

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.

Korean tire workers end industrial action

Over 4,000 employees at Kumho Tire Co., Korea's second-largest tire maker, ended their strike on September 5 after agreeing to a union compromise with the company over wages and layoffs.

The union had been in dispute with Kumho for two months after management rejected demands for a 7.8 percent pay increase in addition to bonuses. Management wanted to cut 733 jobs, maintain a wage freeze, which the union agreed to in 2008, and introduce job-sharing through cuts to working hours.

Kumho locked workers at its three factories in Gwangju, Gokseong and Pyeongtaek on August 25, after members of the Kumho Tire Workers' Union-Korean Metal Workers' Union (KMWU) began rolling strike action in support of their demands.

The union, however, has accepted Kumho's demands to extend the 2008 wage freeze through 2009 and to forego scheduled 2008 bonuses, with talks over 2009 bonus schemes to be put off until the first quarter of 2010. In return, Kumho agreed to drop its plan to retrench workers but will not pay employees during strikes.

The dispute resolution mirrored the failure of the KCTU and KMTU to protect workers' wages and conditions in the recent Ssangyong Motors struggle. Some 75 percent of KMWU members at Ssangyong this week voted to end their union's affiliation with the KCTU, an attempt by the KMWU leadership to shift the blame for the defeat of the Ssangyong workers onto the KCTU. Hundreds of Ssangyong workers' jobs were axed and union members now face hundreds of individual lawsuits from the auto company.

Korean train drivers strike

Around 2,500 locomotive drivers of the Korea Railroad Union in

Daejeon (on a major rail link 160 km south of Seoul) walked out for 24 hours on September 8 in protest over wages. The union, which represents half of the 5,000 locomotive drivers employed by South Korea's railway monopoly, Korean Railroad, is demanding management resume stalled wage negotiations.

Bangladeshi garment workers walk out over salaries and bonuses

Thousands of garment workers across Bangladesh have begun demonstrations in Dhaka and other cities to demand unpaid wages and that Eid religious festival bonuses are paid before September 16.

Garment workers formed a human chain outside the National Press Club in Dhaka on September 6 and on the following day several hundred Salna Tex Garments employees in Gazipur walked off the job demanding unpaid wages from August and September, along with Eid bonuses. Management ignored the workers' demands and then deployed police.

Some garment factory owners who have not paid wages on time have closed their factories and gone into hiding, anticipating increasing protests by workers on the eve of the Eid festival.

Since the global financial crisis took effect, over 100 Bangladeshi garment factories have closed with the loss of 50,000 jobs. Factory owners have been delaying the payment of workers' entitlements, waiting for an "incentive package" from the government.

Jet Airways pilots on strike

Nearly 400 pilots from Jet Airways, India's largest private airline, took "sick leave" on September 7. The strike led to the cancellation of 129 flights and affected around 20,000 passengers. The National Aviators Guild (NAG) members are demanding reinstatement of two senior pilots dismissed after registering the newly formed NAG in July.

Home Secretary G.K. Pillai has directed all state governments to use the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) to ban the strike, meaning the pilots could be arrested or sacked. Meanwhile, the Bombay High Court has issued a contempt notice to the union for ignoring an earlier

return to work order. The airline has taken disciplinary action against eight pilots since the strike began.

Nepal nurses on strike

Nepal Nursing Union (NNU) members in government hospitals and health posts began an indefinite strike on September 3 to demand implementation of a six-point deal signed with the government and the reinstatement of two sacked union delegates. Only emergency services are being maintained.

Demands include a monthly salary increase, job permanency, amendment of nursing policy, additional facilities and improved working environment, adequate health check-up infrastructure, and an end to political intervention in the hospitals.

The NNU has threatened the strike action will continue until the two delegates are reinstated. Of the 26,000 nurses affiliated to the NNU, 3,500 work in the government sector.

Indian public sector workers on strike

Public sector workers in Meghalaya launched a 48-hour strike on September 7 for implementation of the Fourth Pay Commission increases with retrospective effect from January 2006. Various government departments were affected by the walkout.

All Meghalaya Grade IV Government Employees Association president Odman Nongphlang said workers have rejected the new pay scale approved by cabinet, which is only retrospective from January 1, 2007.

“If required we will go for indefinite strike,” Nongphlang said, but the Meghalaya Chief Minister has threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act, which would make an indefinite strike illegal.

Vietnamese processing workers walk out

More than 1,000 Rattan Processing and Export Company (Rapexco) employees in Nha Trang, Khanh Hoa province walked off the job without warning on September 7 after years of waiting for their social insurance contributions to be confirmed.

The director of Rapexco—which has 2,400 workers on the payroll—said the delay had led the workers to suspect that the company was stealing their payments instead of forwarding the money to the Khanh Hoa Social Insurance Agency. The agency claimed it has only two workers to process the registration of 620,000 contributors.

The Khanh Hoa Labor Union convinced its members to return to work after giving the insurer and Rapexco two days to provide a list of workers who had paid their insurance premiums.

New South Wales university staff strike

Academics and some general staff at universities in Armidale, Wagga, Bathurst and Albury struck for 24 hours on September 9 for a new workplace agreement. National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) industrial officer Mark Dolahenty at the University of New England said the stoppage came after 14 months of failed negotiation to secure more manageable workloads and a 16 percent pay rise over four years.

NTEU members in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria voted for strike action last week for new workplace agreements covering 30 universities. The NTEU wants annual pay rises of between 4 and 6 percent, stricter workload regulation, restoration of union rights and limits on the use of fixed contracts. The union is planning a 24-hour national strike on September 16.

Hunter Valley miners out over new agreement

More than 100 miners employed by Xstrata Coal at its United Collieries in the Hunter Valley, NSW began a four-day strike on September 10 for a job security clause in their new enterprise agreement (EA).

Mining operations at the colliery have begun to wind down and will cease early next year, axing up to 110 jobs. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) wants a clause in their new EA that will guarantee sacked workers are re-employed should the company resume mining operations on the same lease in 2012 as planned by the company.

Xstrata had promised to redeploy workers to its 14 other coal mines in the Hunter Valley, but CFMEU spokesman Robin Williams said to date, no retrenched worker at United Colliery has been offered a transfer. Xstrata also plans to slash up to 122 jobs at its Ulan mine, northwest of Mudgee. The CFMEU and Xstrata are due to resume negotiations next week.

New South Wales nurses rally over aged care privatisation

Around 30 staff and residents' families from Wallsend Aged Care Facility in Newcastle, NSW rallied outside state parliament on September 9 in protest against state government plans to privatise the 11 remaining

state-run nursing homes. A petition with 10,000 signatures opposing the sell-off was presented to parliament.

Nurses say Wallsend is a special needs facility, housing old and young people with a higher staff ratio than privately run facilities. They are worried staff numbers will fall if Wallsend is sold off, affecting the level of care.

Nurses and residents refuse to accept the state government's pledge that "new operators must meet its high standards and if they cannot, the facilities will remain in public hands."

University of Melbourne staff strike

Nearly 200 staff from the University of Melbourne walked off the job on September 7 to oppose the university's plan to axe 220 positions. The university claims that the cuts are to cover a \$30 million funding gap due to the financial economic crisis. About 100 NTEU members rallied outside the Old Arts building, where a university council meeting was underway.

Queensland bus drivers stop work

About 100 bus drivers employed by Brisbane City Council stopped work on September 7 after discovering sewage from portable toilets near Bowen Hill bus depot's lunch room, for the second time in as many months. The dispute was exacerbated when the council refused to acknowledge that the issue was a risk to workplace health and safety and refused to pay for driver downtime caused by the sewage spill.

When drivers at other bus depots threatened to strike in solidarity the council agreed to pay for downtime and for the portable toilets to be moved.

Telecom New Zealand engineers industrial action in third week

Around 700 lines engineers employed by Telecom NZ subsidiaries Transfield Services and Downer EDI in Auckland and Northland are maintaining industrial action begun on August 24 over Telecom's plan to contract their work out to Visionstream. Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members in Auckland began picketing the North Shore telephone exchange this week and are continuing with work bans. Northland members remain on strike.

In a move designed to break the strike, Telecom NZ last week began transferring work to Visionstream one month before the contract is due to start. Visionstream claims it has already recruited enough engineers as

owner-operators for installing and repairing Chorus's phone and broadband connections in Auckland, Northland and Waitakere. It has given the engineers until the end of the week to sign up as owner-operator contractors or lose their jobs.

EPMU members are opposed to Visionstream's sub-contracting model, which the union claims will lower their income by 50 and 66 percent and force them to pay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools, plus cover vehicle operating costs. The union claims the industrial action is resulting in phone and internet outages in Northland and delays up to three weeks for 118 unfixed fault repairs and new broadband connections in Auckland.

New Zealand fire fighters to strike

Auckland Firefighters Union president Jeff McCulloh has warned that members would strike and picket a September 11 opening ceremony of the new \$4.9 million Mt. Roskill fire station over stalled pay talks since January and other issues. Further strike action is planned for September 17 and 24.

Firefighters are complaining that staff and work hour pledges made by the previous New Zealand government have been dropped by the Key government. Of major concern is the Fire Service reneging on promises to increase staffing for the soon-to-be-built Te Atatu station, relocation of Ponsonby fire station, and the 24/7 manning of Silverdale station.

According to the union, there are less firefighters on duty in Auckland now with a population of 1.5 million than there were in the mid 1970s when the population was around 750,000.

New Zealand dairy workers to strike

More than 7,000 members of the New Zealand Dairy Workers' Union (NZDWU) at Waharoa Open Country Cheese in Waikato have voted for strike action claiming the parent company, Open Country Dairy Limited, is refusing to negotiate a "fair" collective agreement.

The NZDWU (Te Runanga Wai U) members plan to strike for eight days from September 16—the first time in 20 years. The union has begun back pedalling, however, and dropped a demand for an across-the-board wage increase and will settle on improved conditions around restructuring and protecting hours of work.

The union claims that Open Country Cheese, New Zealand's second biggest dairy processor, had set up a "sham employment agency" to establish a number of on-call and temporary staff to undermine union negotiations. Negotiations between union officials and the company were to commence this week.

Tertiary education teachers vote for strike

Teaching staff at six institutes of technology and polytechs (ITPs) in New Zealand this week voted overwhelmingly (98 percent) for industrial action over a proposed multi-employer collective agreement. Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members at NorthTec, Waikato Institute of Technology, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, Whitireia Polytechnic, Western Institute of Technology and Unitec rejected the ITPs' offer, which 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.

The union has offered a counter proposal and given the ITPs until September 14 to respond.

The TEU's original demands were for a 5 percent increase in salaries and allowances and a reduction in maximum teaching hours from 825 per year to 750. Other demands are for greater protection for casual staff, including workers involved in organisational change or surplus staffing reorganisations.

Auckland bus drivers' strike called off

A planned strike this week by NZ Bus drivers has been called off by the Auckland Combined Unions who went into "mediation" on September 8 for a new collective agreement. NZ Bus had planned a lock-out, pulling 700 buses off the road if the strike proceeded.

The unions have rejected a company offer of 9.9 percent over three years, demanding a 12.6 percent increase over three years. Drivers have planned a stop-work meeting to vote on an amended company offer.



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