

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.

Air India pilots end strike

Some 400 executive pilots of Air India, the state-run carrier, ended a four-day strike on September 30, after airline management agreed to reconsider massive cuts in the productivity-linked incentive (PLI) allowances. Executive pilots are a part of the airline's management. They claimed the cuts had reduced their allowance by 70 percent.

An estimated 7,000 Air India employees have been forced to take a pay cut as a result of the airline's decision last month to reduce the PLI allowance by 25 and 50 percent. The Indian Commercial Pilots Association (ICPA), the apex body representing Air India's 800 line pilots, did not join the strike and entered separate talks with management.

Air India was forced to cut its flights by 25 percent during the strike. Air India is heavily in debt and its borrowings more than doubled from 65.5 billion rupees in November 2007 to 152.4 billion rupees (\$US3.1 billion) in June this year.

In August, the Minister for Civil Aviation Praful Patel refused to provide finance needed for overdue wages, declaring that the Indian government would not keep bailing out the airline. The unions have accused the government of withholding funds and cutting allowances in preparation for privatisation.

Indian government doctors resign

Over 3,600 members of the Karnataka Government Medical Officers' Association (KGMOA) from across the state travelled to Bangalore on September 29 to tender their resignations to the Health and Family Welfare director after talks broke down over demands for a pay increase, time-bound promotion and the regularisation of contract doctors' services.

The doctors withdrew their resignations after Health Minister B.

Sriramulu said that the government had accepted their demands in principle and would provide an additional 1,000 million rupees (\$US20.9 million) in funding. KGMOA president H.N. Ravindra said the association would start talks with the government on October 4.

Bosch and Brembo strike enters ninth week

Hundreds of permanent and temporary employees of auto-brake manufacturers Bosch and Brembo in Pune, India are maintaining strike action begun on July 18 over pay. The Bosch Chassis Systems Kamgar Sanghatana Employees Union wants pay rises agreed to in a 2007 collective bargaining deal, plus equal pay for equal work. Casual workers are paid only 25 to 30 percent of the wages received by regular employees.

Management at the two factories proposed a settlement but demanded that contract workers and trainees not be rehired. The union rejected this and wants all 131 contract workers and 43 trainees to be taken back with improved wages and conditions. Talks between the union and Bosch and Brembo are continuing but the companies have threatened to close down their Pune factories if the union fails to accept their proposal.

Tamil Nadu metal utensil workers strike

On September 29, 1,700 workers at the Anuparalayam steel utensil manufacturing cluster at Tirupur, Tamil Nadu struck for a day to demand a Deepavali (religious festival) bonus equal to 20 percent of their annual salary. Last year's Deepavali bonus rate was between 13 and 16 percent of their annual salary.

The striking workers are affiliated to eight organisations, including the All India Trade Union Congress, the Labour Progressive Front and the Indian National Trade Union Congress.

Tamil Nadu power-loom workers walk out

Power-loom workers in Komarapalayam, Tamil Nadu, one of the region's main textile hubs, began indefinite strike action on September 28, after wage talks with cloth manufacturers and job order unit owners failed.

Workers are demanding a 50-paise (half a rupee) increase per metre of cloth weaved. Manufacturers say they will only pay a 10-paise increase per metre, claiming the current wage agreement does not allow for a "substantial" pay rise. Job unit holders said they could not provide an increase until cloth manufacturers lifted their payments.

Indian police attack demonstrating transport workers

Police in Indian-held Kashmir on September 29 attacked 1,000 protesting State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) workers in Srinagar as they were marching with family members to the Civil Secretariat to protest over delays in the release of salary dues. Twenty workers along with five family members were injured.

Sri Lankan nurses strike

All-Ceylon Nurses' Union (CNU) members held a national sick note protest on September 30 over the closure of teaching colleges and the failure of health authorities to resolve other longstanding demands. The nurses demonstrated outside the Health Ministry in Colombo and hoisted black flags at all teaching, general and base hospitals.

CNU president S.B. Madiwatte said nurses want the government to withdraw its plans to close teaching colleges. They have also called for immediate recruitment to the colleges, resumption of enrolments to post-graduate nursing degrees and the resolution of salary anomalies, full monthly stipends to trainee nurses and all training college principal posts filled.

Railway technicians strike

Sri Lankan Railway Department technicians struck for five hours on September 28 to demand technical salary upgrades. Technicians and assistants at Maradana Diesel Electric, Dematagoda Hydro Power and Maligawatte Power participated in the action, which disrupted the rail network.

Sri Lankan agricultural workers protest

Around 2,500 agricultural instructors, including those from the war-ravaged northern and eastern provinces, protested on September 30 outside the Peradeniya Agricultural Department near Kandy. Their major demands include re-establishment of the Rural Agricultural Extension Service, a promotion scheme for agricultural instructors, and a substantial salary rise for farm managers.

Workers accused the authorities of ignoring their rights and entitlements, and have threatened to boycott planned conferences and to withhold progress reports if their demands are not met. The All Ceylon Agricultural Instructors' Union organised the demonstration.

Indonesian paramedics demonstrate

Dozens of paramedics in Jayapura, Papua rallied at the Papua Governor's Office on September 28 to demand the local administration increase their allowances, which they say are no longer enough to live on. One demonstrator said that the paramedics had asked the administration to revise the 1999 regulation on service allowances.

Under this regulation paramedics receive only 300 rupiah (30 US cents) for treating a patient and 500 rupiah for performing an operation. In a move intended to delay the issue, Papua Deputy Governor Alex Hessegem told the paramedics that his office would establish a special team to handle the case.

Cambodian garment workers remain on strike

More than 2,000 Fortune Garment and Woollen Knitting company workers in Saang district, Kandal have vowed to continue strike action begun on September 22. Their demands include higher wages, a daily break, paid maternity leave and meals for employees working overtime.

"We didn't want to strike," a workers' spokesman said, "but after more than a year of attempted negotiations with not a single thing to show for it, we had no choice."

Thai bus workers protest over privatisation

At least 3,000 Bangkok Mass Transit Authority (BMTA) bus drivers and fare collectors rallied at Government House on September 29 in protest against a National Economic and Social Development Board (NESDB) call for private bus owners to operate 155 routes. BMTA labour union chairman Sanan Boon-ngok claimed that more than 10,000 BMTA employees would lose their jobs if the privatisation goes ahead.

The demonstrators returned to work after Deputy Transport Minister Prachak Klaewklaharn signed an agreement confirming that he would oppose the privatisation in cabinet. BMTA union leaders said the protest was suspended temporarily, pending the cabinet resolution.

ACT ambulance support workers strike

About 20 ambulance support workers in the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) walked off the job on September 25 over working conditions and job security. They returned to work several hours later after the Emergency Services Agency acknowledged their grievances and in talks with the Transport Workers Union agreed to resolve a range of issues, including selection, advancement and job security.

Visy workers remain locked out

Some 100 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union members (AMWU) at Visy Food Packaging in Melbourne have voted to continue industrial action after being locked out on September 14 when they imposed work bans for a new collective agreement. Workers have established a 24-hour picket outside the company's Coburg factory.

According to AMWU organiser Tony Mavromatis, the main sticking point is a draft flexibility clause, which Visy management sent to workers but had not been discussed in negotiations. The union believes the clause can be used to undermine the collective agreement. The AMWU also wants a 5 percent pay rise and assurances on casual labour, shift structures, accrued entitlements and safety issues while the company is demanding job cuts and changes to safety.

Stood-down Tasmanian miners protest

Stood down workers from the Mt Lyell Copper Mine in Queenstown, Tasmania joined an Australian Workers Union (AWU) delegation to Labor state premier David Bartlett in Hobart on September 28. The union wants the state government to intervene over unpaid wages. Mine operator Vedanta Resources stood down 186 contractors five weeks ago when heavy rains and mud flows interrupted mining.

The workers have used up all their leave entitlements and have been forced to seek unemployment benefits or food from charities. The company has refused to pay wages while the mine remains closed. The AWU has not mobilised its membership to support the contractors. Union spokesman Robert Flanagan has urged the company to bring forward new projects and consider voluntary redundancies.

Retrenched Telecom NZ engineers protest

Around 150 retrenched Telecom NZ lines engineers on October 1 rallied outside the company's annual shareholder meeting in Auckland against the company's new contractor-model for its Auckland and Northland linemen. The workers brought with them a giant inflatable rat and carried banners saying "What's the need for all the greed" and "\$5m bonus for (chief executive Paul) Reynolds, 900 laid off Telco Techs".

At least 400 engineers employed by Telecom contractors Transfield and Downer EDI have been made redundant, after refusing to sign up with Telecom's new contractor Visionstream. Downer and Transfield began sacking staff after Telecom began transferring work to Visionstream even though it has been unable to sign up enough engineers to fulfil its contract.

Most of the 700 engineers in Auckland and Northland said they will not join Visionstream, rejecting its subcontracting model which makes their job insecure and forces them to outlay up to \$60,000 to buy their own vans and tools. Despite Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) claims that Visionstream is sitting on a backlog of over 900 customer faults because it can't sign up enough engineers, Visionstream has refused to alter its conditions of employment.

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 Northland members.

Dairy factory lockout continues

Management at Open Country Dairy Limited, New Zealand's second largest dairy producer, is refusing to allow 36 locked-out staff to return to work, despite an Employment Court ruling on September 25 that the lockout was illegal. 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 Open Country Cheese factory in Waikato running.

DWU national secretary James Ritchie said that the company's 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 accused the company of establishing 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.

Auckland bus workers vote for industrial action

On September 28, bus drivers and cleaners at NZ Bus, Auckland voted for industrial action after rejecting a pay rise offer of 10.5 percent over three years. The unions want a 12.6 percent increase over three years. The dispute began five months ago and has involved nearly 1,000 workers in work bans and stop-work meetings.

Drivers and cleaners earn between NZ\$14.05 and NZ\$16.75 an hour. A spokesperson for the combined unions said industrial action would take the form of a work-to-rule rather than a full strike. The unions withdrew a planned strike earlier this month after the company threatened to take over 700 buses off the road and lock out workers if the strike went ahead.

New Zealand port workers reject proposed redundancies

Port Otago Limited workers voted on September 29 to reject a company proposal to axe 35 jobs or 10 percent of its workforce and boost shifts from 8 to 12 hours. The Maritime Union says that it will organise strike action if the company pushes ahead with the proposal.

New Zealand health workers stop work

About 400 employees at 14 Presbyterian Support Centre (PSC) homes in the lower North Island held stop-work meetings on September 25 to discuss a new collective employment agreement. The New Zealand Nurses' Organisation and the Service and Food Workers Union, representing 650 nurses, healthcare workers and domestic staff, have rejected a 3.1 percent pay increase offer. They want a 5 percent pay rise.

The current starting rate for PSC staff, who provide elderly care, family and counselling services, is NZ\$12.79 an hour, just above the minimum wage of \$12.50. The top pay rate is \$14.43 an hour. The unions are continuing to negotiate with PSC with a mediator present.

PNG nurses walk out

Clinical nurses working in urban health centres in Lae city, Papua New Guinea walked off the job on September 29 over the non-payment of their nursing awards by the Morobe provincial administration. Nurses claim they have not been paid according to their award since it was approved by the National Government early this year.

A Lae district health spokesperson said the nurses took industrial action because the provincial administration's human resource manager Miring

Singoling repeatedly refused to discuss the issue with them. One nurse said that every time they made appointments to see Singoling he claimed to be busy and said they should come at another time.



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