

# 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 textile workers on strike

Around 5,500 workers at seven National Textile Corporation (NTC) mills in Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu began indefinite strike action on October 13 following failed talks over bonus pay. The Coimbatore District Mill Workers' Union is demanding that the total annual earnings of individual workers be considered when calculating bonuses. Currently, they are calculated on a fixed annual income and do not include additional hours.

At talks in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner of Labour, NTC management rejected the union's demand, claiming that the mills don't make a profit and a bonus increase "is not possible".

## Kashmir bus workers resume strike

State Road Transport Corporation (SRTC) employees in Indian-held Kashmir resumed their strike on October 12 after a three-day halt. SRTC employees struck on August 26 to demand payment of long-outstanding wages. They suspended their action after an assurance by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah that the government would redress the matter. Workers had set a three-day deadline to settle their grievances, which was not met.

On Monday, Jammu and Kashmir government employees marched from Municipal Park to the SRTC office near Lal Chowk to show support for the SRTC workers. The SRTC is the largest state-owned transport fleet and the strike has affected district and city bus transport and interstate services.

## Kashmir junior doctors' strike enters second week

Nearly 4,000 junior doctors in the Indian state of Jammu and Kashmir are continuing the strike they began on October 5 for a pay rise and the payment of arrears dating back to January 2006. The walkout has affected the health care services at 12 major hospitals and primary health centres. Emergency services are still being provided by doctors.

Doctors this week rejected a delaying tactic by Chief Minister Omar Abdullah, who called for them to return to work on a promise that the government would enter into talks next month. The government has threatened to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act to illegalise the strike.

## Punjab power employees protest

On October 14, Technical Services Union members at the Punjab State Electricity Board rallied at the board's office in Phagwara over pay and conditions. Their demands include implementation of new pay scales, abolition of the contract system and the recruitment of new employees. Workers said they will join a state-wide protest scheduled to be held on October 21 in Patiala.

## Orissa women rally for work rights

About 8,000 tribal women from 12 districts took to the streets in Bhubaneswar, Orissa demanding the 100 days work they were promised under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. "Last month they started road work and we were asked to work for three days. That was all," one of the marchers told journalists.

The protesters demanded compensation for the people who have not received work and disciplinary action against the government officers who are responsible.

## Sri Lankan railway workers strike

At least 8,000 railway workers, including technicians, technical assistants, shunters, engine drivers and assistants, pointsmen and yard masters, struck on October 8, demanding the abolition of salary anomalies and the streamlining of recruitment. Leaders of the Trade Union Alliance of the Ceylon Government Railway (CGR) called off the strike later in the day after talks with railway management. No agreement, if any, has been reported.

### **Sri Lankan water workers protest**

Employees of the National Water Supplies and Drainage Board (NWSDB) staged a picket at the Assistant General Managers' office in Kandy on October 14 demanding their scheduled salary increase for 2009. It was the second picketing campaign organised by NWSDB workers.

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

Workers at the General Motors plant in Rayong province ended a three-day strike that forced the factory to close on October 5. Some 700 of GM's 1,700 workforce walked off the job to demand a five-month incentive bonus and freedom for their union to organise. The strike came after GM only offered a one-month bonus.

Neither GM nor the Workers Union of GM has revealed details of the agreement.

### **Cambodian garment workers blockade factory**

Over 1,800 garment workers at the Tack Fat factory, in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district, rallied at the factory on October 8 after managers closed the factory without informing them in advance. The owners said the factory will be closed for two months due to declining garment orders and have agreed to pay workers US\$10 per month in compensation. Workers say the amount is insufficient to compensate them for lost wages.

Meas Saphors, leader of the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union, said: "Workers want the factory to pay them 50 percent of their salary if it wishes to suspend their jobs for two months, and we want the factory to be locked properly so that the property cannot be secretly removed before making a clear deal with the workers."

According to a report released by the Ministry of Labour, 130 factories have closed during 2009, resulting in the loss of 30,683 jobs. The ministry also estimates an additional 30,617 workers are also facing unemployment because of a decline in export orders.

### **Captain evicted from Tasmanian vessel under strike**

A week-long standoff over pay and safety on the vessel *Matthew Flinders* escalated on October 15 when police evicted the captain on the basis of a court order won by the vessel's owner, Southern Shipping. Captain Percy Barnett and crew of five had refused to sail from Flinders Island on October 10 following a dispute over alleged \$30,000 of unpaid wages and the lack of ship maintenance.

The *Matthew Flinders* plies a government-contracted route, carrying livestock and supplies between Tasmania, Victoria, and the Flinders and Bass Strait Islands.

The captain told reporters that with the combination of wage and safety issues he had been left with no other option but to strike. "There has always been safety issues in this vessel", he said. "I've been here for nearly three years and the tension's been building up for many a month and there comes a point in time where enough's enough."

Another Southern Shipping vessel delivering emergency supplies to Flinders Island has been forced to wait offshore until the *Matthew Flinders* departs. The ship, however, no longer has a master, and therefore legally cannot be moved. The standoff comes less than a fortnight after the Tasmanian Ports Corporation prevented a Southern Shipping vessel docking at Flinders Island until outstanding fees were paid.

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

National Union of Workers members employed at Hazeldene's Chicken Farm in Bendigo, Victoria, this week voted to continue with overtime bans in support of their wage claim. The vote followed a two-day lockout after workers struck for four hours on October 9.

The company has offered its 260 workers a 2 percent annual pay increase over two years. The union claims Hazeldene's employees need 5 percent over two years to bring them in line with other industry employees. Other employers in the industry have offered their employees a 4 percent increase.

### **Australian medical research workers take industrial action**

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members employed at CSL Limited in Broadmeadows and Parkville, Melbourne, walked off the job on October 16 after months of negotiations for a new work agreement ended in a stalemate. CPSU national president Louise Persse said management's proposal would significantly disadvantage around 400

CSL shift-workers.

The union wants a minimum 4 percent increase, a sign-on bonus and maintenance of current employment conditions. Management has offered 3.75 percent and a \$1,000 sign-on bonus, but wants to reduce shift entitlements by ending recognition of public holidays and access to paid shift breaks.

Meanwhile, Fair Work Australia (FWA) ordered members of the National Union of Workers at CSL to call off a planned four-hour strike over a similar wage offer. The FWA ruled the NUW strike application was “open-ended” and lacked detail.

CSL Limited is a global medical products manufacturer that produces blood products as well as vaccines. The company has 1,800 staff in Australia and 10,000 worldwide.

### **New Zealand Bus ends lockout**

NZ Bus, which operates 700 buses in Auckland, lifted a seven-day lockout on October 14 after its 870 drivers and cleaners agreed to suspend work-to-rule industrial action imposed over a five-month pay dispute. Earlier in the week, the Auckland Regional Council threatened that it would start cancelling NZ Bus’s contracts if the city’s transport services did not resume. Around 80,000 passengers daily were affected during the lock-out.

Workers want a 12.6 percent pay rise over three years but the company is offering only 10.5 percent. On Wednesday, workers overwhelmingly rejected a revised offer drawn up by the government’s Employment Relations Authority (ERA). Details of the offer have not been revealed. NZ Bus and the four unions representing workers have agreed to return to negotiations facilitated by the ERA.

### **Ministry of Justice workers take industrial action**

More than 1,700 members of the Public Service Association (PSA) at the Ministry of Justice (half the Ministry’s workforce) started work-to-rule industrial action on October 14 over a government proposal to freeze wages and cut redundancy entitlements. The PSA, representing security officers, library staff, reception workers, building maintenance staff and messengers, has been in negotiations with the Ministry since two previous collective agreements expired on June 30.

According to PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff, the Ministry of Justice workers are paid on average 6.3 percent below the median pay rate for public servants and are denied the right to collectively negotiate their contracts. The Ministry wants to freeze wages until July 2010 and then implement performance-based pay increases.

Wagstaff said the union will strike if their demand for a pay increase is not met. Since the start of the year, around 2,000 jobs have been axed in

the public sector but the PSA has not organised any strikes. The union has around 57,000 members.

### **Papua New Guinean health workers walk out**

More than 50 employees at two St John run health facilities in Port Moresby walked off the job on October 13. Cleaners, administrative staff and health workers from St John’s Gordon clinic and Gerehu hospital claim that over the past year they have not been paid on time and some were being underpaid.



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