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.*

Asia

Thai garment workers rally against sackings

About 300 former Body Fashion (Thailand) factory workers rallied outside Government House in Bangkok on August 6 to protest mass sackings. More than 1,950 workers are to be dismissed from the company's Bang Phli plant in Samut Prakarn on August 31. Body Fashion is a subsidiary of giant lingerie company Triumph International, headquartered in Switzerland. The sackings are part of the parent company's plan to eliminate over 3,700 jobs from plants in Thailand and the Philippines.

A union spokesman claimed that Body Fashion was using the excuse of financial difficulties to relocate production to sites with lower labour costs and non-union labour. He said workers decided to protest on the same day that Thailand's prime minister had scheduled a press conference about the government's "achievements", after six months in office. "We wanted to show that workers were still being laid off, contrary to the PM's claims," he said.

Indian bank workers' strike hits operations nationwide

Indian bank workers went on strike for two days on August 6 after the collapse of talks between the United Forum of Bank Unions and the Indian Banks Association (IBA) over salaries and benefits. The IBA rejected the workers' claim for a 20 percent pay rise.

The union estimates that one million employees participated in the strike, which affected tens of thousands of private and state-run banks across the country. The walkout impacted on bulk cash withdrawals, money market transactions, forex operations, letter of credit, cheque clearances, loan sanctions, retail transactions and ATM operations. State-run banks account for over 70 percent of the country's banking operations.

Union officials arrested in Mumbai teachers' strike

A month-long strike by thousands of Mumbai teachers over pay and conditions is continuing. This week police arrested officials of the Maharashtra Federation of University and College Teachers' Organisations who are coordinating the strike. Teachers are demanding their immediate release.

Mumbai teachers walked out on July 14 demanding implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. They also want an end to discrimination against 10,000 union members who are being denied placement benefits because they have not passed a state eligibility test. The test only became mandatory in 1999 and teachers with 18 years' experience are being denied benefits and remain on a lower pay scale. College principals from across the city are now planning a one-day protest in support of the teachers.

Cargo workers demand higher pay for back-breaking work

Manual cargo handlers at the Regulated Marketing Committee (RMC) in Yeshwantapur, Karnataka, protested on August 10 over poor pay rates for carrying potatoes, onions and other heavy agricultural goods.

A leading spokesman for the APMC Yard Loading and Unloading Labor Union told the media that the workers were only paid 1.90 rupees (US0.03) for loading or unloading the 50- kilogram sacks of produce. The RMC charges the farmers 4 rupees per sack. The cargo workers also want the introduction of fixed salaries, bonuses and working hours.

Indian transport workers demand wage increase

Bus workers in Kadapa, Andhra Pradesh protested outside Road Transport Corporation (RTC) district depots on August 10. They want improved wages for contract workers, benefits on par with regular staff, and permanency. The protest was called by the Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) National Mazdoor Union (NMU).

Indian power workers strike for pay parity

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Indefinite strike action by employees of the Puducherry Power Corporation Limited (PPCL) has now entered its second week. The workers walked out on August 3 to demand pay parity for C- division PPCL technical staff with their Department of Electricity counterparts.

The strike has disrupted annual maintenance work at the main power plant. The Karaikal region, which receives most of its power from the plant, is now sourcing electricity from the Tamil Nadu state grid.

Construction workers rally in support of Ark Tribe

Hundreds of building workers rallied outside the Elizabeth Magistrates Court in North Adelaide on August 11 in support of rigger Ark Tribe. The construction worker is facing up to six months' jail or a $22,000 fine for refusing to give evidence at an Australian Building Construction Commission (ABCC) hearing in 2008.

The ABCC can impose heavy fines on construction workers for taking on what it defines as "illegal" industrial action, force witnesses into compulsory closed-door interrogations and compel them to give information under threat of a six month jail sentence.

Tribe is a member of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) and was charged for refusing to give evidence about workers who had raised concerns about safety on the Flinders University building site. The case is now being relocated to the Adelaide Magistrates' Court for a pre-trial conference.

Australian technical teachers threatening further strike action

Stop-work meetings on August 11 of New South Wales technical college (TAFE) teachers overwhelmingly voted for a 24-hour strike at the end of the month.

The industrial action is over state government demands for massive trade offs in exchange for a 12.5 percent pay increase over three years. The government has imposed a 2.5 percent cap on public-sector salary increases. Anything above that amount must be offset with concessions.

Teachers Federation president Bob Lipscomb said this week that the government demands were a "grab for cash from the TAFE system". Teaching-hour changes being demanded by the government involve a 57-hour annual increase for head teachers, permanent and temporary teachers.

Geelong council forced to reinstate sacked workers

A protracted campaign by fellow workers and supporters has forced the Geelong Council to reinstate two employees it sacked last month. Two hundred workers from the council's parks, gardens and road network departments walked out for 24 hours this week and picketed council premises to reinstate the victimised workers.

Mick Van Beek and Peter Anderson were dismissed last month after they used waste asphalt to fill in two dangerous pot holes in Leopold Sportsman Club car park and accepted steak sandwiches from the club's manager. The incident occurred eight months ago.

Western Australian construction workers ordered to end strike

On August 11, striking employees of construction contractors, Modern Industries and United Industries, at Bluewaters Power Station in Western Australia, ended industrial action after a "return to work" order was issued by the industrial court.

Members of the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU), Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) walked off the job on August 6 to demand one paid week in lieu before their current contract finishes. This amount is already been granted to Hitachi Plant Technologies workers—the largest employer at the site. Workers claim that this payment is an industry standard even though work is not performed in the final week.

About 800 workers are employed on the Bluewaters project by several different construction companies. Union officials told the striking workers that they faced individual fines of $6,000 if they continued their strike action. According to one media report one angry striker told a union representative that going back to work was "bulls**t" and "it's about time we stood up to them [the company]."

New Zealand telecommunication engineers strike for job security

Around 900 line engineers employed by Telecom NZ contractors Downer EDi and Transfield Services went on strike for two days this week as part of an ongoing campaign over job security. Hundreds of workers marched on the Telecom building in Christchurch and the company's headquarters in Auckland.

The workers are opposed to a planned restructure under which new contractor Visionstream will force 900 engineers in the Auckland and Northland regions to become owner-operators or lose their jobs. Telecom NZ has not offered redundancy to engineers who are unwilling to transfer to Visionstream.

The Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union representing the engineers claims that as owner-operators engineers will pay up to $60,000 to buy their own vans and tools. They will also be required to cover their vehicle insurance and repair costs. The union estimates that under the Visionstream's dependent contractor model engineers' incomes would fall by between 50 and 66 percent.

Union signs deal with Air Caledonie

The Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) in New Caledonia signed a draft agreement with airline AirCal on August 6 ending a long-running dispute. The agreement came a few hours after the French government announced it would send more riot police to the territory to be used against thousands of picketing workers.

The deal purportedly settles workers' demands for pay for the time they were on strike over the sacking of an AirCal employee. It fails, however, to address the issue of the imprisonment of six USTKE officials last month that sparked protests leading to clashes with police and security forces across the territory.

Charges against the six men relate to an occupation of Noumea airport

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and the alleged boarding of an AirCal aircraft on May 28. Union leader Gerard Jodar and one other official were sentenced to 12 month jail terms while four other officials received terms of between four and ten months. Eighteen other union members received four month suspended jail terms.

Police have arrested 13 other workers involved in the protests this month. A spokesman for USTKE says the union will continue to protest the sentences and that a demonstration against police repression is planned for August 22.

Unions in French Polynesia threaten general strike

Unions in French Polynesia have threatened to call a general strike before the end of the month against the territory's high cost of living. Union leaders claim that the government of President Oscar Temaru provided $US8 million to bail out employers after they protested and set up road blocks in the capital Papeete last week but refuses to provide any relief to ordinary working people hit by the rising price of essential goods and services.

Solomon Island teachers demand pay increase

The Solomon Islands National Teachers Association (SINTA) is threatening to strike if the government refuses to increase pay. The union has lodged a claim for a 7.5 percent pay rise claiming the government only gave teachers 5 percent of a promised 12.5 percent increase two years ago.

The teachers also want an 18.01 percent cost-of-living increase to cover rises from July 2008 to June this year. The union claims it has been prompted to push for pay by the recent increase in entitlements paid to parliamentarians. Teachers had initially voted to strike before the end of the week, but SINTA withdrew the strike notice after the government offered talks over the issue.

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