

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 December 2009

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Indian tea estate workers' lockout enters third month

A lockout of Nowera Nuddy tea estate workers has entered its third month. The Nowera Nuddy Estate (Tata Tea) Workers' Action Committee members were locked out on September 14 after they organised a series of protests over the company's mistreatment of Arti Oraon, a young female worker. She was denied maternity leave and eventually collapsed while working in the fields.

The tea estate is owned by Indian trans-national conglomerate Tata, whose well-known subsidiary Tetley is a member of the Ethical Tea Partnership, which supposedly "aims to improve the lives of tea workers".

The estate employees have been denied wages and rations for all but two days' work since early August. They want the estate reopened, all outstanding wages paid and the suspension of eight victimised workers to be lifted.

Protesting municipal workers arrested

Police arrested more than a dozen municipal workers in Naupada, Andhra Pradesh, protesting outside the civic administrative office over a new biometric attendance system. The system, which was instituted on October 27, records attendance via a thumb impression rather than traditional muster rolls. Some workers have not been paid because they failed to register under the new system.

The Municipal Labor Union claims that the Municipality Commissioner has refused to meet with the union to resolve the issue, despite repeated requests. The police have imposed a ban on any protests within 200 metres of the municipal headquarters.

Indian domestic workers to protest for conditions

Domestic workers in Maharashtra are planning a protest for December 15 to demand minimal pay rates and the establishment of welfare boards in every district to provide workers with social benefits. A government spokesman previously promised to institute the measures in December 2008 but failed to honour the pledge.

One worker told the local media that wages not fixed by law were so poor that domestic employees had little choice but to take out loans to make ends meet.

"Prices of vegetables, food grains and other eatables have risen to such an extent that we have to worry about being able to eat on a daily basis," she said. "Also, we don't easily get the items that we are entitled to under the ration system. That's why we have to scrounge for kerosene and sugar in the black market."

Indonesian workers protest inadequate minimum wage rise

Around 2,000 people rallied outside Jakarta's City Hall on December 8 to demand that Governor Fauzi Bowo revoke a recent gubernatorial decree that only granted a 4.5 percent increase in the minimum monthly wage for the city's workers. The rise, which will be introduced on January 1, lifts the minimum wage to just 1,118,009 rupiah (\$US120) a month.

A spokesman for the protestors said that the increase only covered 84 percent of the cost of living in Jakarta and that workers had demanded a 10 percent rise. He said workers wanted an explanation from both the city administration and the wage council on how they arrived at the new minimum wage. The protest was called by the Jakarta Labor Forum, an umbrella union organisation covering members in several industries.

Korail plans reprisals against rail workers for striking

Korail management in South Korea announced on December 4 that it would take disciplinary action against all Korean Railway Workers' Union members involved in a recent eight-day strike that disrupted train operations across the country. The walkout was called to protest the company's decision to break a collective bargaining agreement with the

union. The disciplinary threats were issued on the day that strikers returned to work.

A senior company spokesman claimed that the walkout had caused losses amounting to 9.1 billion won (\$US7.9 million) and that Korail would file civil and criminal suits against union strikers. “The 11,700 unionists would be sorted into strike leaders and strike participants and then disciplined appropriately,” he declared, adding that the company aimed to “create a new labor-management culture.”

Korail has also asked government prosecutors to investigate 188 striking railway workers over “illegal stoppages” and wants key union officials arrested, including union head Kim Ki-tae, who is accused of “masterminding” the stoppage.

Land transportation and maritime affairs minister, Chung Jong-hwan, told the media last week that the government was considering ways to reform the country’s railway system, including “cutting about 5,000 Korail workers, restructuring affiliate companies and outsourcing simple tasks”.

Queensland rail workers strike over workshops sell-off

About 1,300 rail maintenance and repair workers in Queensland walked off the job on December 9 against state government’s plan to sell off the workshops and at least \$7 billion in rail assets. The Labor government released its final listing of rail assets for sale this week.

The sell off, which includes Queensland Rail’s coal cartage and other freight businesses, has provoked widespread opposition among public sector workers. A recent poll shows that 79 percent of Queensland residents are opposed to the privatisations.

In a bid to undermine the popular opposition, State Treasurer Andrew Fraser told ABC radio that rather than privatising the state’s port and toll-road businesses outright the government would sell 99-year leases. Rail assets will also be sold through a public float rather than private sale with rail workers being offered free or cheap shares.

Postal workers set to take industrial action

Postal workers are set to begin nationwide industrial action next week after negotiations with Australia Post for a new enterprise work agreement broke down. The action is expected to include work stoppages and ignoring unstamped cards or letters during sorting and delivery.

The workers want a new agreement that protects penalty shifts, rosters and take-home pay and a commitment from Australia Post to improve workplace safety. They also want an end to the use of company-paid doctors to assess workers’ injuries, which the Communications Electrical Plumbing Union (CEPU) claims has led to many employees being forced to return to work when they are still unfit to do so.

Negotiations for an enterprise agreement began in April but have continually stalled. Australia Post appealed to the Rudd government’s

Fair Work Australia on three occasions to block a ballot for industrial action. When a vote was finally held on November 25, more than 9,000 workers out of the 11,500 who participated backed the industrial campaign.

Refinery workers locked out

Locked out BP Eagle Farm refinery workers in Brisbane, Queensland established a picket line outside the company’s nearby office on December 10. The 39 refinery maintenance workers are currently involved in negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement.

The Electrical Trades Union (ETU) claims that BP has demanded that the new agreement requires employees to work in temperatures of 35 degrees or more for 12 hours, with only two 20-minute rest breaks instead of the current three breaks.

Shortly after the picket line was established, a worker was injured by a shuttle bus driven by a contractor. According to an ETU spokesman, the driver deliberately swerved towards the picket. He said the picketing worker’s head “hit the windshield and then bounced off the driveway”. The man was transported to hospital suffering head wounds and suspected abdominal injuries.

Nurses protest staff cuts

More than 150 nurses marched in the NSW rural town of Lismore on December 10 to protest ongoing cuts to staff and working conditions at the Lismore Base Hospital by the North Coast Area Health Service (NCAHS). The nurses were cheered by building workers and residents as they made their way through the town in heatwave conditions.

Speakers at a 600-strong rally after the march said that job cuts, including the elimination of wards people, an X-ray transport person and the unit responsible for discharging patients, had impacted severely on nurses’ workloads and patient safety. The NSW state government’s underfunding of hospitals has not only resulted in staff cuts but prevented many hospitals securing vital medical supplies.

New Zealand supermarket workers protest low wages

Around 45 distribution workers employed by supermarket giant Foodstuffs protested on December 5 outside two Pak’n Save supermarkets and one New World supermarket in Christchurch. The action follows protests and strikes in September and November over Foodstuffs’ refusal to increase wages. The National Distribution Union (NDU), which has been in negotiations with the company for the past nine months, says Foodstuffs workers receive little more than the minimum wage of \$NZ12.50 an hour (\$US8.86).

A union spokesperson said the workers were also protesting the company's refusal to pay over \$5,000 in wages lost when 120 workers were suspended following a one-hour strike last month at Foodstuffs' Christchurch distribution centre.

Foodstuffs, one of New Zealand's two major supermarket companies, posted a record \$227 million profit in February, up from \$222 million the previous year. Food prices have risen by 12.1 percent over the past two years.

Solomon Islands: Palm oil workers strike

Members of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (SINUW) at Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Limited have been on strike since December 8 over the company's refusal to recognise the union. General manager Harry Brock said the company would only recognise the Guadalcanal Plains Palm Oil Workers Association (GPPOWA), which represents 60 percent of the workforce. Brock claimed the strike by SINUW members was "unlawful".



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