

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.

South Korean government workers strike

Korean Railway Workers' Union (KRWU) members began two days of strike action this week over plans by KORAIL to abolish the wage peak system and to retrench workers. The union, which represents 20,000 rail workers, is also demanding the reinstatement of 50 dismissed workers. Workers in non-metropolitan areas struck on November 5 and metropolitan employees on November 6.

Meanwhile, unions at the Korea Gas Corporation, the National Pension Service and Kyungpook National University Hospital said they will also strike against government moves to reform the public sector. In a joint statement all unions involved, including the KRWU, announced that they would hold a series of strikes until November 20.

Thai rail strike ends without resolution

A two-week strike by State Railways of Thailand (SRT) drivers and engineers in the southern province of Songkhla has ended after the prime minister, Abhisit Vejjajiva, met with union president Sawit Kaewwan and six union delegates dismissed for their role in the strike. The prime minister agreed to establish a committee to oversee state railway security and ruled out privatisation of the state enterprise. The union also wants the prime minister to revoke the SRT dismissal order against the sacked union members.

SRT employees struck on October 16 over two issues: poor locomotive maintenance and the sacking of a driver following a derailment early this month in which seven passengers died and 88 were injured; and moves to split the SRT into three subsidiaries—track maintenance, train operations and assets management.

SRT management did not participate in the union-government meeting and are suing the union for 70 million baht (\$US2.1 million) for loss of earnings during the strike.

India: Ten retail workers hospitalised

Ten people were hospitalised and seven arrested when police baton charged and used water cannons to disperse striking employees from state-administered "Fair Price Dealer" shops in Patna, Bihar on November 3. Hundreds of Fair Price Dealer employees and franchise holders from across the state were attacked by police when they staged a sit-down demonstration in Patne city, blocking streets and disrupting traffic.

The protestors, who want pay parity with government employees, a monthly wage and other benefits, were demanding to meet Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar to air their grievances.

Indian steel workers strike

Centre of Indian Trade Union (CITU) members at the state-owned Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) struck for 48 hours on September 30 to demand a Sixth Pay Commission wage increase. CITU members also want payment of wages outstanding for the last 34 months.

CITU has warned that if the National Joint Committee on Steel, which deals with wage agreements covering 140,000 million SAIL employees and 75,000 contractual labourers, does not resolve the issue by November 12 there will be indefinite strike action.

Over 12,000 technical and non-executive workers of the state-owned Visakhapatnam Steel Plant also struck on similar pay issues on November 3. They want a four-year revision of pay scales, including increments and dearness allowances.

West Bengal construction workers protest

Construction workers at the Mejia Thermal power station of Damodar

Valley Corporation in West Bengal picketed the site's main gate on November 3 over the death of Ranjan Kumar (30) and the hospitalisation of four colleagues who were injured after falling 25 metres when a safety belt broke. The building workers want compensation for Ranjan's family. Four workers were killed at the same site in June.

The building workers are under pressure to construct two additional generating units at the power station and to supply additional power to New Dehli before the 2010 Commonwealth Games.

Mumbai University lecturers stage hunger strike

Some 50 teachers from Mumbai University staged a protest hunger strike on November 3 to demand job permanency. The teachers hold master of philosophy degrees and were appointed between 2006 and 2008 on a contract basis. Those recruited during this time have since been terminated or are working on an hourly basis. Following the protest the University Grant Commission (UGC) agreed to grant permanent employment to just 32 of the teachers.

Andra Pradesh transport workers protest

More than 3,000 Road and Transport Commission (RTC) bus company workers in Andra Pradesh held a hunger strike protest on November 3 and on the following day demonstrated at 202 depots and workshops for a pay rise and improved working conditions. Their demands include a 22 percent interim allowance, permanency for all 20,000 contract workers and jobs to family members of deceased workers. Union members said they will continue their campaign until the RTC addresses their demands.

Western Australian school-support workers suspended over work bans

Thousands of Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members at Western Australian state public schools imposed work bans this week to demand a 20 percent pay rise over three years and permanency for casual workers who have been employed for more than 12 months. The action by education assistants, cleaners and school gardeners includes bans on photocopying, yard duty and administration building cleaning. A number of workers have had their pay suspended for taking action.

LHMU organiser Lee Edmundson told the media that school-support workers are the lowest paid public service workers, with many earning less than \$35,000 a year. The state government has only offered an 8 percent pay rise over three years, which for many would increase their pay

by only 44 cents an hour. The Department of Education and Training wants to stop the industrial action through an Arbitration Commission hearing.

Construction workers protest over ABCC

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at building sites around Australia walked off the job on October 30 to protest charges against rigger Ark Tribe for failing to attend a compulsory Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC) interrogation. Hundreds of union members protested outside the Adelaide Magistrates Court where Tribe's case is to be heard.

Tribe was targeted by the ABCC for attending a stop-work meeting over safety issues at a Flinders University construction site in 2008. Under Australian building industry laws he faces up to six months prison for the alleged offence.

Some of the demonstrators were sent letters by their employers threatening that their "non-attendance" at work would be reported to the ABCC. CFMEU national secretary Dave Noonan told the media that construction workers would take national action if Tribe was jailed.

Hunter Valley nurses escalate anti-privatisation protest

Staff and residents' families from Wallsend Aged Care Facility in Newcastle, NSW rallied outside Labor MP Jodi McKay's office this week to protest state government plans to privatise the 11 remaining state-run nursing homes, including Wallsend. Nurses argue that Wallsend is a special needs facility, housing old and young people with a higher staff ratio than privately run facilities. They are worried that staff numbers will fall if it is sold off, affecting the level of care.

Last month, nurses and supporters from the Wallsend facility presented parliament with a petition containing 10,000 signatures opposing the privatisation. They plan to demonstrate outside state parliament this weekend, followed by rolling pickets at the Wallsend facility.

Telstra union calls off industrial action

The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU), representing telecommunications technicians employed at Telstra—Australia's largest telecommunications provider—called off national industrial action planned yesterday, after Telstra revised its pay offer in long-running enterprise bargaining negotiations.

The main disputed issue is pay, with the union wanting a base-pay rise

of at least 12.5 percent over three years—equal to an increase granted to technicians on individual contracts. Telstra is now offering 10 percent over three years—one percent less than non-union negotiated individual contracts—and a one-off 2.5 percent sign-on bonus.

CEPU members on a union-negotiated agreement have not had a wage increase for over two years. In an attempt to reduce worker discontent during stalled negotiations Telstra has granted an interim 2 percent pay increase backdated to February this year.

NT public hospital surgeons quit

Five of the 15 general surgeons employed at Royal Darwin Hospital in the Northern Territory resigned this week over pay and conditions. Others have indicated they may also quit. The hospital's acting general manager, Alan Wilson, says the resignations will cause major disruptions to the hospital's elective surgery schedule. The department has not been able to replace a surgeon who left in January this year.

The Health Department and the surgeons have been negotiating pay and conditions for 15 months. Surgeons say their pay is 25 to 30 percent lower than in other states and that the only way to express their concern was to resign.

Tasmanian college teachers begin industrial action

Tasmanian senior secondary teachers began state-wide action on November 3 over an education reform package called "Tasmania Tomorrow". The reform will affect year 11 and 12 students by turning colleges into campuses of the Tasmanian Polytechnic and Tasmanian Academy. More than 600 Australian Education Union (AEU) members this week voted for a series of industrial bans.

The state Labor government has reneged on a commitment that no school will be forced to participate in the reforms and is now forcing one school, Elizabeth College, to participate. Elizabeth College teachers passed a resolution refusing to participate in the reforms but this was overturned by the school principal, giving the green light for the government to proceed.

An AEU spokesperson claimed that problems with Tasmania Tomorrow have not been addressed by the government and will result in wasted resources, negative effects on teacher's health, top-heavy administration and loss of pastoral and educational support for teachers and students.

New Zealand: Ministry of Justice workers maintain rolling strikes

More than 1,800 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the Ministry of Justice struck for two hours on November 3. The action follows two previous strikes and work-to-rule industrial action begun on October 14. The PSA members, who work at courts and tribunals around the country, are protesting a government proposal to freeze wages. 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.

The union has indicated it will make concessions to gain a wage increase. Wagstaff said the PSA is "prepared to look at closing the pay gap in stages to make it affordable for the Ministry" and will "work with them to reduce their costs by finding ways of working more efficiently, identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity."

Parliamentary employees threatened with lockout

Parliamentary Services says it will lock out security guards who are members of the Public Service Association if they continue with industrial action. The threat came after security and other parliamentary workers struck for two hours on October 29.

About 130 PSA members, including security guards, library staff, reception workers, building maintenance staff and messengers, have been attending stop-work meetings since mid-October to protest a government proposal to freeze their pay and cut redundancy entitlements. The union has been in negotiations with Parliamentary Services since February over a new collective agreement.

New Zealand coal miners strike

A total of 780 miners employed at three Solid Energy (SE) mines in New Zealand are on strike. Action by Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members began last week when 180 miners at the company's Rotowaro open cut mine walked off the job, joined by a support strike of about 100 workers from the Huntly East underground mine. Last Friday, about 120 workers at the Spring Creek underground mine, near Greymouth, struck for 24 hours. On Tuesday this week, 500 miners at the Stockton mine, north of Westport, struck and set up a picket at the mine entrance. EPMU spokesperson Rob Egan said the company has suspended the Rotowaro workers who began the strike action.

The walkout follows a breakdown in talks between the EPMU, Solid Energy and HWE Mining Limited (which operates the Rotowaro mine for SE) over a new multi-employer collective agreement (MECA). No details

of the MECA negotiations have been released.

Pickets outside the Stockton mine, which is run jointly by SE and Downer EDI Mining, told reporters that they were striking in support of their colleagues in Rotowaro and were also upset about roster changes and health and safety issues. 70 jobs were cut from the mine in September.

Tertiary education teachers resume industrial action

Teaching staff at six institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITPs) in New Zealand have resumed industrial action after negotiations stalled between the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) and the ITPs over a new multi-employer collective agreement. Strikes and street rallies have been held this week at a number of polytechs around the country.

Around 950 TEU members went on strike in September to protest the ITPs offer, which the union claims, reduces real pay and conditions. The ITPs refuse to lift their original offer, which includes a pay rise of 1 percent over two years and would increase annual teaching days from 185 to 204. The ITPs also want discretionary leave to be determined at the employer's discretion.

The TEU has withdrawn its original demands, including a reduction in maximum teaching hours to 750 and greater protection for casual staff. The union says that it wants an improved pay offer but not at the expense of existing conditions. The institutions involved are Wintec, WITT, Unitec, Whitireia, NorthTec and Bay of Plenty Polytechnic.

Courier workers strike

Around 30 dispatch workers at New Zealand Couriers went on strike this week, picketing the company's site in Penrose, Auckland. The National Distribution Union (NDU) says the workers are paid less than others who do the same work. The NDU has been in negotiations with NZ Couriers since June over a new collective agreement.

Hospital workers plan industrial action

More than 800 administration and clerical staff in New Zealand's South Island hospitals have threatened to begin industrial action in two weeks if a pay dispute is not resolved. According to the Public Service Association, the workers are paid as little as \$27,600 (\$US19,700), \$3,000 less than the starting rate for workers in the North Island doing the same job.

The PSA says industrial action will begin on November 18 with workers taking their breaks at the same time and will escalate to rolling strikes if the dispute is still not resolved.

NZ Bus workers reject revised pay offer

About 700 NZ Bus drivers and cleaners voted on November 4 to reject a pay offer of just 11.5 percent over three years. The workers want a 12.6 percent increase. Four unions representing the workers had recommended that the offer be accepted.

The five-month dispute came to a head last month when NZ Bus locked out its workforce for one week after they announced plans for industrial action. NZ Bus lifted the lockout, which affected 80,000 passengers daily in the Auckland region, only after the unions withdrew the notice of industrial action. The combined unions have since been in negotiations with the company, mediated by the Employment Relations Authority. The unions have not announced any further industrial action.



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