

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 August 2009

*The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.*

## Bangladeshi garment workers protest shooting

Hundreds of Envoy Garments workers in the Ashulia industrial belt began strike action on August 16 over pay and to protest against the killing of a fellow worker, Al-Amin, 20, by Ansars (police volunteers) who opened fire on a rally the previous day. Workers staged demonstrations, blocked the Ashulia-Tongi Road and chanted slogans that condemned the killing. Their demands included increased Eid bonuses and extensions of the Eid holidays.

By the second day of the strike, over 50 workers were reported injured by the large contingents of police and the Rapid Action Battalion rushed to the industrial estate. As many as 50 surrounding factories closed after thousands of their workers walked off the job and surrounded the striking workers in an attempt to protect them from the police.

At the end of the second day workers said they would remain on strike until their 10-point demands were met.

## Retrenched Mongla Port workers demonstrate

Over 1,000 former workers retrenched from Mongla Port, Bangladesh due to new labour laws enacted in 2008, began a non-stop sit-in protest on August 17 at the port's Call Station Square, demanding the reintroduction of the call station booking system and payment of arrears.

Other demands include payment of the 8.8 million taka (\$US128,000) in total owed to them by the Stevedores Association, payment of due death allowances and payment of termination benefits promised to 741 workers in 2005.

The Mongla Port Shipping Workers Association members were all formerly employed at the port through the Stevedores Association. As the Labour (Amendment) Ordinance 2008 was enforced, the Stevedores Association call station booking system was abolished, causing 1,016 workers to lose their jobs, including assistant supervisors, paper workers, cargo inspectors, tally checkers, deck foremen, tally clerks and hatch foremen.

## Korea: Kia auto union suspends strike

The labour union at Kia Motors, South Korea's second largest carmaker, has threatened to resume strike action due to the failure of wage negotiations last week. On August 12, the union called off an eight-hour strike after four hours to facilitate emergency talks requested by the company but the two parties failed to reach an agreement.

The union is demanding that Kia raise its base monthly salary by 5.5 percent and offer a 200 percent bonus. Management, however, is pushing for a wage freeze, citing unfavourable market conditions amid the global economic crisis.

## Nokia India workers on strike

Around 8,000 Nokia employees in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu are maintaining a strike launched on August 13 to demand an across-the-board 1,500 rupee (\$US31) monthly salary increase. Workers earlier rejected Nokia's offer of salary increases ranging from 800 to 1,200 rupees based on years of employment.

Workers at the Sriperumbudur factory are paid monthly salaries ranging from 3,500 rupees to 4,900. In 2008 the factory increased salaries by just 500 rupees. The factory started operations in 2006 and runs three shifts, churning out 600 mobile phones per minute that sell for between 1,000 rupees and 20,000 rupees.

## Indian cooperative bank employees stage protest

Employees of urban cooperative banks in the Thanjavur, Tiruvarur and Nagapattinam districts of Tamil Nadu staged a demonstration in Thanjavur on August 18, demanding payment of arrears from a wage increase. Other demands include the filling of vacancies, promotions and improved facilities for staff and consumers. The Thanjavur district urban bank employees association organised the action.

## Kolkata railway contract workers arrested

Five leaders of striking Metro Railway workers in Kolkata, India were detained for 24 hours by the Railway Police Force on August 18 during a

demonstration over pay. Workers, employed by various contractors for maintenance and operational activities at metropolitan stations, blockaded the tracks at Esplanade station, affecting the movement of trains. Their demands include a pay increase and permanent jobs.

### **Andhra Pradesh medical staff protest over pay**

Doctors, nurses and other employees of India's Rajiv Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ongole, Andhra Pradesh staged a protest at the hospital on August 17, demanding payment of salaries held up for the past 10 months. Some activities at the hospital were suspended while employees submitted a memorandum to the RIMS director.

The Joint Action Committee claimed the nonpayment of salaries affected some 140 regular employees and 100 contract staff, including doctors, nurses, paramedical staff, fourth class workers and security guards. Some have not been paid salaries since last October.

The treasury department is refusing to pay the salaries, claiming the positions were not properly documented and approved by treasury when the employees were transferred from the Vaidya Vidhana Parishad (Health, Medical and Family Welfare Department) to RIMS.

### **Sri Lankan power workers begin industrial action**

Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) employees have launched a countrywide picketing campaign in front of their offices in provincial cities in preparation for a scheduled countrywide strike on August 28. Picketing began in Galle city on August 12 and in Anuradhapura city on August 18.

CEB workers are demanding a salary increase in accordance with their collective agreement, signed with management three years ago. Other demands include improved Employees Provident Fund benefits, restoration of workers' rights and the abolition of the Electricity Act, which provides for the CEB's privatisation.

### **Queensland sugar mill workers strike**

Mill workers at Bundaberg Sugar's three mills on Queensland's Fraser Coast struck for 24 hours on August 20 and began a seven-day overtime ban. The Australian Workers Union, Electrical Trades Union and Australian Metal Workers Union have been deadlocked in negotiations since April over a new work agreement covering the company's 250 mill workers.

Bundaberg Sugar—Queensland's largest cane grower—offered a 3.5 percent annual pay increase for two years, but it was conditional on buying out one week of annual leave.

The company made a revised offer several hours into the strike but workers rejected it. Management proposed that workers could keep the leave in question if they agreed to work extra hours during the non-crush season and forgo some rostered days off.

### **Queensland engineering workers maintain industrial action**

Around 250 employees at the Karribin site (near Brisbane) of steel products manufacturer Bradken Engineering have implemented an overtime ban after striking for 48 hours from August 14 in a bid to increase the company's wage offer.

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members want a 3.9 percent wage increase and a 12-month agreement. They were offered a paltry 1.8 percent increase over 12 months after the company posted record profits and a net profit increase of 11 percent.

Negotiations for a new agreement started in April, with the company demanding a wage freeze and changes to rostered days off. Negotiations are continuing and workers have planned to meet to decide on further action.

### **New South Wales local council staff walk out**

About 1,200 Blacktown City Council employees, including parking officers, maintenance workers and administration staff, walked off the job on August 19 to protest stalled negotiations for a new work agreement. United Services Union spokesman Steve Donley said the council had been using stalling tactics since talks began in November. The union said that of the 40 items in its log of claims, only five were close to agreement.

### **New Zealand telecommunication workers implement work bans**

Line engineers employed by Telecom NZ subsidiaries Transfield and Downer Edi have imposed an indefinite work ban on Telecom NZ's broadband internet network. The ban follows nationwide strikes and protests against a planned restructure under which new contractor Visionstream will take over work currently contracted to Transfield and Downer. 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 estimates that under the Visionstream's sub-contractor model, engineers' incomes will fall by between 50 and 66 percent. As owner-operators, engineers will pay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools, plus cover vehicle operating costs.

### **NZ postal workers start industrial action**

Christchurch- and Wellington-based workers at state-owned Express Couriers Limited (ECL)—NZ Post's largest courier and logistics subsidiary—have begun working to rule after negotiations broke down for a new collective agreement covering processing, admin and finance employees. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union, which represents over 800 ECL workers, says the company has not met any of its claims.

The union rejected the company's offer, which ECL chief executive Mark Gibson claimed to be "fair in light of the current economic conditions". Neither party has reported details of the rejected offer.

### **Tertiary education staff to vote on industrial action**

Teaching staff at six institutes of technology and polytechs (ITPs) in New Zealand plan to meet over the next two weeks to vote on whether to take industrial action over a proposed multi-employer collective agreement. The Tertiary Education Union has rejected an ITPs offer that includes a pay increase of just 1 percent over two years and would increase annual teaching days from 185 to 204. The ITPs also want to change rules governing discretionary leave, making it at the employer's discretion rather than the worker's.

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. The ITP institutions involved are Wintec, WITT, Unitec, Whitireia, NorthTec and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic.

### **NZ port workers vote against restructure**

Around 200 Port Otago workers, members of the Maritime Union and the Rail and Maritime Transport Union, voted last week to reject a restructuring proposal that would lead to redundancies and reduced working, health and safety conditions. The unions have not announced industrial action over the dispute.



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