

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.

Chinese workers locked in factory grounds

Around 300 immigrant workers at the Jianrong Suitcase Factory in the city of Dongguan were locked in the factory grounds by riot police on December 19 following three days of street protests when their factory was suddenly closed. A locked up worker told *Associated Press* by phone that a female worker tried to leave but was beaten on the head with a metal baton and sent to hospital with serious injuries. "They just don't want us to protest. If we try to leave, they will beat us even more," he said.

Local government officials said the Japanese owner and Taiwanese factory manager could not be located and offered the workers 60 percent of the monthly wages they had earned since October. The workers, who are paid an average monthly salary of 1,500 yuan (\$US220), refused to accept the deal.

Using loudspeakers, officials urged the workers to take their final wages and leave, but they refused and remained in the compound, shouting from their dormitory balconies, "We don't want it. You're uncivilized. You beat people."

The officials left after an hour, then around 100 workers shouting, "There are no human rights here," pushed aside about 30 riot police as they walked out the factory main gate. There have been no further reports.

Chinese construction workers protest for wages

Over 400 migrant construction workers and contractors travelled 50 kilometres from Langfang (China's "Silicon Valley") on December 20 to rally at the premises of Foxconn in Beijing's Yizhuang Development Zone, demanding payment for deferred salaries. The protesters were forced to leave by local police without resolving the issue.

Foxconn, based in Taiwan, is the largest manufacturer of electronics and

computer components worldwide. It mainly manufactures in China and in 2007 it employed 450,000 people there.

Japanese foreign workers protest over job losses

About 250 foreign workers marched through the streets of Hamamatsu in the Shizuoka prefecture on December 21, calling on companies to stop firing temporary workers and demanding assistance for foreign temporary workers who have lost their jobs in the deepening recession.

Many of the protesters were Japanese-Brazilians who belong to labour unions. They came to the protest from Shizuoka, Aichi, Gifu and Mie prefectures, which all host group firms of Toyota and Suzuki. One worker said: "We have been treated as disposable, but we work in Japan legally and pay taxes. We want to be treated the same as Japanese workers."

Steel workers in India strike

Thousands of contract workers at the government-owned steel manufacturer Rashtriya Ispat Nigam Ltd in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh struck for 24 hours on December 19 and rallied at the administrative building in protest over management's refusal to increase monthly salaries by 1,000 rupee as promised by the national government.

The plant employs over 18,000 people. According to a spokesman for the Indian National Trade Union Congress, more than 10,000 families of contract workers depend on the steel plant for an income. He said the Centre of Indian Trade Unions, the All Indian Trade Union Congress, the Hind Mazdoor Sabha, and the Telugu Nadu Trade Union Council supported the strike.

West Bengal jute workers end strike

More than 250,000 workers at 59 jute mills in West Bengal agreed to

return to work this week following a two-day tripartite meeting between the central government, jute mill owners and 19 mill unions in New Delhi. The workers struck on December 1 over not being paid dearness allowance since April 2007.

It was agreed that all workers will receive an additional 500 rupees per month, with effect from the date the mills re-open, but the payments will not be backdated and workers will not to be paid for the period they were on strike.

The government agreed to immediately constitute a committee comprising of the governments of India and West Bengal, unions and employers to study outstanding issues and various facets of the working of the jute industry, including pricing, productivity and wage structure. West Bengal contributes 50 percent of jute production worldwide.

Indian postal workers strike for pay

About 280,000 Gramin Dak Sevaks (GDS)—once known as extra departmental staff—supported by members of the All India Postal Employees Union, continued their strike for the second day on December 18, protesting over pay and pensions. Demands include rejection of the Nataraja Murti Pay Committee's (NMC) report, equal retirement rights with national government employees and standardised working hours of indoor and outdoor staff.

The NMC—set up to examine the Department of Post's wage structure and service conditions of GDS employees—recommended lowering their retirement age from 65 to 62 years and suggested a remuneration of 500 rupees for three-hours' work. However, a major concern is the recommendation by the committee to terminate 100,000 GDS workers who are engaged as stamp-vendors, packers and urban sub-post masters.

The All India Gramin Dak Sewak Employees Union said about 80 percent of the postal network across the country was being manned by GDS employees. Postal services have come to a halt since the strike was initiated.

Sri Lankan train drivers work-to-rule

Train drivers on Colombo intercity lines implemented a work-to-rule campaign on December 21, demanding the reinstatement of four employees who were sacked following a railway accident at Ganemulla station in September. One passenger was killed and 43 were injured. The Locomotive Operating Engineers Union has blamed faulty signals for the accident and accused the Railway Department of using the workers as scapegoats.

Most trains are not running on time while drivers stick strictly to speed limits, refusing to increase speed to make up for delays. Railway workers, including drivers, guards and station attendants, struck in September over the same issue, bringing the rail network to a standstill. They returned to

work only after the unions falsely claimed they had resolved the issue with rail authorities.

Drivers have vowed this time to continue their industrial action until the sacked workers are reinstated.

Sri Lankan utility employees picket over bonus system

National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) workers launched a work-to-rule campaign and picketed the board's head office in Ratmalana, Colombo, on December 22, demanding management not implement a new bonus system that distributes employees' annual bonus in proportion to their salary.

Presently workers get a flat bonus rate, and were demanding that an across-the-board payment of 30,000 rupees (\$US270) be made before Christmas.

Water Supplies and Drainage Employees Union general secretary Upali Rathnayake said his members returned to work after the NWSDB management cancelled the new bonus system and made arrangements to pay the bonus before Christmas.

Indonesian migrant workers protest over treatment

Up to 100 former migrant workers and activists rallied in Jember, Indonesia on December 16, demanding authorities crack down on syndicates involved in the trafficking of locals to other provinces and countries. Observing International Migrant Workers Day, protesters marched through Jember and rallied at regency and municipal administration buildings carrying posters and banners decrying the rampant trade in women and children.

Jember is the fourth largest supplier of overseas workers in East Java, behind Sampang, Pamekasan and Sumenep, all on Madura Island. A spokesman for the Jember Migrant Workers Movement said hundreds of women and children are trafficked without documentation to serve as housemaids and sexual workers in other provinces and countries. "They are over exploited and underpaid in their workplace," he said.

Telstra unmoved by rolling strikes

Despite a series of rolling strikes and bans on overtime and recall duty by Telstra employees, Australia's largest telecommunications provider is adamant it will not negotiate a new collective agreement with unions.

Industrial action, which commenced on December 16 by members of the Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), has caused delays in fault restoration and new installations. CEPU national president Ed Husic said: "It's [industrial action] probably added a week to the fault repair schedule." But Husic said there had been no olive branch from Telstra. "Not a phone call, not an email, not an SMS, smoke signal, nothing."

A Telstra spokesman said only 15 percent of Telstra employees were union members and claimed the industrial action was having a negligible effect on its operations.

Australian prison officers forced into court

The New South Wales Prison Officers Association was ordered to appear before the NSW Industrial Relations Commission on December 23 over overtime bans in the state's prisons. The bans were implemented as part of a dispute with the state government over its planned privatisation of prisoner transfer services and two prisons.

In August, the Labor government flagged wide-ranging reforms of the prison system, accusing prison officers of manipulating overtime, causing overtime payments to hit \$43 million a year—more than double its budgeted \$20 million. The Department of Corrective Services said it intended to start advertising 300 casual prison officer jobs "in a bid to change the prison officers' work culture".

On October 28, prison officers across the state walked off the job for 24 hours and rallied outside NSW parliament to protest the privatisation plans, announcing that the rally marked the beginning of rolling strikes and industrial bans.

Auckland retail workers begin rolling strikes

National Distribution Union members at New Zealand's largest supermarket, Pack'n Save in Auckland, began rolling strikes on December 17 at its Lincoln Road store. The Pack'n Save site was unionised last year 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.

Employees picketed the company's Lincoln Road store in November, waving banners saying: "We're not discount workers" and "Pay up Pack'n Save". The union said industrial action would continue during the busy Christmas period.

Workers have rejected Pack'n Save's offer of a starting rate of \$12.30 an hour, which is less than workers are being paid in supermarkets just a few minutes away.

Stranded PNG teachers plan protest

More than 300 public school teachers, mostly from the Highlands province of Papua New Guinea, are stranded in Lae waiting for their leave airfares from the Education Department in order to return to their home villages for the school holidays. Highlands Teachers Association chairman Kati Tore said on December 22 the teachers had waited for over three weeks and there had not been one positive response from the authorities.

A program adviser for education said there were no funds and told the teachers they would get their leave fares in the New Year when funds became available. The teachers said they would set up a protest camp at the provincial education division office.

Meanwhile, about 150 teachers from the Central and Gulf provinces are stranded in Port Moresby and Kerema waiting for their airfares. They have been rallying daily at the Central provincial education office demanding their tickets.



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