers, allegedly some of the lowest paid in the region, met the following day to decide when to return to work. The meeting results have not been reported to the press.

PNG teachers threaten not to take up postings next year

About 4,000 teachers in the Western Highlands province of Papua New Guinea will not take up postings next year until their "record of employment" files are retrieved and kept safe. The decision was taken at the annual general meeting of the PNG Teachers Association on December 3.

Teachers suspect that their files, which show whether they are entitled to Christmas holiday travel allowance, have been destroyed after a government building (Kapal Haus) burnt down in October.

Teachers declared that unless provincial and national level education authorities provided an answer by Friday, when all schools end class prior to the Christmas break, they would not take up their postings next year.

New Caledonia public servants strike continues after six weeks

A six-week strike by New Caledonia's Fiscal Department staff for better pay continues to impact on the administration, despite an earlier claim by authorities that "differences" had been overcome. The payment of salaries and pensions later this month will be delayed, as well as drivers' licences and car registration processing.

The strike is also preventing the distribution of French cigarettes to retailers. This sparked a riot in mid-November when 300 members of a consumer association tried to gain access to a warehouse where tonnes of cigarettes were stored. The government was forced to import cigarettes from Australia.

French Polynesia hospital workers walk out

Health workers at French Polynesia's four public hospitals walked off the job on November 26 over a protocol agreement with the health ministry. Up to 360 of 2,800 workers remained on strike the next day over the failure of the ministry to finalise an agreement worked on during the first day of the strike.

Union members at hospitals located in Papeete and Taravao on the island of Tahiti, Raiatea in the Leeward Islands and Nuku Hiva in the Marquesas Islands have made 20 demands, including personnel reclassification, payment of late indemnity payments, internal transfers and the repeal of the pension cuts that sparked a 15-day general strike by public sector workers in late November.

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