

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 protest job losses

On July 10, 1,000 workers from Wuhan Boiler Co. Ltd in Wuhan City, Hubei Province held a 12-hour protest on a major city road against a planned company restructure.

Wuhan Boiler is relocating to a new factory and plans to cut 1,300 jobs from its 2,300-strong workforce. Management told employees that they will be retrained “while awaiting job assignments” but workers fear that they will be sacked because the “training” is scheduled to finish at the end of the year, when their job contracts expire.

Indonesia: Striking Toshiba workers demonstrate

Around 200 striking workers from PT Toshiba Consumer Products Indonesia in Cikarang, West Java demonstrated outside the Bandung District Court on July 13 over company attempts to sack 675 workers for joining strike action on April 16. Toshiba employees struck after the company refused to recognise a collective labour agreement signed by the union and management.

Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia members are demanding that the company honours the labour agreement and registers it with the Indonesian government. The union also want 15 sacked union leaders at the plant be reinstated. Toshiba has locked out the workers and mounted a court case to sack them.

India: Maharashtra state teachers strike

Around 30,000 Maharashtra state college teachers launched indefinite strike action on July 14 demanding implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. The Maharashtra Federation of University and College Teachers Organisation is also protesting against plans to bring 10,000 teachers recruited between 1991 and 1999 into the NET/SET (national and state eligibility test) framework.

Teachers allege the eligibility examination that was made mandatory by the government in 1999 is denying placement benefits to senior teachers

with up to 18 years’ experience and keeping them on a lower pay scale. The teachers vowed to continue the strike until their demands are fulfilled.

India: Kendu leaf workers strike

Kendu leaf workers at the Forrest Department in Sambalpur, Orissa are maintaining strike action, after walking out on July 12 to demand a 40 percent wage rise for seasonal workers. Other demands include distribution of sleepers, mosquito nets, blankets and lanterns. Orissa Kendu Leaf Karmachari Sangha members are also protesting delays in the regularisation of various posts and the exclusion of seasonal workers from the welfare fund.

Kendu leaves are used for wrapping a cheap cigarette called Bidis, which are popular among the poor.

Orissa pharmaceutical retail workers demonstrate

Retail pharmaceutical workers marched through Berhampur, Orissa on July 8 and then rallied at the district labor office to demand an improved minimum daily wage, identity cards issued, provision for a provident fund facility, insurance coverage, overtime payments and a 150-rupee (\$US3) allowance for workers sent outside the city.

Berhampur Pharmaceutical Workers’ Union delegates allege that most of their members are being paid the official minimum daily wage. The pharmacy workers ended their rally after the Assistant Labor Commissioner told the union that his department would investigate the grievances and begin inspections of employers’ premises and wage registers.

Tamil Nadu: Protesting noon-meal workers arrested

Over 790 noon-meal employees were arrested by police in Krishnagiri and Dharmapuri districts on July 8 after they joined state-wide industrial action and protests called by the Tamil Nadu Noon Meal Employees’ Association. The workers are demanding regular employment, implementation of time scale pay and family pension benefits.

While the union members were later released, union president S. Sampathkumar said that the state’s 4,000 noon-meal organisers, cooks and assistants were paid only a portion of what regular government

employees are paid.

“We want this changed, so that the noon meal workers have some parity with government employees,” he said. Workers said they would continue the protests despite police harassment.

Sri Lankan road workers demand pay hike

Contract highway construction workers in southern Sri Lanka began a daily picket campaign on July 11 at work sites in Kahathuduwa, Paragastota and Kalutara along the Kottawa to Dodamgoda highway. The road workers are paid 350 rupees (\$US3) per day and are demanding a cost of living pay rise.

Sri Lankan Board of Investment employees protest

Sri Lankan Board of Investment (BoI) employees protested outside Lake House in Colombo on July 15 for a 20 percent salary increase, promotions and against government plans to transfer some of their work to the Customs Department. President of the Union for the Protection of the BOI, A.S. Subasinghe, said that some employees have not had a promotion for ten years while others have never had a pay increase.

Thailand garment workers demonstrate

About 500 laid-off employees from the Bang Phli factory of clothing manufacturer Body Fashion (Thailand) demonstrated outside the Board of Investment (BoI) office in Bangkok on July 13 to demand their jobs back. Some 1,950 Bang Phli workers are to be laid off. Body Fashion makes lingerie and swimwear under the Triumph brand.

Workers claim that the company accepted BoI incentives to relocate its factory to Nakhon Sawan where labour is only 180 baht (\$US5.30) per day per worker compared to the 333 baht paid at Bang Phli.

Newcastle train manufacturing workers walk out

Up to 200 United Group Rail Services employees in Newcastle walked off the job on July 15 in protest over the sacking of a fourth-year apprentice injured in a workplace accident. The company manufactures trains.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union organiser Daniel Wallace said the apprentice, Skii Webster, injured his back at work in 2006. Webster subsequently accepted a workers' compensation settlement to voluntarily terminate his apprenticeship and move to light duties in the company's store. Wallace said the company reneged on that arrangement and dismissed Webster on Tuesday.

An urgent hearing of the Fair Work Australia tribunal issued interim orders directing workers to suspend industrial action for 48 hours.

New South Wales energy workers begin industrial campaign

United Service Union (USU) members in the state-owned energy retail sector will begin an industrial campaign on July 20 to oppose the Labor government's plan to privatise Energy Australia, Integral Energy and Country Energy. From Monday, call centre operators will read a message to customers about workers privatisation concerns.

The government has assured workers who transfer to the new owners that their jobs will be secure for five years, and those who do not wish to transfer will be offered jobs in the state-owned transmission distribution sector. The union claims, however, that there are still no firm guarantees that workers' jobs will be protected or that prices will not skyrocket under privatisation. USU spokesman Scott McNamara said other industrial action is being planned.

NSW teachers threaten industrial action

NSW public school teachers have threatened to ban next year's student national assessment tests if the state government goes ahead and publishes school ranking information known as "league tables". The NSW Teachers Federation claims that publishing school rankings introduces "free market competition mechanisms", in which schools compete against each other for students, and destroys co-operation between schools and teachers.

NSW Teachers Federation president Bob Lipscombe said up to 70,000 members were prepared to strike next year if their demands are not met.

NSW teachers are also involved in a long-running dispute over a 21 percent pay and conditions agreement which was to have gone before the Industrial Relations Commission this week but has been put off for at least another fortnight.

South Australia Catholic school teachers threaten to strike

The Independent Education Union in South Australia, which covers 6,000 Catholic school teachers, has warned that if there was no "movement" on stalled negotiations for a new work agreement by July 17 it would apply to take sanctioned industrial action. Teachers want an 18 percent pay rise over three years and a benchmark top salary of at least \$75,000.

New Zealand tertiary education staff to hold stop-work meetings

Academic staff at six institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) will hold stop-work meetings later this month to discuss the institutes' demands for cuts to working conditions in a new work agreement. The Tertiary Education Union said proposed changes to hours of work and a reduction in discretionary leave would breach its "core working conditions on which its negotiating team does not bargain".

The ITPs have not yet made any wage offer as part of their multi-employer collective agreement. The union wants a 5 percent increase to salaries and allowances and a reduction in maximum teaching hours from 825 per year to 750. Other demands include greater protection for casual staff, including workers involved in organisational change or surplus

staffing reorganisations.

ITP institutions include Wintec, WITT, Unitec, Whitireia, NorthTec and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic.

New Zealand metal workers accept union deal

Around 2,000 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union members this week ratified a multi-employer collective agreement negotiated between the union and 150 employers in the metal and manufacturing industry. However, the agreement represents an effective wage cut and prepares for job losses. It raises wages by 2 percent (well below the annual cost of living increase which stands at 3 percent), and provides for six weeks' redundancy compensation.

The MECA is the EPMU's largest agreement and considered a national trend-setter for wages and conditions.

Solomon Islands public servants strike enters fourth week

Public sector workers in the Solomon Islands' Western Province are maintaining strike action begun on June 24. The strikers—including hospital, education, police, correctional service, customs, forestry, lands, and agriculture workers—are demanding compensation from the region's government for properties lost and damaged in the April 2007 earthquake and tsunami.

Samson Maena, speaking for 200 striking employees at the Gizo Hospital, complained that the Western Province government paid \$20,000 compensation to members of the provincial assembly and support staff, but health workers had received no humanitarian assistance. The government told workers last week that a paper was being prepared for Cabinet to deliberate on the issue.



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