Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Thai rail workers resume strike action

A five-day strike by State Railways of Thailand (SRT) drivers and engineers in southern Thailand, which ended on October 21, erupted again following a management refusal to guarantee that strikers would not be "penalised". Some services south of Bangkok have been restored but cargo and passenger services linking Hat Yai and the three southernmost provinces of Yala, Pattani and Narathiwat are still suspended.

Seventy-two drivers and engineers have been sent to break the strike and over 100 armed railway police and security volunteers dispatched to Hat Yai station early this week to free a locomotive being held up by striking workers.

SRT employees in Songkhla Province are also protesting the lack of maintenance on locomotives and the sacking of a driver involved in a derailment in Prachuap Khiri Khan early this month in which seven passengers died and 88 were injured. Drivers oppose a proposed restructure that divides the SRT into three subsidiaries—track maintenance, train operations and assets management—insisting it is a first step toward privatisation.

As a part of their original strike, drivers refused to drive 36 locomotives they claimed were unsafe and that their actions were to prevent a repeat of the October derailment.

SRT management has threatened to dismiss 10 union members it claims persuaded South and Central Plains workers to strike. The union has said that it will enter talks with SRT management but only if it agrees not to file criminal or civil lawsuits against rail workers refusing to drive locomotives that don't meet safety standards.

Thai garment workers maintain protest

Laid-off employees from the Bang Phli factory of clothing manufacturer Body Fashion (Thailand), which produces lingerie and swimwear under the Triumph brand, are occupying the ground floor of the Ministry of Labour in Bangkok to protest the suspension of 1,960 workers in July. The company is eliminating over 3,700 jobs from its plants in Thailand and the Philippines.

After shutting the Bang Phli factory, the company has moved to Nakhon Sawan where workers are paid 180 baht ($US5.30) per day compared to the 333 baht paid at Bang Phli. The workers have since staged protests demanding the company reinstate them or pay fair compensation.

Thailand's labour minister has refused to talk with the laid-off workers, so around 200 Triumph Labour Union members have set up a protest garment factory in the ministry building and are producing underwear to sell to Ministry of Labour workers.

South Korean rail workers vote for strike

Korean Railway Workers' Union members voted this week to strike for higher wages and better working conditions. Union leaders representing 25,000 members said that over 76 percent favoured strike action against Korea Railroad Corporation, South Korea's railway monopoly.

The union has not announced a strike date. Talks between the employer and the union are continuing over demands, which also include the reinstatement of 50 dismissed workers.

Indian auto workers remain on strike

Workers at Rico Auto Industries facility in Gurgaon, Haryana remain on strike and are maintaining protests outside the plant. Police have been mobilised to virtually every floor of the Rico factory.

"It seems to be a pressure tactic so that we call off our peaceful protest. There have been two meetings with the additional commissioner and Rico management, but nothing has progressed," a Rico union member said.

Industrial activity in Haryana's Gurgaon-Manesar auto parts

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manufacturing belt came to a halt on October 20 when 100,000 workers from 60 factories walked off the job in protest over the death of Ajit Yadav. Yadav died three days earlier in a clash involving 3,500 striking workers and company thugs and scabs during a pay dispute at Rico. Protesters want 5 million rupees ($US104,600) compensation for Yadav's family, a job for a family member, and legal actions against the killers. A company offer of half a million rupees has been rejected.

Rico workers have been negotiating with management since August for a 10,000-rupee annual salary increase and the right to form a union. Sixteen workers have been suspended during the dispute.

Visakhapatnam junior doctors walk out

Some 300 junior doctors from King George Hospital in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh walked off the job on October 27 to demand "protection from the public while discharging their duties".

Their action was triggered by an incident in which duty doctors were abused by relatives of a patient who had died during treatment. A similar incident occurred a month earlier. In 2007, a duty doctor was violently attacked after the death of a road accident victim.

Last week three hospitals in Mumbai reported attacks on staff and hospital property by relatives of patients who had died during treatment. In each case a doctor was not immediately available to give emergency treatment. With a chronic shortage of doctors in Indian government hospitals these attacks are becoming more frequent. For every 10,000 people in India there are only six doctors, compared with nearly 55 in the United States and 21 in Canada.

Workers protest against price hikes and job losses

Workers throughout India held demonstrations on October 28 to oppose price rises, job losses and disinvestment of public sector undertakings (PSUs). In Chennai, Tamil Nadu workers gathered at three locations in the evening while lunch-hour gate meetings were held at various factories and offices across the state.

Four major Indian unions coordinated the demonstrations but advised workers to participate before or after their working shifts. No strike action was organised.

According to a United Nations Human Development Report (2008), approximately 80 percent of India's population lives on less than $US2 a day, 40 percent of children under the age of three are underweight and a third of all men and women suffer from chronic energy deficiency.

Gujarat college teachers protest for salary rise

On October 26, teachers and faculty members from colleges and higher education institutes in Gujarat protested against the state government's refusal to pay them according to the University Grants Commission (UGC) recommendations.

Protesting teachers signed their names in blood on applications to the state government, and burnt copies of a state government resolution rejecting the UGC recommendations. The North Gujarat Universities Area Teachers' Association coordinated protests.

Sri Lankan electricity workers demonstrate

About 250 workers of the state-owned Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) on October 28 held a lunch-hour picket in Colombo opposing privatisation of the CEB, and calling for a pay rise. The protest was organised by the CEB Joint Trade Union Alliance.

Protesters displayed various placards reading: "Give us our salary increment due once in three years immediately", "Stop selling shares of CEB in LECO" and "Hands off rights of CEB employees". LECO (Lanka Electric Company) is a state-owned power distribution company with majority shares in CEB. The Electricity Bill was adopted by the government earlier this year and paves the way for increased electricity charges and privatisation of the CEB.

Indonesia: Migrant Care members protest maid's death in Malaysia

Fifty members of Migrant Care rallied outside the Malaysian Embassy in South Jakarta on October 28 over the death of Indonesian migrant worker, Muntik binti Bani, who is alleged to have been abused by her employers in Klang Selangor. Muntik died after six days in hospital. She was found on October 26 by police unconscious in the bathroom at her employer's residence with her hands and feet bound. Her face and body were covered with scars and bruises.

More than 300,000 Indonesian women make up the majority of maids in Malaysia. Hundreds file complaints every year alleging ill treatment, overwork and unpaid salaries.

The National Migrant Workers Placement and Protection Agency estimates that there are around six million Indonesian migrant workers abroad, including 1.7 illegal migrants, who remitted $US6.6 billion last year, providing a major source of revenue for the Indonesian economy.

NSW coal miners walk out over job security

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Around 300 miners at Xstrata's Tahmoor coal mine south of Sydney, New South Wales walked off the job for two hours on October 24 to demand a new workplace agreement. Negotiations between the Construction, Mining, Forestry and Energy Union and Xstrata are continuing with the Australian Fair Pay Commission.

United Mine Workers vice president Graham White claims Xstrata wants to dump key clauses that require minimum manning levels and pay parity between contractors and permanent employees for the same work. White has accused Xstrata of wanting to impose similar agreements to those at the company's Ulan and Oaky Creek mines, where permanent employees have been replaced by underpaid contractors.

Xstrata plans to restructure this year and axe 280 positions from its New South Wales workforce. In September, 100 miners at Xstrata's United Colleries in the Hunter Valley struck for four days for a security clause in a new work agreement.

Xstrata is a Swiss global mining group with operations in Australia, South Africa, Spain, Germany, Argentina and the UK. It employs approximately 24,000 people world-wide.

Queensland Catholic school teachers take strike action

About 2,000 members of the Queensland Independent Education Union (QIEU) at Catholic schools held a 24-hour stoppage on October 28 for higher wages. The strike affected 87 schools across the state. More than 400 teachers marched on the Queensland Catholic Education Council (QCEC) city office in Brisbane.

Catholic and state school teachers are currently fighting for pay parity with their interstate counterparts, arguing that Queensland teachers are among the lowest-paid in Australia.

Queensland public school teachers have been forced into arbitration after they rejected a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years. Teachers want a 5.4 percent annual pay increase. A QCEC spokesperson claimed a 4.5 percent interim wage rise awarded in May to Catholic school teachers was "fair and reasonable" and that it would wait for the outcome of the Queensland state schools' arbitration case before re-entering talks with the union.

Tasmanian college teachers to stop work

Tasmanian college teachers will hold stop-work meetings on November 2 to discuss their objections to the "Tasmania Tomorrow" reforms. The measures will affect year 11 and 12 students and are to be implemented on a school-by-school basis, turning colleges into campuses of the Tasmanian Polytechnic and Tasmanian Academy.

Greg Brown, the Australian Education Union secondary colleges state division president, said problems identified with the reform early this year have still not been resolved. He claimed these included wasted resources, negative effects on teachers' health, top-heavy administration, the loss of pastoral and educational support for teachers and students, and an increase in student absenteeism and declining student retention.

State Premier and Education Minister David Bartlett said that teachers opposed to the changes will be found jobs in other colleges "not yet involved in the changeover". Colleges not yet affected have been given the option to delay implementing the reforms until 2011.

Western Australian school-support workers continue protests

Some 15 school-support staff, representing cleaners, gardeners and teaching assistants in public schools across Western Australia, protested outside State Treasurer Troy Buswell's office on October 21 as part of a long-running wage campaign. Workers from schools in Buswell's electorate met with him on the weekend but according to Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) organiser Lee Edmundson, they "were disappointed with the outcome".

LHMU members have been holding stop-work meetings across the state since August for a 20 percent pay increase over three years and in line with a rise granted to teachers. The government, however, is only offering 8 percent over three years and aims to restrict state employees' annual wage rises to 2.5 percent for the next two years and 3 percent after that.

The LHMU, which covers 10,000 state school employees, also wants permanency for those on fixed-term contracts and improved safety and security in schools, particularly for cleaners and gardeners. Edmundson claimed that the school-support workers are the lowest paid workers in the public service. The government's offer would only increase their pay by 44 cents an hour.

Union meetings in Perth and Bunbury have endorsed industrial action but the union has not put forward any concrete proposals.

New Zealand: Dairy factory lockout ends in workers defeat

After three weeks of negotiations between the New Zealand Dairy Workers Union (NZDWU) and Open Country Dairy Limited (OCD), 28 of the 34 workers locked out by the company have been made redundant in a new work agreement. Workers were locked out of the company's plant in Waharoa on September 16 after taking industrial action over outstanding issues in the company's proposed work agreement.

DWU national secretary James Ritchie had rejected the company's original offer, saying that the proposal was intended to turn most employees into seasonal and temporary workers and subjected them to major and disruptive roster changes at short notice. Ritchie also accused the company of establishing an employment agency to casualise the workforce—a claim vindicated during the lockout when OCD announced a plan to cut permanent jobs in its powder and whey plant and employ more casual and seasonal workers.

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The DWU has tried to present the latest deal as a victory. A union press release stated that “workers have secured their goal of a collective employment agreement”. Details of the agreement have not been released to the media.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

Ministry of Justice workers strike over wage freeze

More than 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the New Zealand Ministry of Justice struck for one hour on October 27. The strike is an escalation of industrial action that began on October 14 with a work-to-rule. Workers held protest rallies outside courthouses in Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, and numerous smaller towns.

PSA members, including security officers, library staff, reception workers, building maintenance staff and messengers, are protesting a government proposal to freeze wages and cut redundancy entitlements. The union 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. Workers have voted to hold further strikes if the ministry does not lift its wage freeze.

Ford workers on strike over wage freeze

Workers at Ford New Zealand went on strike last Friday and picketed the company’s head office in Auckland to protest a wage freeze by the company. National Distribution Union organiser Mark Muller said “The company is profitable but is refusing to pay even a cost of living increase. That amounts to a wage cut.” New Zealand’s annual consumer price index (CPI) rate currently stands at 1.7 percent.

Solomon Islands: Construction workers on strike

Workers employed by the China United Corporation (CUC) to build a new rugby stadium in Honiara have been on strike since October 20. Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) members are demanding that CUC comply with a Trade Disputes Panel order to raise their wages by 6 percent, back-dated to January. The company says it has raised wages, but SINUW general secretary Tony Kagovai says CUC reduced its workers’ existing wages before implementing the 6 percent increase and has not paid the back-pay.

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