

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 Korea: Kia workers accept wage freeze

Two-thirds of 29,800 striking workers at Kia Motors, South Korea's third largest auto-maker, have voted to accept management's latest pay deal which includes a wage freeze for 2010. Each employee will receive a one-time payout of 5 million won (\$US4,392) plus a 300 percent bonus. The decision was taken by union members on January 22.

Kia Motors is an affiliate of Hyundai Motors. In December, the Hyundai union set the current pay standard by convincing its members to accept a wage freeze along with payments identical to those now endorsed by their Kia colleagues.

Indian government employees on strike

On January 21, over 450,000 government employees in Kashmir, India struck for 48 hours to demand the full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and full payment of arrears. Government offices throughout the state remained crippled while employees held protests and rallies in all the regions.

Implementation of the Commission's recommendations will put Kashmir state government employees on par with central government workers. Their other demands include that the retirement age be lifted from 58 to 60, cost of living allowances be converted into a dearness allowance and regularisation of temporary and ad hoc government employees.

Nokia workers in India end strike

On January 22, around 2,000 employees at Nokia's Sriperumbudur plant, Chennai ended a four-day strike following a government-negotiated meeting. The strike, the second in six months, erupted after an employee was transferred from one department to another without his prior knowledge, along with the suspension of 62 protesting colleagues. Many of the 5,700 assembly-line employees had walked off the job and joined a demonstration in the factory grounds.

The dispute, however, is not fully settled and the Nokia India Employees Union is holding further talks with the company and the government to decide on the fate of the suspended employees. Nokia is the world's biggest mobile phone maker and has about 8,000 staff at the Chennai facility, which produces more than 6 million handsets a month.

Gujarat brick kiln workers resume strike

Around 50,000 brick kiln workers in Gujarat this week resumed industrial action after the Gujarat Brick Manufacturers Association refused to meet with the union. Int Bhatta Majdoor Union members struck on January 17 to demand their wages be doubled, complaining that they are labouring for 12–14 hours a day for less than the stipulated minimum daily wage of 140 rupees (\$US2.90). Their other demands include the provision of safety shoes, helmets, gloves and goggles, better facilities, such as water, electricity, and child-care and schools for their children.

Employers at 40 brick kilns have stopped paying living expenses, forcing some employees to return to work or leave the district. Distressed workers and their families have begun gathering at the union premises, seeking protection from employers they claim are sending thugs to force them to end their strike.

The majority of workers at Gujarat's 35,000 brick kilns are from Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra and are virtually bonded for six months. They are paid only 50 percent of their wages and receive the rest only after six months.

Patna University non-teaching staff on strike

Non-teaching staff at Patna University in India remain on strike for the second week over a nine-point charter of demands and payment of salaries for December. The university has agreed to pay their December salaries but rejected their charter of demands and is refusing to pay them during the strike period.

Bangladeshi port workers to strike

Dock Sramik Oikya Parishad has called on Chittagong port workers to strike and occupy the docks on January 31 to realise their four-point charter of demands. The strike action comes after an unsuccessful meeting with the shipping minister on January 13 in which he demanded the end of a seven-hour blockade at one of the port gates. Port workers' demands include reinstatement of 2,200 dock workers terminated during the last caretaker government, an end to repression of workers employed by berth operators and their reemployment by the port authority, and reestablishment of a dock management board.

Around 4,200 dock workers have been retrenched since 2007 when the dock management board was dissolved and other measures introduced aimed at privatising the port. After a strike in August the Chittagong Port Authority proposed to negotiate with labour units to resolve their demands. Only 1,800 workers were reinstated as private berth operators and 200 others were forced to change their profession.

Seafarers union in Western Australia call off strike

The Maritime Union of Australia has called off a 96-hour strike at Total Marine Services (TMS) in Western Australia planned for January 29 to protest the company's last pay offer. TMS agreed to withdraw legal action against the union at a Fair Work Australia hearing this week and to resume negotiations on a new work agreement. The maritime workers service offshore oil and gas projects in Western Australia.

The MUA wants a 30 percent pay increase over three years and a construction allowance to start at \$175 a day, before increasing to \$214. While employers claim that the union demand is equivalent to a \$90,000 a year pay increase, the MUA said the allowance applies to about 400 seafarers and only when they are engaged in construction work. The company's last offer was a 29 percent pay increase over three years and a \$140 per day allowance for seafarers involved in construction.

The dispute at TMS is part of a MUA campaign begun in November for new work agreements with shipping companies that service oil and gas field projects in the North West Shelf, the Timor Sea and Bass Strait. On January 12, around 200 maritime workers from Farstad Shipping implemented a second round of strike action over wages and allowances, one day after ending a 48-hour strike.

Employer organisations and the Western Australian Liberal premier Colin Barnett have called on the federal government to use its Fair Work

Australia industrial laws to ban the strikes on the grounds they are affecting the Australian economy. Total Marine Services claims it has already lost over \$1 million due to the industrial action.

Melbourne Age clerical workers strike

On January 28, 40 clerical workers at Fairfax Media's the *Age* newspaper began a two-day stoppage for a new work agreement. Around 100 *Age* employees from other sections joined a demonstration by the striking workers outside the newspaper's CBD headquarters. This week's walkout follows strike action on January 12 and 13.

The Australian Metal Workers Union members want a 9 percent wage increase over three years. Fairfax has offered 2.25 percent each year and demanded exceptional productivity increases that include the loss of three days' annual leave and one public holiday and a redundancy agreement capped at 52 weeks' pay.

Rallying workers said Fairfax also wanted a clause in the work agreement enabling individual workplace flexibility over and above the productivity trade offs. Failing the inclusion of such a clause, a standard inclusion under the Rudd government Fair Work Act, known as a model individual flexibility term, will be imposed. Fairfax Media is already proposing seven-day rotating rosters.

The *Age* clerical workers voted last year for industrial action, including an unlimited number of indefinite strikes and indefinite bans on overtime, after overwhelmingly rejecting management's proposed three-year agreement. Fairfax Media human resources director Gary Seppings told the clerical employees prior to last year's ballot that if they rejected the company offer "back-pay would be lost, and, more than likely, a less generous proposal would follow".

Victorian refinery workers walk out

On January 27, 20 workers at Shell's Geelong refinery, Victoria walked off the job over the forced retrenchment of a union delegate and two occupational health and safety officers by their maintenance contractor Fluor Australia. The three were included in a group of 11 retrenched workers. According to maintenance workers, the three were targeted by Fluor despite 30 co-workers volunteering for redundancies.

New South Wales health records workers ban worksite

Medical records storage employees in Cardiff, Newcastle refused to return to work on January 22 because of alarmingly high mould-spore levels at their worksite. The Health Services Union claims that recent

testing at the facility found mould-spore levels 100-times higher than tests carried out nearly a year ago.

Last year, 30 John Hunter Hospital staff walked off the job claiming medical records from the Cardiff site had caused skin rashes and breathing problems. Hunter New England Health is reported to be investigating staff relocations.



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