

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.

Indonesian media workers demonstrate

Some 200 employees from the privately owned Indosiar television station rallied outside their workplace in West Jakarta on January 11 to demand a pay rise and better facilities. The demonstrators, who wore black Indosiar uniforms and red headbands, carried posters with messages such as, "Six years with no pay raise" and "Don't fool us".

An Indosiar union spokesman said many long-time employees were only paid 350,000 rupiahs (\$US38) a month and that overtime rates were below the Labor Law standard.

South Korean auto workers to strike

Over 27,800 workers at South Korea's third-largest carmaker Kia Motors, an affiliate of Hyundai Motors, will down tools at its three plants for four hours each day, starting Monday, in protest against a company wage offer. Kia's offer includes a bonus equivalent to three months' pay and a one-time payout of about 4.8 million won (\$US4,000) in exchange for a wage freeze for 2010.

The union has not opposed the freeze and is demanding instead incentives and bonuses equal to those received last year at Hyundai. The Hyundai deal is slightly above Kia's current offer. The Hyundai union convinced its members to accept a wage freeze and a one-time 5 million won payout for each worker, a bonus equivalent to three months' pay and 40 company shares.

Thai auto workers end strike

Around 1,600 full-time employees at Auto Alliance Thailand's assembly plant in Rayong ended strike action on January 6 after management threatened to lock out all 2,200 full-time workers if they refused to accept a company pay offer. Around 600 union members are continuing to rally outside the plant demanding a better deal.

Auto Alliance Thailand (AAT) and the Ford-Mazda Thailand Union began negotiations over pay and bonuses last November. AAT proposed a merit-based increase of 4.5 percent, a 100-baht (\$US3.00) payment to be paid in April, an end-of-year bonus equal to four months' pay and a special payment of 10,000 baht. The union wants a 5.5 percent salary increase, a 400-baht special payment, an end-of-year bonus of 4.6 months' pay, and a 20,000 baht special payment.

AAT is a Ford-Mazda joint venture which employs around 3,400, including 1,200 contracted staff. The Rayong plant produced 120,000 units last year. The company claims that orders this year are 25,000 units below target and cannot improve its pay offer.

Indian education workers maintain daily protests

Over 370 Jharkhand Academic Council (JAC) daily wage employees are maintaining protests begun on January 6 to demand the right to leave without being sacked. The JAC is an autonomous education institution that conducts matriculation and intermediate examinations in the state of Jharkhand.

"We used to get leave without pay and special leave...but now, the authorities have stopped all leave. Whoever goes on leave is sacked," said M. Kumar, leader of the Dainik Watenbhogi Karamchhari Sangh, organiser of the daily workers.

Kumar said women were not given maternity leave and removed if they were absent for a day. He claimed that JAC has sacked about 60 people under the new rule. JAC chairperson Laxmi Singh alleged that there was no provision for sanctioning leave to daily wage employees who had not been formally appointed.

Tamil Nadu tannery workers protest

Joint Action Committee of the Vellore District All Tannery Workers' Trade Unions members protested on January 11 over annual bonuses. Employers have reduced the 2009 bonus, ignoring a directive by the Chennai deputy commissioner of labor that workers' bonuses be paid at the same rate as the 2008 bonus. Tannery workers want an increase above the 2008 bonus.

Indian jute workers strike

Juggilal Kamalpat (JK) Jute Mill workers in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh took industrial action on January 12 to demand outstanding wages. Police intervened after workers allegedly took three officials hostage for several hours. Mill officials claim the mill is running at a loss.

Since the mill reopened in October 2008 workers have been in dispute over a range of issues including medical facilities, salaries, permanent status for all employees, dearness allowance and the retirement age. The main issue, however, has been delays in salary payments. JK management attempted to lock out workers during a dispute in June but workers ignored the order and kept the mill running.

WA maritime workers continue rolling stoppages

On January 12, around 200 maritime workers from Farstad Shipping implemented a second round of strike action, just one day after ending a 48-hour strike over wages and allowances. The industrial action affected the company's vessels servicing offshore projects for Woodside Petroleum, Shell, Chevron and Exxon-Mobil which operate oil and gas fields in the North West Shelf, the Timor Sea and Bass Strait.

The latest 24-hour stoppage by Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members is for a 30 percent pay rise over three years. MUA members also want allowances of up to \$300 per day to bring them into line with offshore oil and gas project construction workers.

The MUA campaign began in November at Farstad and was followed last month with a two-day walkout at Total Marine Services. The MUA has rejected Farstad's latest 27.5 percent pay rise over 3.5 years. The offer does not include any additional allowances. The union claims its members have not had a pay rise for 14 months.

A host of employer organisations and the Liberal state premier Colin Barnett have called on the federal Labor government to use its Fair Work Australia industrial laws to ban the strikes on the grounds they are affecting the Australian economy. The Australian Mines and Metals Association claims that the pay demands will increase maritime workers' wages by \$90,000 a year. This has been rejected by the MUA, which says the claim amounts to \$24,000 and is in line with other employees in the sector.

Tasmanian smelter workers end industrial action

Officials of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) this week called off work bans begun on December 19 at the Nyrstar zinc smelter in Hobart over a wages dispute. Union officials agreed to a 14-day cooling-off period after the company threatened workers implementing bans with a 16-day lockout. Other workers were told to continue reporting for duty.

CFMEU organiser Marshall Reeves told the media, "We avoided something which would have been nasty and ugly". Both parties have agreed to begin talks on Monday.

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

Nyrstar operates a 300-worker zinc smelter in Hobart and exports some 250,000 tonnes of zinc cathode annually.

NSW coal miners strike

About 250 miners at Xstrata's Bulga open-cut mine in the Hunter Valley walked off the job for 48 hours this weekend over a new work agreement. CFMEU members met this week and rejected the company's last pay offer of 15 percent over three years. During the past four months CFMEU members walked out at three other Xstrata mines in NSW: the Tahmoor, United and Ulan collieries.

CFMEU official Greg Sharp told the media that this weekend's strike was the only one planned. Xstrata said the limited strike action would not affect coal shipments.

New South Wales nurses call off protest

Nurses at the Griffith Base Hospital in NSW have called off a January 27 protest against plans by the Greater Southern Area Health Service (GSAHS) to implement staff cuts. The Australian Nurses Federation (ANF) claimed the staff restructure was a cost-cutting exercise and would mean the loss of key frontline staff. GSAHS told the nurses union this week it has decided to withdraw the proposal.

ANF Griffith branch president Skye Vagg claimed the department's reversal was greatly influenced by strong community backing and opposition from other health workers. Griffith Base Hospital serves a rural

population of 140,000 people with 114 beds and a large emergency department.

PNG maritime workers vote for strike action

Some 4,000 members of the Maritime and Transport Workers Union (MTWU) have begun casting votes in a secret ballot to decide whether to take industrial action for a 6 percent wage increase. Voting began at Port Moresby last Saturday and continued during the week at other major ports of Lae, Wewak and Rabaul. The results will be known this weekend.

The MTWU is demanding Steamships Shipping and other stevedoring employers implement a 6 percent wage increase previously agreed in July 2009. The agreement included a pay increase back-dated to January 2009 for all stevedoring and maritime workers, but Steamships Shipping has since refused to sign the deal. Last week it offered a 1.5 percent pay rise from January 1 this year but without any increase for 2009. The company also wants the ordinary working week increased from 37 hours to 40 hours without an additional three hours' pay.

MTWU president John Mahuk told the media that Steamships Shipping is also demanding drastic cuts to weekend penalty pay rates. It wants double time pay abolished for Saturday work and double time-and-a-half for Sunday work paid at ordinary rates for the first eight hours.



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