

# 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.*

## Striking oil workers in India arrested

At least 20 oil sector employees have been suspended and two arrested as part of a government clamp-down on nationwide strike action by Oil Sector Officers Association (OSOA) members at 14 state-run oil PSUs (public sector undertakings). The officers defied a High Court ruling and began indefinite strike action for higher wages on December 7.

The Hazira-Vijaipur-Jagdishpur pipeline was shut down, stopping gas supplies to power plants. The Oil and Natural Gas Corporation reported that the strike had shut its South Bassein and satellite fields in the Western offshore and the privately operated Panna Mukta and Tapti fields. Bharat Petroleum Corp refineries were operating at little more than half their usual rate. Indian oil companies have stocks for 15-20 days, but the National Thermal Power Corporation said its plants were seriously affected.

The Indian Oil Corporation has deployed Territorial Army personnel to operate installations at oil fields and the Mumbai and New Delhi airports.

The OSOA said last month's government offer, which included a 17 percent wage increase, was unacceptable. Association president Amit Kumar told reporters in New Delhi: "It's do-or-die this time. Officers feel betrayed by the numerous broken promises by ministers."

The union previously submitted a 13-point charter of demands that included moving all oil sector PSUs into a higher salary category, open-ended pay scales, removing the limit of 50 percent of basic pay on allowances, a wage revision every five years, and the maintenance of existing annual and promotion increment levels of four and six percent.

The government has established a Group of Ministers headed by Home Minister P Chidambaram to examine the union's demands.

## Indian public servants strike for pay

Nearly 300,000 government employees in Bihar launched an indefinite strike on December 7 to demand the full implementation of a pay commission report. Bihar State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation (BSNGEF) general secretary Manjul Kumar Das claimed that strike action had brought the government to a standstill.

The Sixth Pay Commission recommended the payment of three years' arrears, due since January 1, 2006, with a cash payment of 40 percent of the arrears during the current financial year and the rest in 2009-10. It also recommended that in 2010-11 the retirement age be lifted from 58 to 60 years and transport allowances be provided to all employees.

The BSNGEF and the Bihar Secretariat Services Association rejected a government offer to pay the arrears from April 1, 2007, declaring, "We will not accept anything less than the commission's recommendations".

The finance secretary has issued an order to all department heads to implement a "no work, no pay" policy and warned that those on strike would not be entitled to interim arrears and the planned revised pay scale.

## Uttar Pradesh power workers strike

Around 45,000 power employees and engineers from the Uttar Pradesh Power Corporation began an indefinite strike on January 1 over the government's refusal to implement recommendations from the Sixth Pay Commission. Power breakdowns remain unattended and revenue collection has been adversely affected.

The state government has deployed additional security personnel to affected power installations and mobilised engineers and technical staff from other government power utilities to maintain services.

Following rumours that three union leaders had been arrested, the VKSSS union (Vidyut Karamchari Sanyukt Sangharsh Samiti) said that its members would present themselves for mass arrest if the union officials or other employees were victimised or jailed.

The corporation management has threatened it will use the "full force of the police" if workers establish pickets or hold demonstrations.

## **Indian truck drivers walk out**

Over 600,000 truck drivers began national strike action on January 5, following calls from the All India Motor Transport Congress (AIMTC).

The truckers want a 10-rupee per litre reduction in diesel, a 35 percent cut in tyre prices and an exemption from collecting service tax from customers on gross freight. The AIMTC has also demanded a reduction in the annual national permit fee and a suspension of highway tolls for six months due to the global economic slowdown.

An oil ministry official indicated that there would be no government compromise and claimed that the drivers' demands were unreasonable and that oil prices were already being subsidised by the three state-run oil marketing companies.

## **Tamil Nadu fishermen strike**

More than 100,000 fishermen from 51 hamlets in Tamil Nadu, India struck for three days on January 4.

They were demanding repeal of the Coastal Management Zone Act, which restricts fishing activity, a bank-loan waiver for tsunami-affected fishermen, immediate disbursement of compensation to the families of missing fishermen and the removal of welfare discrimination between inland and marine fishermen.

There was no reported response from the government.

## **Karnataka beedi workers demand salary hike**

Beedi (local cigarettes) workers protested outside the Labour Commissioner's Office in Bangalore, Karnataka on January 5 to demand the payment of wage arrears of around 4,500 rupees per worker and the implementation of an agreement that managers signed with the workers' unions in January 2007.

The agreement was to deliver a minimum daily wage of 62.5 rupees (\$US1.26) for rolling 1,000 beedis. Many workers from the state's interior areas are paid only 25 rupees per 1,000 beedis.

The Karnataka State Beedi Workers' Federation organised the protest.

## **Media workers in South Korea end strike**

Thousands of media employees at 120 South Korean radio and television stations returned to work on January 7, ending a 12-day strike over government legislation aimed at deregulating broadcasting ownership and competition laws. Members of the National Union of Media Workers halted the strike after the government agreed to put the legislation on hold.

The Grand National Party government's planned laws will allow some of South Korea's largest newspapers and corporate conglomerates to take control of broadcasting companies. The union has threatened to strike again if the government tries to pass the legislation in its present form.

## **Hong Kong airport staff accept pay deal**

Ground staff at Hong Kong's International Airport on January 6 ruled out further strikes after their employer agreed to maintain annual bonuses. About 1,000 ground staff of HK Airport Services struck for three hours over the issue on December 27, affecting over 80 flights and leaving thousands of passengers waiting for hours for their luggage.

Representatives of the company's 3,000 employees said management would have to pay each full-time employee a bonus equivalent to 18 days' pay and give a one-off additional payment of \$HK1,000 (\$US130) to all staff.

## **Philippines leisure park workers vote for strike**

More than 460 employees from the state-owned Clark Development Corp. (CDC) at the Mimosa Leisure Park in Pampanga voted on January 2 for strike action.

The workers have complained that when CDC took control of the leisure park from the Tourism Secretary in 1999 they were forced to sign three-month contracts without the same benefits as other government employees.

The Association of Clark Mimosa Employees wants permanency for its members and a 14<sup>th</sup>-month pay and performance bonus. No date has been set for the walkout.

## **Construction workers in Singapore protest for wages**

On December 31 around 200 Chinese foreign workers of Zhonghe Huaxing Development and China Nuclear Industry Huaxing Construction Co. rallied at the Ministry of Employment demanding government assistance to retrieve outstanding back pay from their employers.

Workers claimed they had not been paid since September and said that

up to 50 percent of their wages is deducted by their employer for living expenses. Many said that they were promised monthly salaries of \$1,200 to \$1,300 by hiring agents but were only being paid \$1,100 (\$US733).

Workers dispersed later that evening after a spokesman for the companies said their September salaries had been deposited into their bank accounts and all other outstanding money would be paid before the Chinese New Year. The companies also agreed to review the high number of salary deductions.

### **Malaysian waste collector workers demonstrate over sackings**

Around 300 employees of privatised waste collector Trienekens Sarawak, supported by officials of the Malaysian Trade Union Congress (MTUC), rallied in Kuching city on January 4 protesting over the sacking of their union president and secretary.

Trienekens dismissed the two union officials last August for writing in a union circular calling on workers to boycott the company's Family Day.

The protestors accused the company of trying to destroy the union. Apart from saying that it might lodge a complaint with the International Labour Organisation, the MTUC did not reveal whether any further action was planned.

### **Vietnamese shoe factory workers strike**

Some 4,000 workers at Taiwanese-owned shoe factory, Sun Jade, in Vietnam's Thanh Hoa province, struck on January 3 protesting alleged management misconduct. The workers, mostly women, said managers from mainland China had beaten and humiliated them.

Workers also claimed that they were denied sick and bereavement leave and often lost one month's pay if they failed to show up for work on any one day. Those arriving late for work were frequently docked one day's wages and not allowed into the canteen to eat the lunch provided by the company and prevented from leaving to buy lunch outside the factory.

The strikers returned to work the following day, after management promised to resolve their problems, but walked out again that day when floor managers began reprisals. "We will continue to strike for the next few days if our requests are not met," said a worker who declined to be named, fearing retribution.

The official government union, which is not supporting the strike, has entered into talks with the company.

Sun Jade Vietnam Company has six factories in Vietnam with a total of 30,000 employees. Thanh Hoa factory workers earn between 1.2 million dong (\$US71) and 1.5 million dong per month.

### **Telstra workers to resume industrial action**

Workers at Telstra—Australia's largest telecommunications company—are set to resume rolling strikes and overtime bans this weekend after a lull in industrial action during the Christmas-New Year break. The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) has directed its members to ban overtime, recalls and call backs for 48 hours from January 10.

Over 7,000 Telstra workers endorsed industrial action last month and implemented rolling strikes and overtime bans from mid-December in response to the repeated refusal by Telstra management to negotiate new collective agreements with the CEPU, Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) and APESMA (Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers). Instead, Telstra is offering employees individual non-union agreements.

CEPU divisional president Len Cooper said last year's strike action had led to nearly eight days of backlogs in dealing with faults and problems critical to EFTPOS and ATM banking networks.

Telstra is adamant that it will not negotiate a new collective agreement with the unions. A Telstra spokesman said only 15 percent of Telstra employees were union members and claimed that industrial action was having a negligible effect on its operations.

About 13,000 Telstra employees are covered by an enterprise agreement that expired in September. The unions estimate that the rest of the 32,000-strong workforce is on Australian Workplace Agreements (individual contracts).

### **Nurses ban new patients at Batlow hospital**

WorkCover officials were called to a hospital in the New South Wales town of Batlow after nurses on January 2 refused to admit more patients until defects in the building are fixed. Susan Pearce from the Nurses' Association said the Batlow Multi Purpose Service, which opened in August, has loose electrical wires, missing wall panels, a hole in an office roof, and dangerous water leaks, which are occupational health and safety hazards.

Pearce said, "The nurses are continuing to assess and treat patients in the emergency department, but are not accepting any new admissions until the building defects are addressed satisfactorily."

Union inspectors and WorkCover officials arrived at the hospital on January 7.

### **PNG health workers protest**

Papua New Guinea Community Health Workers Association members implemented a six-day sit-in protest on January 1 before deciding this week to take future strike action. The health workers want outstanding 2006 entitlements to be paid by January 7.

Association general secretary James Amuna said "nothing positive" had come from the health department or treasury and that strike action was imminent.

Meanwhile, over 400 nurses and community health workers in the East Sepik province remain on strike after walking out last week over unpaid liabilities totalling 800,000 kina (\$US302,000).

East Sepik Nurses Association's industrial relations officer Moses Kapus said that all nurses and health workers from the district hospitals, health centres and aid posts withdrew their services because the provincial administration had failed to pay them their overtime, shift loading, risk and camping allowances since 1998.

The local media has been unable to secure any response from the East Sepik government over the dispute.

### **French Polynesian teachers quit**

One hundred and twenty public school teachers in French Polynesia resigned late last year in order to avoid pension cuts that will apply to those retiring from January 1, 2009. Strikes in October and November by thousands of public servants in French Polynesia and New Caledonia failed to stall French parliament legislation that cuts public service pensions in overseas territories.

Under a system introduced in 1952, retired public servants in the territories were entitled to a 75 percent top-up on their pensions to compensate for high consumer prices, which are often 300 percent higher than in France. The reform will reduce the amount of the top-up.

There has been no response from the French government to the mass resignations.



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