

# 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.*

## Indian public sector workers strike

Around 550,000 Madhya Pradesh public sector workers struck on October 1 to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Workers protested near the T.T. Nagar stadium in Bhopal and government offices remained closed affecting services in all departments, including hospitals.

One of the demands in their 17-point charter is for a dearness allowance payment on par with Central Government employees. Twenty-two unions participated in the strike.

## Karnataka head-load workers protest introduction of hospital fees

Dakshina Kannada District Head Load Workers' Union members protested outside the Wenlock Hospital in Mangalore, Karnataka on October 6 against "commercialisation" of the government hospital. Fees have been placed on hospital services that were previously free for all patients.

Patients from now on will be required to pay a fee-for-service, including for ward accommodation, intensive care, ambulance transport and treatment by specialist doctors. Charges will also apply for dialysis, medical certificates for leave, physical fitness and disability and the provision of medical records. The protestors demanded that district medical officer Dr Prabhudeva "cancel all the anti-poor rules".

Head-load workers do heavy manual work and are employed through agents on a casual basis. They are among the lowest paid workers in India.

## Junior doctors strike

Nearly 4,000 junior doctors in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir began indefinite strike action on October 5 for a pay rise, payment of arrears from January 2006 and time-bound promotions. The walkout has affected the health care services at 12 major hospitals and primary health centres.

The state government has threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act to illegalise the strike action.

## Kashmir bus workers' strike enters second month

State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) employees in Indian-held Kashmir are maintaining strike action begun on August 26 to demand payment of long-outstanding wages and a one-time settlement of five months' dues.

Hundreds of SRTC employees last Saturday marched through the Lal Chowk city centre.

Last week, police attacked 1,000 SRTC workers in Srinagar as they marched with family members to the Civil Secretariat. Twenty workers along with five family members were injured.

The SRTC is the largest state-owned transport fleet and the walkout has affected district and city bus transport and interstate services.

## Sri Lankan petroleum workers protest

More than 1,000 Ceylon Petroleum Corporation (CPC) employees picketed the company offices in Kolonnawa, on the outskirts of Colombo, on October 6 to demand a pay rise and a 5,000-rupee interim allowance promised by the Petroleum and Resources Minister A.H.M. Fowzie. According to protestors, the CPC and the Ceylon Electricity Board have not increased employees' pay since 2006.

The workers are members of the Executive Officers Union, All Ceylon Petroleum Workers Union, Petroleum Industrial Union, Ceylon Petroleum Common Services Union and Jathika Seva Sangamaya.

### **Sri Lankan teachers demonstrate**

Teachers in Colombo demonstrated at the Ministry of Education on October 6 to demand employees recruited as teacher assistants be integrated into the respective teachers' grades as per the Sri Lankan Teachers' Service constitution.

The next day, teachers in Palawatte held a protest outside the Directorate for several demands, including abolition of salary anomalies, the provision of distress and property loans and the speedy expedition of promotions. Teachers have also accused authorities of not using three billion rupees (\$US62.7 million) allocated in the last budget to abolish salary anomalies and grant salary increases.

### **GM auto workers on strike in Thailand**

The General Motors plant in Rayong province, Thailand remains closed after 700 of its 1,700 workforce walked off the job on October 5 to demand a five-month incentive bonus and freedom for the union to organise. The strike came after 11 months of negotiations with GM only offering a one-month bonus.

According to Workers Union of General Motors secretary-general Suriya Phochailert the auto workers have been given increased workloads since the company laid off nearly 800 employees in February. GM and the union remain in talks.

### **Cambodian garment workers protest lay-offs**

At least 1,000 employees of the Sky High garment factory in Phnom Penh demonstrated outside the Ministry of Labour on October 6 to demand the government take legal action against the company for allegedly failing to provide severance payments and other compensation measures as required under Cambodian labour law. Workers claim that Sky High fired its employees in late June after they went on strike. One worker said that at the time of the walkout four or five workers daily were being fired without just cause.

Meanwhile, 2,000 employees at the Fortune Garment and Woollen Knitting Company in Kandal province have been ordered back to work by the Arbitration Council Foundation, ending a strike begun on September 22. Workers' demands included higher wages, a daily break, paid maternity-leave and meals for employees working overtime. Workers' representative Lun Simeth said there would be another strike if employees' demands were not soon met.

### **Victorian poultry workers begin industrial action**

More than 250 employees at Hazeldene's Chicken Farm near Bendigo, Victoria imposed overtime bans this week and planned to stop work for four hours yesterday over a new work agreement. National Union of Workers (NUW) members last week rejected a collective agreement from the company with a 2 percent pay rise. NUW state secretary Antony Thow said the company offer would entrench Hazeldene's workers as the lowest paid in the industry.

The company has revised its offer to include a 4 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 industry employees.

### **Alcoa unions accept wage freeze**

Alcoa Australia Point Henry rolling mill employees in Geelong, Victoria this week agreed to lift various work bans and rolling strikes begun on September 16 for a new collective agreement and have accepted a union/management proposed wage freeze until February next year.

In return Alcoa has offered a lump sum payment, an income protection scheme and agreed to allow workers stood down as a result of recent industrial action to claim annual leave. AWU Geelong organiser Gavin Penn admitted members were not happy with the deal.

Alcoa is Victoria's largest exporter and the Point Henry operations employs around 1,000 workers each producing around 90,000 tonnes of rolled aluminium per year. The workers are members of the AWU, the Electrical Trades Union and the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union.

### **NSW power workers begin stop work meetings**

On October 7, Energy Australia workers in Sydney's CBD and Integral Energy workers in Sydney's west attended stop work meetings. It was the first of similar meetings to be held across New South Wales over the state Labor government's plans to privatise the electricity sector. United Services Union (USU) members fear up to 2,000 jobs will be lost in the sell-off.

The state government has promised energy workers guaranteed employment for five years after the sell-off, no forced redundancies and up to \$30,000 payment for employees transferring to new owners.

USU general secretary Ben Kruse said lack of detail on these conditions

does not give the guarantees the union was promised by the government.

### **NZ Bus workers locked out**

The NZ Bus company withdrew 700 buses from its Auckland routes on October 8, locking out 900 drivers and cleaners after they refused to call off proposed industrial action over a five-month pay dispute. Workers have rejected a pay rise offer of 10.5 percent over three years, and are demanding 12.6 percent over three years.

The company said it will not lift the lockout until the four unions representing its workforce remove their notice of work-to-rule and submit to negotiations facilitated by the government's Employment Relations Authority.

An estimated 80,000 passengers are affected daily on city routes that include Go West, Waka Pacific, LINK and City Circuit.

### **Parliamentary employees stop work**

Some 120 workers at New Zealand's parliament buildings over the past week have been attending one-hour stop-work meetings to protest a government proposal to freeze wages and cut redundancy entitlements. The action by Public Service Association members, including security officers, library staff, reception workers, building maintenance staff and messengers, comes after seven months of negotiations with Parliamentary Services for a new collective agreement.

The walkout represents the first time this year that the PSA has organised industrial action, despite the fact that over 2,000 jobs have been cut from the public sector. The union has around 57,000 members.

### **Dairy workers remain locked out**

Some 36 workers at New Zealand's second largest dairy producer, Open Country Dairy Limited, remain locked out of its Waharoa processing plant despite a court ruling that the lockout is illegal. Dairy Workers Union (DWU) members have been locked out since September 16, after taking industrial action over a new work agreement. The company has been using administrative staff, company directors and farmers to keep the Open Country Cheese factory 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. His earlier accusation that the company had established an employment agency to casualise the

workforce was vindicated last week when the company announced a plan to cut permanent jobs in its powder and whey plant and employ more casual and seasonal workers.

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. Talks between the union and management in front of a government mediator are in progress.



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