

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 coal miners on strike

Up to 5,000 coal miners at four state-owned mines in Hunan province remain on strike. They struck indefinitely on August 22 and occupied the mines to fight the imposition of new work contracts because of privatisation.

The mines belong to Jinzhushan Mining Industry, which is part of the Hunan Coal Group (Xiang Mei Ji Tuan, XMJT). The strike was triggered by XMJT's plan to list on the stock market, requiring Jinzhushan to convert into a privately owned company.

Strike action was triggered when Jinzhushan management refused to allow workers into the mines until they signed new contracts which cancelled their termination entitlements. Under their current contracts, terminated workers are entitled to four weeks' pay for each year of employment. Some workers have been employed at the mines for 30 years.

Workers accused the company of forming a "mine protection brigade" using company thugs hired for 200 yuan (\$US29) each per day to force them off the premises. Government authorities declared the strike illegal and threatened to arrest workers if they refuse to return to work.

Bangladeshi coal miners strike

At least 1,000 miners at the Barapukuria Coal Mining Company Ltd (BCMCL) began an indefinite strike on September 11 with 14 demands that include festival bonuses, full salary compensation for injured miners and reinstatement of miners who were fired after an industrial dispute in May. Workers also want a round-the-clock doctor and ambulance facilities established at the mine. Striking workers alleged that the authorities have breached pledges they made last May.

The miners have blockaded the mine, preventing the transport of coal by the China National Machinery Import and Export Corporation, which started to extract coal during the strike.

BCMCL is a subsidiary of state-owned Petrobangla. It pays salaries of 4,500 taka (\$US65) to 7,200 taka per month to underground miners working eight-hour shifts.

Indian police attack daily-wage workers

On September 16, Karnataka police in Gulbarga, Tumkur, Belgaum, Udupi and Mangalore intervened in protest rallies by thousands of daily-wage workers who are seeking increases in the minimum wage and job regularisation.

Police in Gulbarga baton-charged demonstrators who were picketing the Vikasa Soudha complex. Over 300 people were arrested and many were injured, some beaten to unconsciousness. Police were seen dragging women protesters into waiting police vans during the three-hour demonstration.

In Tumkur, police arrested 2,000 workers picketing the Deputy Commissioner's building. In Mangalore, 831 workers, mainly women, were arrested and in Udupi there were arrests of a large number of women protesters.

Karnataka has around 15 million daily-wage workers in the unorganised sector that includes child care centres, Agricultural Produce Marketing Committees, government-owned food grain warehouses, beedi (cigarette)-making factories, construction projects, the goods transport sector, village councils, farmlands and the school midday meal scheme.

Workers are also demanding government-supplied houses near their place of work, an increase in the number of days of guaranteed employment a year from 100 to 200, and retirement benefits for child care workers.

Exide Battery workers strike in West Bengal

Casual contractual employees of Exide Industries in Haldia, West Bengal held a 24-hour strike on September 15, demanding a 300 percent salary increase. The 1,100 casual workers in Exide's Haldia unit are paid only 4,200 rupees a month while permanent workers, who do the same work, get 18,000 rupees. The union has demanded just 12,000 rupees for casual workers.

Electricians in Tamil Nadu strike

At least 5,000 employees of the state-run Bharat Heavy Electricals (BHEL) facility in Tiruchi, Tamil Nadu struck for 24 hours on September 14, protesting the delay in a wage revision due since 2007. Company sources said only 1,100 workers and employees reported for work for the general shift, compared to the normal attendance of 6,000 plus.

Indian postal workers protest

More than 300,000 Gramin Dak Sewaks (GDS) postal employees began a three-day relay sit-down protest (dharna) in front of the Postal Superintendent's office in Kollam, Kerala on September 14, demanding improvements in working conditions and their salary structure.

According to the workers, a salary revision was submitted to the national government many months ago, but nothing has happened.

Sri Lankan workers picket for wages

National Water Supplies and Drainage Board workers held a picket line in front of their head office in Ratmalana, Colombo on September 9 to demand a scheduled salary increase, distress loans and promotions. Twelve trade unions were involved.

On the same day in Colombo, Peoples Bank of Sri Lanka employees held a picket line in their lunch hour, also demanding the expedition of the salary increase scheduled for this year.

Sri Lankan health workers on fasting campaign

Trincomalee Hospital workers in eastern Sri Lanka began a fasting campaign in front of the Provincial Health Department on September 14, demanding permanent appointments for colleagues who had completed seven years' employment.

Hong Kong maids protest wage freeze

More than 200 Filipino and Asian domestic helpers marched to the Hong Kong Central Government Office last week to protest the government's decision to peg the minimum allowable wage of foreign maids at \$3,580 (\$US468) a month. The average monthly wage rate for most miscellaneous non-production workers in Hong Kong is \$11,712.

The maids, who included Filipinos, Thais, Nepalese and Sri Lankans, chanted slogans, raised placards and unfurled streamers denouncing the wage freeze. Asian Migrants Coordinating Body spokesman Eman Villanueva said wages for foreign domestic helpers were "lower than a decade ago".

A bill was introduced into the Hong Kong parliament in July proposing a "Statutory Minimum Wage" but it excludes foreign domestic workers.

Philippine Airlines employees protest job cuts

PAL Employees Association (Palea) members at Philippine Airlines (PAL) held a noontime protest at the PAL In Flight Center, Paranaque city on September 14 over the airline's plan to slash over 2,000 jobs from its 8,000-plus workforce. Almost half of PAL's employees in catering, passenger handling, ramp handling, and cargo handling operations will be offered early retirement beginning on November 15.

PAL claims the job cuts are part of a restructure forced on it after posting \$US301.4 million in losses. The union has accused PAL of secretly planning to outsource work to non-unionised companies, as it did 10 years ago. Further demonstrations are planned.

Filipino garment workers strike

About 100 employees at the Alta Mode garments factory in the Mactan Export Processing Zone, Cebu held a sit-down protest last week against union members being forced to take leave. The Alta Mode Workers Union has proposed rotation among workers to share the reduced workload, financial assistance for workers who cannot be absorbed through rotation, and a definite cut-off date for the forced leave and reduced workdays.

The union has filed a notice of strike on the basis of union busting and unfair labour practices.

Food packaging workers in Melbourne locked out

About 100 employees of Visy Food Packaging in Melbourne were locked out for three days from September 14 after implementing work bans and one-hour strikes at the end of each shift in a dispute involving casualisation and a new enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA). The EBA expired on June 30 and negotiations had been continuing since November.

According to a union delegate on site, the company brought in “hired goons” to “personally target people and escort them off the site”. Visy has refused to make any comment to the media. The terms on which the lockout ended are not yet known. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) has sought a 5 percent pay rise and assurances about casual labour, shift structures, accrued entitlements and safety issues.

Campbell’s Soups lock-out ends in compromise

On September 16, 150 locked out workers at Campbell’s Soups’ food processing plant in Shepparton, central Victoria returned to work after a deal was struck between the AMWU and management. The workers had been locked out of the factory for five days after implementing industrial action over plans by management to insert a “flexibility clause” into their enterprise agreement.

The union claimed that the clause—a model clause introduced under the federal government’s Fair Work Australia Act—represented a return to individual bargaining that could push the union out of the negotiating process. The clause would have allowed Campbell’s to unilaterally approach individual workers and demand changes to key terms of employment such as working hours, overtime and penalty rates. The AMWU wants to use its own preferred “flexibility” clause that maintains union involvement in any such agreement.

Hunter Valley miners end strike without resolution

Around 100 miners employed by Xstrata Coal at its United Collieries in the Hunter Valley, NSW returned to work on September 13, ending a four-day strike aimed at getting a job security clause in a new enterprise agreement (EA). The miners also want pay rates on par with other mines in the area, redundancy payments and transparent bonuses.

Mining operations at the colliery have begun to wind down and will cease early next year, axing up to 110 jobs. Instead of fighting the job destruction, the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union wants a clause in the EA that will supposedly guarantee that sacked workers are re-employed if the company resumes mining at the site.

New Zealand dairy workers locked out

Open Country Dairy Limited imposed a six-week lockout on 40 employees at its Waharoa Open Country Cheese factory in Waikato after they began industrial action on September 16 for a new work agreement. The company—New Zealand’s second largest dairy producer—is using administrative staff, company directors and farmers in an attempt to keep the factory running.

The New Zealand Dairy Workers Union (NZDWU) has accused the company of not negotiating in good faith. The union has already dropped its original demand for an across-the board wage increase. The NZDWU has not mobilised its 7,000 members to support the Waikato workers and instead has rushed to the courts to challenge the legality of bringing in volunteers to break the strike.

Telecom NZ engineers’ dispute continues

Some 200 telecommunications engineers employed by Telecom NZ’s contractors, Downer EDI and Transfield, have been made redundant and another 400 have said they will resign next Monday rather than transfer to Telecom’s new contractor Visionstream. The Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members are opposed to Visionstream’s sub-contracting model that will force them to pay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools, plus cover vehicle operating costs.

The union claims that industrial action begun in August over the issue has resulted in phone and internet outages in Northland and delays of up to three weeks for 118 unfixed fault repairs and new broadband connections in Auckland.

The EPMU has 45,000 members and represents nearly 1,000 Telecom lines engineers but has made no attempt to initiate a national campaign of industrial action in support of its 600 Auckland and Northlands members. Instead, its only alternative for engineers has been to run a “solidarity” campaign to gain “moral support” from the public in an attempt to pressure Telecom and Visionstream to begin negotiations.

Tertiary teachers take industrial action

Around 950 teaching staff at six New Zealand institutes of technology and polytechs (ITPs) struck for 24 hours on September 16 over stalled negotiations in a new work agreement. Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members set up pickets at the colleges and held several street rallies.

The ITPs are holding firm on their original offer, which is a reduction in real pay and conditions. The offer 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 TEU has called 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.

Last week the union offered a counter proposal but the ITPs did not respond. The ITPs involved are Whitireia Polytechnic, NorthTec, Waikato Institute of Technology, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, Western Institute of Technology in Taranaki, and Unitec.

Supermarket workers protest over low wages

Around 50 employees at Foodstuffs distribution centre in Christchurch walked off the job for several hours on September 12 and picketed the Pak'n'Save supermarket in Northlands (owned by Foodstuffs directors) to protest low wages. The strike followed pickets on September 3 outside supermarkets in Christchurch and Dunedin, also owned by directors at Foodstuffs.

The workers receive take home pay of just \$10.39 to \$12.14 an hour. The minimum wage in New Zealand is \$12.50 an hour.

Auckland bus drivers reject pay offer

At a stopwork meeting in Auckland this week, some 900 drivers and cleaners of NZ Bus overwhelmingly rejected the company's latest pay offer of a 9.9 to 10.4 percent increase over three years. A planned strike had been called off by the Auckland Combined Unions, which went into "mediation" on September 8 for a new collective agreement after NZ Bus threatened to lock out workers and pull 700 buses off the road. The unions want a 12.6 percent increase over three years.

New Zealand teachers protest education cuts

On September 12, teachers and supporters across New Zealand held street rallies to protest the government's planned cuts to community education. Around 800 people marched in Queen St, Auckland and 150 attended a rally in Wellington's Civic Square. Protests were also held in Christchurch and several provincial centres. The cuts contained in the government's July budget slashed 80 percent of funding to schools-based adult and community education. Speakers at the rallies said fees would rise three- or four-fold.





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