

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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much as 50,000 rupees a month.

## Chinese garment workers on strike

Around 3,000 employees at Hainan Youmei Underwear in Haikou City walked off the job on November 11 and gathered outside the factory to press their demands on pay and vacations, after management announced drastic cuts in bonuses. Workers at the German-Swiss-owned lingerie giant Triumph International were told they would receive no year-end bonus if their production efficiency failed to reach 50 percent of the average level last year. Mo Xiaohui, a worker at the plant, told Xinhua. "That was impossible for most of us as the production dropped sharply in the financial crisis."

Three days into the strike, management agreed to pay all workers their bonus, but workers decided to continue strike action over other demands. These include for the company to raise wages to the minimum national standard, provide vacations according to the law and end penalty pay deductions. The workers' monthly salary is as low as 500 yuan (\$US73), while the end of year bonus is 700 yuan.

## Indian junior doctors on strike

Around 950 junior doctors at the Patna Medical College Hospital and Darbhanga Medical College Hospital in Bihar are maintaining their strike, begun on November 10, for a wage increase. More than 90 doctors have been deployed from nearby government hospitals and private nursing homes to maintain emergency services. The government is claiming that 70 patients have died because of the strike and has threatened to deregister the doctors if they refuse to return to work.

The Bihar Junior Doctors Association is demanding that the state government honour a commitment given in December 2008 to raise their monthly stipend from 13,000 to 25,000 rupees (\$US540). Doctors contend that their counterparts in neighbouring Jharkhand are paid stipends of up to 30,000 rupees a month, while those in Central universities are paid as

## Jet Airways pilots' union de-registered

The Mumbai labour commissioner on November 13 de-registered the recently formed National Aviators Guild (NAG), a pilots' union at Jet Airways, India's largest private airline, for alleged "misrepresentation" of facts. NAG officials, who represent 40 percent of JA's 760 pilots, said they still hoped to resolve the issue through talks or appeal to the Industrial Court.

In September, NAG members went on mass sick leave to protest the sacking of two senior pilots because of their involvement in July in forming the NAG. During the five-day strike, Jet Air's domestic and international operations were brought to a standstill. Under a settlement between the airline and the union, the sacked pilots were reinstated, and a group comprising representatives from Jet Air, the Flight Operations Department and the NAG was set up to resolve outstanding issues.

## Laid off Cambodian garment workers seek compensation

Temporarily laid off workers at the Tack Fat factory in Phnom Penh's Meanchey district, have rejected a deal that would have paid them one-quarter of their monthly salaries while they wait to be rehired. A laid-off worker said the \$US12 per month offer was too meagre and that workers were asking for half their normal earnings.

Workers have been rallying at the factory since October 8 when it closed without notice and laid off all 1,823 employees. The owners said the factory would be closed for two months due to declining garment orders. A union representative said talks between city and union officials produced only a promise to launch an investigative committee.

Meanwhile, 500 employees at the Huiying Enterprises garment factory in Choam Chao are seeking compensation after their Chinese employer skipped town last week without paying their monthly salaries.

According to a report released by the Ministry of Labour, 130 Cambodian factories have closed during 2009, resulting in the loss of

30,683 jobs. The ministry estimates an additional 30,617 workers are facing unemployment because of a decline in export orders.

### **Vietnamese garment workers strike**

More than 1,500 workers at the South Korean-owned garment factory Viet-Han, in the Vietnamese port city of Haiphong, struck on November 9 to demand base salary increases and changes to the way bonuses are awarded. A company spokesman claimed the company could not raise workers' base salary, set at \$US63 per month, as it was already \$3 above the national minimum wage. But after three days of strike, the management offered to consider making it easier for workers to receive production bonuses. Workers agreed to consider the offer.

### **WA seafarers on strike**

Limited strike action by seafarers in Western Australia's offshore energy support sector began on November 17, with 15 of Farstad Shipping's 20 vessels affected.

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

Following the strike, the Australian Shipowners Association offered a 20 percent pay rise over three years. This was rejected by the MUA, but the union has said it hopes to avoid further industrial action.

### **Victorian council workers begin industrial action**

Around 450 workers employed by the City of Greater Geelong in regional Victoria began industrial action on November 17 after negotiations with the council's management over the terms of a new work place agreement broke down. The immediate impact has been on garbage collection and street sweeping, with bans on collecting rubbish in the cities downtown area.

A further 24 bans have been put in place, including by council engineers and nurses who are expected to join the strike action in the coming days. Action by parking inspectors has already caused the loss of \$77,000 in revenue for the council.

Australian Services Union (ASU) members have been at loggerheads with the council for the last eight months over the terms of a new work

place agreement. Workers are demanding a 10 percent wage rise over two years to reach parity with employees of adjacent councils. Geelong City management is offering just 3.25 percent over two years.

### **NSW TAFE teachers walk out**

Teachers from Technical and Further Education (TAFE) colleges in the upper Illawarra, New South Wales, walked off the job on November 18 in protest at proposed changes to their working conditions in a ruling by the NSW Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). Protest rallies were held outside the offices of local state Labor MPs.

Last week, thousands of TAFE teachers throughout the state attended stop-work meetings to vote against the changes. Under the ruling, teachers are required to increase their work week by five hours in return for a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years. The changes would increase TAFE teachers' workload by 20 percent in return for an average 1.5 percent annual salary increase. The ruling is designed to enforce the pay and productivity measures of the state Labor government.

### **SA smelter workers directed to lift work bans**

The Rudd Labor government's Fair Work Australia agency this week directed Australian Workers Union members at the Nyrstar smelter in Port Pirie, South Australia to suspend work bans and for the union and the company to continue negotiations for a new work agreement. Workers want a 12 percent pay rise over three years, but the union says Nyrstar wants individual performance contracts.

### **Queensland Teachers Union accepts pay offer**

The Queensland Teacher's Union (QTU) will recommend that its 37,000 members accept a state Labor government pay rise offer, of just 12.5 percent over three years, which teachers rejected in May. Throughout the seven-month dispute, which involved strikes and work bans, teachers have demanded pay parity with colleagues in other states. The 12.5 percent pay offer means they would still be earning between \$4,000 and \$7,000 a year less than interstate teachers.

The deal accepted by the union includes increased base pay for new teachers, experienced classroom teachers and school leaders, including principals. Other teachers will receive a one-off grant of \$500. The union is claiming the deal means every state school teacher would receive a pay rise of between \$7,500 and \$11,500 over the three year agreement.

A ballot of QTU members on the agreement will close on November 23. Some teachers have complained publicly that the deal still does not satisfy

their demand for pay parity.

### **Darwin hospital surgeons return to work**

Royal Darwin Hospital surgeons, who began resigning two weeks ago, returned to work this week after management met most of their demands on pay and conditions. By the end of last week, six of the 15 general surgeons employed at the hospital had resigned following 15 months of failed negotiations over conditions and pay parity with colleagues in other states.

### **New Zealand firefighters reject pay offer**

Members of the Professional Firefighters Union (PFU) have voted by a majority of 94.6 percent to reject a pay offer of 1.3 percent, with a further 1.5 percent next year. Firefighter contracts expired at the end of 2008, but the offer is not backdated. The offer does not even cover inflation, which stands at 1.7 percent.

The PFU this week notified Fire Services that work bans begun in October will remain in place up to December 5. Bans include refusing to undertake training, administrative tasks, or provide community education. PFU members will still attend to emergencies.

The PFU merely wants to increase firefighters' base starting rate from \$10.74 an hour to \$12.50, in line with the national minimum wage. The base rate is used to calculate allowances for working nights, weekends, public holidays and overtime.

### **Ministry of Justice workers strike**

About 1,000 employees at the Ministry of Justice, who collect fines and work at courts and tribunals, walked off the job on November 16 over a new collective agreement. Court services across New Zealand were severely affected for 24 hours. Striking Public Service Association (PSA) members rallied at the Auckland and Manukau District Courts, calling on the government to "front up with better pay".

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 until July 2010 and then implement performance-based pay increases. The union has been in negotiations with the ministry since two previous collective agreements expired on June 30.

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.

### **New Zealand coal miners vote to end strike**

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at four mines of state-owned Solid Energy voted to return to work, contingent on negotiations between the union and management on November 21. More than 800 miners went on strike in support of colleagues locked out of the Huntly's Rotowaro open-cast mine on October 27 after they implemented work bans in support of a new multi-employer collective agreement (MECA).

The strike has affected mines at Rotowaro and Huntly East in the North Island, and Stockton and Spring Creek in Buller and the West Coast. Details of the proposed MECA have not been released.

### **Arcor NZ workers locked out**

Some 66 EPMU members employed at the Australian-owned aluminium beverage cans maker Arcor, were locked out of its Manukau plant on November 16 after they voted to reject a pay offer and signalled their intention to strike. According to the EPMU the offer contained a pay rise but cut breaks and lowered minimum staffing levels.

Last month, Arcor's CEO had his pay hiked to \$8 million and the executive gave themselves an 11 percent pay increase. EPMU members are currently picketing Arcor's Manukau plant.

### **Hospital workers begin industrial action**

More than 800 administration and clerical staff in New Zealand's South Island hospitals began industrial action on November 20, with hospital workers taking their work breaks at the same time. The action will continue until November 26.

The administration and clerical workers are paid as little as \$27,600 (\$US19,700), just 78 cents an hour above the minimum wage, and \$3,000 less than the starting rate for workers on the North Island doing the same job.

### **Solomon Islands public servants strike cancelled**

A strike called by the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union

(SIPEU) on November 17 was cancelled hours later after the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Public Service, Ishmael Avui, declared that it was illegal to strike while the dispute was being mediated by the Trade Disputes Panel (TDP).

A 12-hour strike held in August was called off by SIPEU after the TDP intervened. The union had presented a series of claims to the government, including a cost of living increase, improved accommodation allowances and compensation for property damage caused by the 2007 tsunami.



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