

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 shuts down public service union offices

All 59 regional offices of the Korean Government Employees Union (KGEU) have been shut down as part of the Lee Myung-bak administration's clampdown on unionised civil servants. The Ministry of Public Administration and Security said the union had "defied repeated government orders to dismiss fired civil workers from the union".

The government dismissed 14 senior members of the union and disciplined a dozen others for participating in anti-government rallies in July, but the union has kept them on its payroll.

Last month, the KGEU was labelled an "illegitimate entity" after it aligned itself with the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU). The government has stopped deducting union dues from the 50,200 KGEU members' pay.

In anticipation of further industrial action by public servants, the government is planning revisions to public service regulations that will take effect from December 1. The regulations will prohibit government employees from collectively objecting to government policies and from wearing clothing with political slogans. A KGEU spokesman said it would file a petition with the Constitutional Court.

Korean railway workers on strike

Around 16,000 members of the Korea Railway Workers Union (KRWU) began strike action on November 26 to protest the Korea Railroad Corporation's (KORAIL) cancellation of their collective agreement. During negotiations for a new agreement, KORAIL annulled the existing one, because the parties could not narrow their differences, particularly over the reinstatement of fired workers. This is the first time in KORAIL's 60-year history that a collective bargaining agreement has been terminated.

Earlier this month, KRWU members struck for two days over KORAIL's planned restructure to abolish the current wages system and retrench workers. The union also demanded the reinstatement of 50 sacked workers. KORAIL CEO Huh Joon-young has inflamed the dispute by indirectly threatening to sack union representatives, stating that 61 employees were working as full-time union officials, a three-times higher rate than in other public sectors.

Indian construction workers on strike

About 2,000 contract workers on the Supermax project at Haldia Petrochemicals (HPL) near Kolkata, West Bengal launched an indefinite strike from November 21 after talks failed the previous day between the company and the HPL Contractors Workers Union. Workers' demands include a wage increase, dearness allowance and induction of temporary workers on the payroll.

Over 20 workers were injured when police baton-charged a picket line during a confrontation between striking workers and scabs who tried to forcibly break the picket. Workers accused political leaders of trying to sabotage their strike by mobilising members of INTTUC (the Indian National Trinamool Trade Union Congress) who were not HPL employees.

This is the first time that an indefinite strike has paralysed operations at HPL, in which the West Bengal government is the principal partner. The plant is being upgraded to raise its ethylene capacity from 520,000 to 670,000 tonnes per annum.

Indian junior doctors suspend strike

The 950 striking junior doctors at the Patna Medical College Hospital and Darbhanga Medical College Hospital in Bihar temporarily suspended their 12-day old strike for 15 days on November 21 following an intervention by the Bihar chapter of the Indian Medical Association (IMA) and Bihar State Health Service Association (BSHSA). A joint statement issued by the IMA, BSHSA and Junior Doctors Association (JDA) warned that if the state government did not accept their demands

within the 15 days the three associations would resume industrial action jointly.

The Bihar JDA is demanding that the state government honour a commitment given in December 2008 to raise monthly stipends from 13,000 to 25,000 rupees (\$US540) and introduce a residency system. Doctors contend that their counterparts in neighbouring Jharkhand are paid up to 30,000 rupees a month, while those in Central universities are paid as much as 50,000 rupees.

The government has lodged criminal cases against the doctors, as well as cancelling their registration, for defying an order by the state's Human Rights Commission to end the strike.

Andhra Pradesh transport workers issue strike notice

The joint action committee representing 50,000 members of five Andhra Pradesh State Road Transport Corporation (APSRTC) unions issued a strike notice to RTC management on November 26, threatening to strike any time after December 10 if their demands are not met. Demands include the filling of vacancies, replacement of over 5,000 old buses, checks on illegal private bus operators, an end to hiring private buses and jobs for family members of deceased employees.

Another union, the National Mazdoor Union, said it would also issue a strike notice on the APSRTC and intends to strike on December 11 over similar issues.

Orissa police baton-charge protesting teachers

On November 23, 30 teachers were arrested and hundreds injured when police in Bhubaneswar used water cannon and baton-charged a rally by thousands of teachers from non-government secondary schools in Orissa. Teachers had been demonstrating at the State Assembly. The police attack occurred when teachers began to march towards the chief minister's residence at Naveen Nivas. Teachers are demanding regularisation of employment and allocation of grants.

In March last year, police attacked a protest at the Orissa chief minister's residence by teachers from non-government schools over the same issues, causing injury to more than 10 demonstrators.

Bangladeshi unemployed nurses on hunger strike

Unemployed nurses began a hunger strike on November 21 at the Central Shaheed Minar memorial in Dhaka, demanding the government immediately recruit 5,000 unemployed diploma nurses. At least 10 nurses

have fallen ill and were given intravenous saline.

At a rally of nurses from across the country, Bangladesh Unemployed Diploma Nurses Association leaders declared that the protests would be escalated if the government did not immediately fulfil their demands.

Bangladeshi jute workers protest

Over 2,000 workers from the Kashem Jute Mills in Sitakunda, Shitalpur held a rally on the highway in front of their factory on November 23 to demand payment of unpaid wages. Traffic on the Dhaka-Chittagong Highway came to a complete standstill during the two-hour rally.

Workers say they have not been paid salaries for nearly a year and resorted to the street after management repeatedly ignored their grievance.

Cambodian rail workers protest

At least 300 rail workers demonstrated inside Phnom Penh Railway Station on November 19 to demand that the government pay two months' back salary. In June, the government awarded Australia's Toll Holdings a 30-year contract to manage the Phnom Penh-Poipet line. Under an agreement, Toll is required to pay salaries for only 670 of the 1,000 rail employees, and the Railway Department is to pay the rest.

Workers say they have not been paid salaries since October when the railroad, formerly a state entity, was placed under a new Railway Department within the Ministry of Public Works and Transport. As a result of the protest, the Ministry said the October salaries would be paid, but gave no commitment for November's wages.

Indonesian workers rally for minimum wage increase

On November 19, thousands of workers staged a rally at the Central Java gubernatorial office in Semarang to demand that the minimum wage in 2010 be raised to the KHL (decent living standards) based on a survey conducted by the Central Java remuneration council. Workers, affiliated with the Indonesian Labor Union Federation and the National Labor Union, arrived on trucks, cars and motorcycles and displayed placards saying, "Wages must be set according to decent living needs" and "To live and die reasonably".

The remuneration survey shows the average amount of next year's KHL for regencies and municipalities in the province is 801,201 rupiah (\$US83) per month, while workers currently receive only 734,874 rupiah on average.

On the same day, hundreds of workers in Tegal, Central Java protested against insufficient wages. Workers are demanding their monthly wage be raised from 700,000 rupiah to the 2010 KHL for Tegal city of 798,000 rupiah.

On November 11, thousands of Semarang City workers held a protest rally to reject the city's minimum monthly wage (UMK) proposed by the mayor of 893,000 rupiah in 2010, instead demanding 944,538 rupiah.

WA school support workers stop work

On November 26, school support workers in Perth, Western Australia defied an order by the Industrial Relations Commission banning them from taking strike action. Around 400 cleaners, education assistants and gardeners walked off the job for the second time this month and rallied at parliament house to protest the government's pay offer.

Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members want a 20 percent pay rise over three years and permanency for part-time workers who have been employed longer than 12 months. The government has offered 8 percent over three years, which translates to an increase of just 44 cents an hour. Many of the workers earn less than \$35,000 a year.

Earlier this month, the union called off work bans after the Department of Education and Training began suspending the wages of workers.

SA smelter workers resume work bans

Australian Workers Union (AWU) members at the Nyrstar smelter in Port Pirie, South Australia have re-imposed work bans after rejecting the latest company pay offer on November 20. Last week the Rudd Labor government's Fair Work Australia agency directed the union to suspend work bans and resume talks. Negotiations for a new work agreement have been going on for more than 12 months

Workers originally wanted a 12 percent pay rise over three years, but this has now been reduced to 7.5 percent, according to a posting on the union's web site. Nyrstar wants to put workers on individual performance contracts.

Victorian university staff impose work bans

Melbourne University staff voted to begin industrial action and continue the action over the holidays and next year in a bid to pressure the university into negotiating a new workplace agreement. At a meeting on

November 19, unionised staff voted not to process end-of-year student results. The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) began negotiating for separate new work agreements at about 30 universities across Australia over 18 months ago.

Queensland public school teachers accept pay offer

Public school teachers in Queensland have voted in favour of a union recommendation to accept the state Labor government's pay rise offer of 12.5 percent over three years, which teachers rejected in May. The deal brokered by the Queensland Teachers Union includes increased base pay for new teachers, experienced classroom teachers and school leaders, including principals.

About 18 percent of the 37,000 union members voted against the deal. Throughout the seven-month dispute, which involved strikes and work bans, teachers rejected the 12.5 percent offer and demanded pay parity with colleagues in other states. The increase means they will still be earning between \$4,000 and \$7,000 a year less than interstate teachers.

The Education Department must now conduct a ballot of all teachers, including non-union members, before the Industrial Relations Commission can certify the agreement.

Union calls off Geelong City workers' bans

The Australian Services Union, representing 450 employees who are locked in a pay dispute against the City of Greater Geelong in regional Victoria, has accepted a request from council management to partially lift work bans and direct workers to clean rubbish from streets being used on Gala Day, November 21.

The bans were imposed on issuing parking fines, emptying bins and cleaning streets in the inner part of the town. Meetings of union delegates have been called to discuss management's latest wage offer of 3.25 percent per year over two years, as well as a minimum pay increase of \$2,300 per year for low-paid workers. Workers on higher wage brackets would get only a 4 percent increase over two years.

Mass walkout over New Zealand pay freeze

Almost 27,000 low-paid workers in schools, hospitals and services for the disabled planned to take to the streets on November 27 to protest the government's Budget decision not to fund any new pay rises in the public sector this financial year because of escalating public debt.

Some 2,700 orderlies, cleaners, kitchen and security staff at public

hospitals were to strike for four hours to attend 27 lunchtime rallies from Kaitaia to Invercargill, and 3,000 staff of the intellectual disability service IHC planned to strike for eight hours. Another 21,000 school support workers, including teacher aides, librarians, science technicians and office staff were staging school-based protests and planned their own street march for Saturday.

The strike is part of a Council of Trade Unions campaign calling for an end to wage freezes in government departments.

Public Service Association members in South Island hospitals began industrial action for a pay rise on November 20, with hospital workers taking their work breaks at the same time. Around 800 hospital workers went on strike on November 23. South Island hospital 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.

New Zealand coal miners resume strike action

Workers at state-owned Solid Energy's South Island coal mines have resumed strike action begun a month ago for a new multi-employer collective agreement. Action by Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members has affected mines at Rotowaro and Huntly East in the North Island, and Stockton and Spring Creek in Buller and the West Coast.

Huntly East management resumed talks last weekend and all four mines returned to work, but negotiations again broke down. The Huntly East miners want a 13.5 percent pay increase, but the management is offering just 8.5 percent. The EPMU said Solid Energy planned to reduce miners' hours at the Huntly East mine but not compensate them for the loss of income.

NZ Bus workers accept pay deal

The long dispute between New Zealand Bus and its Auckland drivers and cleaners, which involved strikes and a lockout, ended this week when workers accepted the company's latest pay offer. The deal brokered by Auckland Combined Unions negotiators, representing about 900 employees, includes an 11.5 percent pay increase over the next three years. Workers originally sought a 12.5 percent increase.

Three weeks ago, union members turned down an earlier offer agreed to between the company and union negotiators, because of concerns over two clauses relating to conditions.

Solomon Islands construction workers end strike

Construction workers employed by the China United Corporation (CUC) to build a new rugby stadium in Honiara have returned to work after a pay deal was struck between the company and the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW). Workers struck on October 20, demanding that CUC comply with a Trade Disputes Panel order to raise their wages by 6 percent, back-dated to January. The company said it had raised wages, but SINUW claimed CUC reduced its workers' existing wages before implementing the 6 percent increase and had not paid the back-pay.

Under the agreement, payment is backdated to January 5. The 62 workers and 142 dismissed workers will receive an average of \$2,000 each.



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