

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.

Chinese private school teachers strike

Hundreds of private school teachers in Chengdu City, Sichuan walked off the job for two days on November 5 over low pay and unhealthy working conditions. The teachers have not had a pay rise since 2002 when the former state schools were privatised and taken over by the Derui Group, whose chairman Yan Yude is one of the wealthiest men in China.

The highest paid teachers only earn \$US368 per month—much less than comparable teachers in the state sector. Teachers also complained that they work in unsafe and rat-infested buildings. Pupils and parents rallied at the schools to support the teachers, complaining of unhealthy conditions and “sub-standard” food.

Yan Yude dismissed the walkout declaring that “thousands of teachers were queuing up to take the jobs.” The millionaire’s wife accused the teachers of being “low quality and not fit to teach”.

Protesting aged pensioners in China attacked by police

Some 100 police violently intervened in a demonstration of around 100 old-age pensioners outside Luzhou city hall in Sichuan on November 9 to petition the local government over loss of their retirement pensions. Three demonstrators—aged between 70 and 80—were hospitalised.

The pensioners are former Changjiang No. 2 Hydraulic Machinery Factory workers in Luzhou, who were laid off in the 1990s. They were recently told that their benefits would end because the factory was sold to a real estate developer.

One protestor, who asked to remain anonymous, said: “Workers are now extremely anxious because the new owner will no longer take care of us. This is why we have to petition the government for benefits.” Government officials refused to meet the pensioners.

Korean workers rally against new labour law

At least 50,000 unionised workers rallied in Seoul on November 7, followed by 16,000 the next day, demanding that the government drop plans to enforce new labour laws that weaken the unions. The government wants to implement the laws next year, which will allow multiple unions in workplaces and ban companies from paying wages to full-time union representatives. The laws were passed in 1997 but have never been implemented.

The rallies were organised by the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions and the Federation of Korean Trade Unions, which began negotiations with the government this week. The union federations said they would combine forces and launch a large-scale strike unless the government drops its plans to enforce the laws.

Bangladesh river transport strike ends

River transport workers called off strike action on November 9 and agreed to participate in a 16-member tripartite committee to consider workers’ demands and make a recommendation within two months. The walkout halted water transportation across the country for 38 hours.

Around 150,000 members of the Bangladesh River Vessel Workers Federation have presented a 22-point charter of demands, which includes a pay rise, increased waterway security to stop extortion and robbery, restoration of river and canal navigability through regular dredging, and an end shipping department corruption.

Indian auto workers end strike

A three-week strike by Rico Auto Industries employees in Gurgaon ended on November 7 after the management agreed to reinstate some

workers sacked during a pay dispute. The strike stopped the supply of auto parts to Ford and GM factories in the US and Canada.

Rico workers have been negotiating with management since August for a 10,000-rupee (\$US209) annual salary increase and the right to form a union. Sixteen workers were suspended during the dispute. On October 20, 100,000 workers from 60 factories in Gurgaon walked off the job over the death of a Rico worker killed in a clash between 3,500 striking workers and company thugs and scabs during pay negotiations.

Rico management has agreed to reinstate nine of the 16 suspended workers but the remaining seven would be considered after an in-house inquiry by a retired magistrate. Although an agreement was reached on pay and other issues no details have been reported to the media.

Indian liquor shop workers protest

State Marketing Corporation (Tasmac) liquor stores employees in Chennai, Tamil Nadu, demonstrated outside the Tasmac office at Egmore on November 5 to demand permanent employment. Tamil Nadu Tasmac Workers Union members claim that they have to work 12 hours a day for “meagre” wages, in violation of labour laws, and even after several years of employment are not offered permanency.

Sri Lankan public sector workers take industrial action.

On November 7, thousands of Ceylon Petroleum Corporation, Ceylon Electricity Board, National Water Supply and Drainage Board and Sri Lanka Ports Authority workers held a three-day work-to-rule campaign for a new collective agreement. Joint trade unions representing 54,000 workers rejected a 22 percent pay rise offer effective from November and demanded a higher increase effective from January 2009 and salary increases every three years.

Workers from the four state-owned companies have been picketing government installations and office buildings over the past two weeks to push their demands.

Pakistan irrigation workers protest

Hundreds of National Programme for Improving Watercourses (NPIW) employees from five Sindh districts marched through Khairpur to the Chief Minister’s House on November 9 demanding permanent status at the Irrigation Department.

Workers are complaining that 150,000 NPIW employees in the Punjab have been regularised but the Sindh government refuses to do the same.

The protestors were met by a representative of the Sindh chief minister who recorded their complaints.

NSW TAFE teachers stop work

Thousands of Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers throughout New South Wales attended stop-work meetings on November 10 and unanimously rejected changes to their working conditions directed by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). Under the ruling, teachers are required to increase their working week by five hours in return for a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years. Annual leave taken in combination with long-service leave will also be deducted from long-service leave entitlements.

The ruling increases TAFE teachers’ workload by 20 percent in return for an average 1.5 percent annual salary increase. Teachers at some centres were so incensed that they voted not to return to work for the rest of the day and Newcastle TAFE teachers stopped work for 48 hours.

The IRC ruling is in line with the state Labor government’s 2.5 percent wage rise cap on all public sector employees. Any increases above the cap must be based on trade-offs. The government, however, recently granted state members of parliament a 3 percent salary increase without trade-offs.

A media release from the NSW Teachers Federation claimed that the NSW Director General of Education had informed state school teachers that he could not guarantee that similar conditions would not be imposed on public school teachers once their award expires.

NSW Teachers Federation president Bob Lipscombe said that the TAFE teachers’ dispute was not settled, and “school teachers in public primary and high schools across the state will join with their TAFE colleagues to take combined industrial action within weeks.”

Qantas engineers impose work bans

Professional engineers who service the Qantas and Jetstar aircraft fleet, and sign off for airworthiness, imposed work bans on November 13 after seven months of failed negotiations over pay and conditions. The bans by 190 members of the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists and Managers (APESMA) means the engineers will not respond to call-outs during weekends and between 5p.m. and 8 a.m. on weekdays.

Engineers want a 30 percent pay increase over three years but Qantas claims this is “unreasonable” and “excessive”. A key issue in the dispute is the airline’s out-of-hours work policies that have led to serious cases of fatigue among the engineers and pose real safety risks.

According to the APESMA, there have been recently occasions where some senior engineers at Qantas have been required to respond to critical, complex engineering issues with less than five hours’ sleep between jobs

in a 24-hour period.

SA smelter workers implement work bans

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at the Nyrstar smelter in Port Pirie, South Australia began industrial action with overtime bans this week for a new work agreement. Workers want a 12 percent pay rise over three years but the union says Nyrstar wants individual performance contracts.

AWU's Port Pirie branch manager Michael Hopgood said the bans would continue for two weeks unless an agreement is reached. Union members stopped work for four hours on November 11 to attend a meeting over the issue.

WA school support workers walk out

Thousands of public school support workers across Western Australia held a half-day stoppage on November 11 after the government began suspending workers implementing work bans. Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union members, which include education assistants, cleaners and school gardeners, want a 20 percent pay rise over three years and permanency for part-time and casual workers employed for over 12 months.

Hundreds of workers protested outside the state Liberal Premier Colin Barnett's office in Perth denouncing the government's 8 percent offer over three years. For many workers the offer would only increase their pay by 44 cents an hour.

WA seafarers to strike

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members servicing the multi-billion-dollar offshore oil and gas sector are planning strike action for improved wages. The first strike will be for 48 hours on November 17 and affect 17 Farstad Shipping vessels in Bass Strait and around the northwest Australian coastline. Farstad is the first of 12 shipping companies expected to face industrial action unless the employers agree to the union claim.

The MUA wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years and a construction allowance (\$200 to \$300 per day) for seafarers engaged in offshore construction that will give them pay parity with riggers. The union also wants companies to pay \$45 daily per employee into a union-established training fund.

According to the *Australian*, the companies are close to agreeing to the

30 percent wage rise over three years, with the sticking point being pay parity and payments to the union training fund.

Victorian community services workers rally for pay

Almost 4,000 social and community services workers (SACS) in not-for-profit organisations from across Victoria rallied on the steps of state parliament in Melbourne on November 10 to call on the Brumby government to increase sector funding. Australian Services Union (ASU) members have been lobbying the government for 18 months for pay parity with Queensland SACS workers and public sector workers doing the same work.

In May this year, Queensland SACS workers were granted pay increases between 18 and 36 percent up to 2012.

Tasmanian teachers call off industrial action

Senior secondary teachers in Tasmania voted on November 11 to call off industrial action over an education reform package called "Tasmania Tomorrow" after the government agreed to enter talks. The reform will affect year 11 and 12 students by turning colleges into campuses of the Tasmanian Polytechnic and Tasmanian Academy.

The state Labor government had reneged on a commitment that no school will be forced to participate in the reforms and tried to force one school, Elizabeth College, to participate against the wishes of the majority of its teachers. The education department has agreed to consult Elizabeth College teachers about their concerns.

Other issues still have to be addressed, including resources, negative effects on teacher's health, top-heavy administration and loss of pastoral and educational support for teachers and students when the reform is implemented. Australian Education Union spokesman Greg Brown said although talks will continue industrial action will resume if teachers are not satisfied with the outcome.

NT public hospital surgeons enter negotiations

The Northern Territory's Royal Darwin Hospital surgeons who resigned last week hope to reach an agreement with management over pay and working conditions by the end of this weekend. Professor Phil Carson who is negotiating on behalf of the doctors said the department had come close to meeting all their demands.

Last week, five of the 15 general surgeons employed at the hospital resigned over poor pay and conditions. Others indicated they were also

ready to quit. 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.

New Zealand coal miners' strike continues

Around 1,000 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at four state-owned Solid Energy (SE) coal mines have been on strike since November 3 over a new work agreement. This week, around 300 workers from the Stockton mine marched through Westport, protesting changes to rosters and low wages. SE has threatened to start cutting jobs unless the miners returned to work.

The dispute began on October 27, when SE contractor HWE Mining indefinitely suspended 180 workers at its Rotowaro Open Cast Mine, who took industrial action after a breakdown in negotiations over a new multi-employer collective agreement (MECA). Hundreds of workers at the Huntly East mine, the Stockton mine near Westport, and the Spring Creek mine near Greymouth walked off the job protesting the Rotowaro lock-out and demanding improved work conditions.

Ministry of Justice workers vote to escalate industrial action

Around 1,800 Public Service Association (PSA) members at the Ministry of Justice attended 16 separate two-hour stop-work meetings on November 6 and voted to escalate strike action. Most courts across New Zealand were closed during the stoppage. The action followed three other strikes and work-to-rule industrial action begun on October 14. PSA members 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. There has been no announcement on what form of new action will be taken.



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