

# 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.*

## Bangladeshi port workers strike

Hundreds of Chittagong port workers, including supervisors, assistant supervisors, jetty supervisors, foremen and tally clerks, struck on September 17 to demand an increased Eid festival bonus. Container lacing and unlacing workers joined the strike the next day. Four container vessels stood idle at their berths during the walk-out.

The workers called off their strike at the end of the second day, after port authorities declared that they would pay each worker a 3,500 taka (\$US50) Eid bonus.

The Chittagong Port Stevedores and Contractors Employees Union organised the strike with the support of the Chittagong Port Dock Workers and Employees Federation.

## Indian police attack demonstrating teachers

Police in Guwahati, Assam fired teargas and baton charged a rally of over 1,000 non-provincial school teachers at the secretariat in the Last Gate area of Dispur on September 21. Several teachers were injured and many were arrested. The teachers, who were mobilised by the Asom Shikshak Karmachari Aikyamancha, were demanding government recognition and payment of salaries.

## Uttar Pradesh teachers protest

Honorary teachers of rural schools across Uttar Pradesh demonstrated at the Vidhan Bhawan in Lucknow on September 19 demanding an increase

in honorarium payments and regularisation of their services. The demonstrating teachers said that they had been paid only 3,500 rupees (\$US73) a month for the past nine years. The Adarsh Shikshamitra Welfare Association organised the demonstration.

## Indian medical teachers suspend industrial action

The Kerala Government Medical College Teachers' Association on September 18 temporarily suspended its two-month long non-cooperation strike at five medical colleges in Kerala, after the government agreed to talks. During the work bans college doctors/teachers stopped visiting certain wards and refused VIP duties, including attending medical board meetings.

Doctors want anomalies in their last pay revision corrected, including a higher salary package for entry-level lecturers. Talks were due to take place this week.

## Filipino garment workers picket closed factory

On September 22, 100 employees of garments manufacturer Alto Mode in the Mactan Economic Zone (MEZ II), Cebu began picketing the main gate of the temporarily closed factory after learning that trucks were removing material from the factory. Workers suspected it was an attempt by the company owners to establish a "runaway shop".

Alta Mode, which exports clothes under brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Hollister, declared a six-month temporary shutdown starting September 11 after the majority of its workers voted for certification of their newly formed union. The factory has been hit by labour unrest this year with workers complaining of inhuman working conditions, such as excessive production quota, illegal forced leave and unfair schemes for "under-time" work.

The Alto Mode Workers Union wants the management to recognise the union, honour a memorandum of agreement established on September 8 providing for work rotation, financial assistance for workers on forced leave and access by two union officers to the factory for the duration of the six-month shutdown.

Pickets are ignoring demands from the MEZ II authorities to leave the zone and have vowed to keep guard at the Alta Mode factory gate until the company agrees to their demands.

### **Vietnamese taxi drivers strike**

Vinasun Taxi Company drivers in Ho Chi Minh City are maintaining strike action begun on September 15 after the company cut their share of the daily takings from 55 to 51 percent, citing the economic crisis and higher gas prices. After drivers parked over 250 taxis outside the company headquarters, management offered to increase the takings share for drivers between 1 and 3 percent, depending on the size of the vehicle. This was rejected by the drivers who want between 2 and 7 percent.

Vinasun has called in the police and requested that they find out who incited the strike and “damaged its business”.

### **Western Australian construction workers walk out over asbestos**

Hundreds of workers at the CITIC Pacific's Sino iron ore project in the Pilbara region, Western Australia walked off the job on September 18 after hazardous asbestos was discovered on the site. They have refused to return to work until a safety inspection is carried out by Worksafe WA.

According to an Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) spokesperson, an inspector will not be available for at least a month, indicating the lack of workplace safety resources allocated to the mining sector. AMWU officials have been refused entry to the site by CITIC Pacific to investigate workers' concerns.

Employees are also concerned that asbestos-laden rocks and dirt may have been used as landfill at the company's Cape Preston site and the mine's camp and accommodation areas. The project employs around 1,700 workers on the construction site at Cape Preston, and in Perth and overseas.

### **Melbourne 7-Eleven store picketed**

More than 30 members of the UNITE union held a protest outside a 7-Eleven store in South Yarra on September 18 over the underpayment of wages. The union alleged the store franchise-holder, who has interests in several 7-Eleven stores in Melbourne, is ignoring an order by the Fair Work Ombudsman to pay employees more than \$100,000 (\$US83,500) in unpaid wages.

UNITE claims that people who have worked in the store had been paid as little as \$10 an hour (current hourly minimum wage is \$14.31) and others had worked unpaid trials for up to two months. UNITE said it will continue campaigning until the workers are paid.

### **Victorian poultry workers to vote for industrial action**

Some 260 employees at Hazeldene's Chicken Farm, Lockwood are to vote in a protected action ballot after they rejected a collective agreement this week after almost four months of negotiations. National Union of Workers (NUW) state secretary Antony Thow said Hazeldene's offer would entrench its workers as the lowest paid in the industry.

The company had offered a 2 percent annual pay increase over two years, but the union claims Hazeldene's employees need a 5 percent annual increase over two years to bring them in line with other workers in the industry. Other poultry companies are offering a 4 percent annual increase over two years.

### **Victorian firefighters protest against lack of resources**

More than 1,500 firefighters rallied outside the Victorian parliament on September 15 in protest over the lack of firefighting resources. A United Firefighters Union spokesman claimed that 23 communities have less than a 50 percent chance of getting a fire truck if they need one, 24 fire stations need upgrading and more full-time staff are required.

Over 170 people died in February this year on “Black Saturday” when deadly bushfires raged through many towns in Victoria. The union spokesperson told the protesters that “The government has not done one thing. It blames the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and the CFA blames the government”.

The CFA wants the state Labor government to employ an additional 684 professional firefighters across the state but firefighters claim it will take six years to recruit them under the current training program.

### **New Zealand dairy factory refuses to lift lockout**

Management of New Zealand's second largest dairy producer, Open Country Dairy Limited, is refusing to lift a six-week lockout imposed on 36 employees at its Open Country Cheese factory in Waikato. The Dairy Workers Union (DWU) members were locked out after taking industrial action on September 16 over a new work agreement. The company has been using administrative staff, company directors and farmers to keep the factory running.

The union this week directed its members to end industrial action and return to work, pending a hearing in the Employment Court on the legality of the lockout, but the company has refused entry to the workers. DWU national secretary James Ritchie said that the proposed work agreement would have turned most employees into seasonal and temporary workers and subjected them to major and disruptive roster changes at short notice. He alleges the company has established an employment agency to casualise the workforce.

Outstanding issues for the dairy workers are working hours and roster changes, redundancy and restructuring protection, length of time temporary employees serve and their ratio to permanent workers, and paid meal breaks. The union has already withdrawn an original demand for a wage increase.

### **Telecom union fails to protect jobs**

At least 300 telecommunications engineers employed by Telecom NZ's contract companies Downer EDI and Transfield have been made redundant after refusing to sign up with Telecom's new contractor Visionstream. Downer and Transfield were forced to begin sacking staff after Telecom began transferring work to Visionstream even though it has been unable to sign up enough engineers to fulfil its contract.

The redundancies follow a month-long industrial campaign by nearly 700 engineers in Auckland and Northland in opposition to Visionstream's sub-contracting model, which will force engineers to pay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools, plus cover all running costs with no job security.

The industrial campaign orchestrated by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) has put no pressure on Telecom or Visionstream to change plans, despite union claims that hundreds of faults are going unattended due to a lack of engineers signing on to Visionstream.

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 Auckland and Northlands members.

### **Cleaners protest poverty wages**

Around 2,000 contract cleaners working for contractors in schools, shopping malls and commercial buildings across New Zealand held nationwide street protests on September 23 over poverty level wages. The cleaners are members of the Service and Food Workers Union Nga Ringa Tota (SFWU) and are paid \$12.55 an hour—five cents above the minimum wage.

The SFWU has rejected an increase offer of 25 cents an hour as part of a multi-employer collective agreement, and is demanding \$14.62 an hour, equal with cleaners in public hospitals and directly employed in schools.

The cleaners plan other protest activities across New Zealand, including pickets outside key buildings in cities.

### **Concrete company ends lockout**

Eleven cement truck drivers employed at Bridgeman Concrete in Manukau City returned to work on September 17 after being locked out for over a week. The lockout is an attempt to force drivers into accepting a wage freeze and no change in their collective agreement for the next two years.

The National Distribution Union (NDU), which represents the drivers, reached an agreement with Bridgeman after government mediators were called in to negotiations. The NDU has not released details of the new agreement, aside from stating that it “resolves the impasse on redundancy selection criteria that had been at the centre of the dispute”.

### **Fire authority rejects Auckland firefighters offer**

The New Zealand Fire Service has rejected a New Zealand Professional Firefighters Union offer to suspend its industrial action to allow wage negotiations to continue. The Fire Service cancelled the planned negotiations demanding that the firefighters first “withdraw” industrial action. The union said this was unacceptable because it would require them to give 14 days' notice before re-imposing work bans.

Firefighters rejected the current wage offer and complained that staff and work-hour pledges made by the previous government have been dropped and that the Fire Service is renegeing on promises to increase staffing. 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.



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