

# 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.

## Indian tyre workers protest in support of demands

Hundreds of Birla Tyre workers protested in Balasore for a 10-point charter of demands on December 22 and submitted their claims to the Orissa state governor and chief minister.

Demands by the Birla Tyres Workers Union (BTWU) members include reinstatement of the union's general secretary and assistant secretary, who were suspended illegally by the company. BTWU members also want nearly 200 warehouse workers retrenched since 2000 rehired, and compensation and jobs provided for the kin of deceased workers and those disabled in tyre industry-related accidents. The workers are threatening to blockade the Orissa plant if their demands are not met.

## Almond-processing workers demonstrate in New Delhi

Nearly 2,000 striking almond workers demonstrated at Jantar-Mantar in New Delhi on December 23. Around 20,000 members of the Badaam Mazdoor Union (BMU), who are employed in Karawal Nagar, northeast Delhi, went on strike two weeks ago over a series of demands.

The almond-processing workers want regularisation of employment, a minimum 80 rupees per 23 kilogram bag of processed almonds and double payment for overtime. The nuts are sent for processing to Karawal Nagar by US, Canadian and Australian companies to take advantage of cheap labour. Workers are paid just 50 rupees (\$US1) to process a bag of almonds while the completed bag returns around 7,000 rupees profit for contractors.

The workers also want identity cards because contractors often fail to pay wages on time and then attempt to avoid payment, demanding that workers produce proof of identity. The almond-processing workers claim that contractors constantly flout labour laws to exploit employees.

On December 17, a peaceful march of women workers was attacked by

almond-processing contractors and their armed goons. Instead of arresting the perpetrators, the police arrested union officials.

## Thai garment workers protest beatings

Angry strike action by over 1,500 Burmese migrant workers at the Top Form brassiere factory in Mae Sot, western Thailand erupted on December 18, after four security guards assaulted two relatives of one of the employees. One relative was hospitalised but the other, Ko Waw, disappeared after the beating and workers feared she had been killed.

Top Form management, aided by security guards and an estimated 300 police and military personnel, imprisoned the protesting workers in the factory compound. The plant is located near the Moei River on the Thai-Burma border. The company claims that garment workers set fire to the factory owner's car and damaged company property.

One protesting worker told the media that the garment workers, who are mainly young women, often worked until midnight and were often harassed or sexually assaulted.

Top Form garment employees ended their protest and were released after police located Ko Waw in a Burma hospital and brought her to the factory. According to Thai press reports, Top Form workers downed tools on December 21 to demand reinstatement of sacked employees and for welfare benefits they are entitled to under Thai labour laws.

There is an estimated two million Burmese migrants in Thailand, most of them have no legal rights and no access to education, health and welfare services.

## Vietnamese garment workers strike

Over 750 MJ Apparel employees in Bien Hoa struck on December 16 over poor working conditions. A Bien Hoa Labor Union spokesman said that workers were protesting over forced overtime and restricted access to toilet facilities. Other grievances included non-payment of workers' social and health insurance and substandard meals at the Korean-owned factory in Dong Nai province.

employees were “going backwards”. She said casino employees wanted an offer that “improves their standard of living”. The casino increased its last quarter revenue by 11.6 percent.

### **Miners strike over work agreement**

About 300 mineworkers at Xstrata’s Tahmoor coal mine in the NSW southern coal fields walked off the job for 24 hours on December 21 for a new workplace agreement. It is the second work stoppage this month. The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) has been in continuous negotiations with Xstrata for 15 months, with workers rejecting two draft agreements.

Xstrata has been restructuring its Tahmoor operation, axing 158 jobs at the mine in September, and now wants increased workplace flexibility in the workplace agreement. This, it claims, is necessary for “the continued operation and viability of the mine.”

### **Maritime union calls early end to WA strike**

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) officials in Western Australia called off a four-day strike by 200 members after two days on December 20 to resume talks with Total Marine Services. The company is contracted to provide staff, equipment and transport support for Woodside Petroleum on the \$13 billion Pluto Gas project in the Pilbara.

The walkout was part of an industrial campaign against ship owners servicing off-shore oil projects. The union wants a 30 percent pay rise over three years and a training allowance of up to \$300 per day to bring maritime employees into line with construction workers on the projects.

Limited industrial action by the MUA began in November when seafarers at Farstad Shipping, which operates 20 vessels in Bass Straight and off the Western Australian coast, struck for four days. MUA members rejected a 20 percent pay rise offer from the Australian Shipowners Association.

### **Casino workers vote for industrial action**

Star City casino employees in Sydney voted last week to take industrial action after overwhelmingly rejecting a 7.5 percent pay rise over three years with no back pay. The latest offer is just 0.5 percent better than one made to employees in July.

A Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union spokesman said management had refused to consider further increasing the offer and that workers were taking action as “a last resort”. The form of industrial action is yet to be decided.

One Star City worker said the pay deal was “substandard” and that

### **Tasmanian paper mill workers locked out**

CFMEU members were locked out of the Paperlinx-Tas Papers mill in Burnie on December 23, after a series of stop-work meetings over proposed job losses. The next day management claimed that it had an agreement with the union and the factory would re-open on December 27.

Paperlinx-Tas Papers plans to axe 252 jobs at its Wesley Vale mill by March next year and eliminate 170 jobs when it sells its Burnie operations. The CFMEU campaign is not centred on saving jobs but for redundancy entitlements for the Burnie workers. The company has already guaranteed severance pay for the Wesley Vale employees.

### **Nyrstar in Tasmania provokes walkout**

Five CFMEU members at Hobart’s Nyrstar zinc smelter walked off the job on December 24 after the company said they would not be paid if they maintained work bans over a pay dispute.

CFMEU organiser Marshall Reeves said the current enterprise agreement at the smelter expired three years ago. Twenty-six meetings between the company and the union had failed to produce a new agreement. Reeves said the company wanted performance-based pay, which has already been rejected by union members. Workers are seeking a three-year deal with automatic pay increases for all.

### **Victorian pathology lab ordered to end lockout**

Fair Work Australia last week ordered Dorevitch Pathology to end a lockout at its Ballarat laboratory in Victoria and negotiate with the Medical Scientists Association (MSA) for a new work agreement. Pathology services throughout Victoria have been severely affected since mid-December after the company locked out 25 scientists.

Scientists and laboratory staff have been taking limited industrial action since September, calling for a 17 percent pay rise in line with colleagues in similar services. Their enterprise bargaining agreement expired in mid-2007. An MSA spokesman said Dorevitch’s pay offer was below market rates and that scientists would fall further behind when public sector agreements were renegotiated in 2011 and 2012.

## New Zealand hospital workers strike

Around 70 orderlies at Waikato Hospital struck for four hours on Thursday in protest against a government-imposed wage freeze. Pay talks between the Unite union and the Waikato District Health Board broke down last month. Unite claims that orderlies' working conditions and relativities had deteriorated compared to other hospital workers.



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