

# 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 jute mill strike approaches its third month

A strike by over 250,000 workers at 52 of West Bengal's 54 jute mills will enter its third month this weekend. Employees walked out on December 15, following a strike called by 19 unions demanding implementation of a "bench-mark" settlement agreed in January 2002. The unions alleged that many points in the agreement have not been honoured and that factory owners have thousands of rupees in accumulated workers' dues.

Workers have rejected a dearness allowance offer from the Indian Jute Mills Association (IJMA) which plans to abolish the current allowance system and spread payments totalling over 900,000 rupees (\$US19,730) over three years. Talks between the parties called by the Central Chief Labour Commissioner began this week.

The strike is being coordinated by the Bengal Chaktal Mazdoor Union, which is backed by the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M). Two jute mills remain open because a union affiliated to the Trinamool Congress has not joined the strike.

## Jaipur auto-rickshaw drivers on strike

Auto-rickshaw drivers in Jaipur, Rajasthan began an indefinite strike for fare increases on February 4. The drivers demonstrated outside the Collectorate (district government) office in Jaipur for a four-rupee rise in the first kilometre and thereafter a one-rupee per kilometre increase above existing fares. Jaipur District New Pinkcity Autorickshaw Drivers' Union secretary Kuldeep Singh said that the strike will continue until the rates are revised.

The government has ordered drivers to charge as per existing fares but drivers say these rates have not been revised since 2007 and they cannot exist on the low charges. Transport officials have threatened to cancel

drivers' permits if they do not return to work and said that action would be taken against union leaders "if they violate law and order to press their demands".

## Bangladeshi apparel workers demonstrate

On February 8, garment workers of Giant and Six H at the Senakalyan Commercial Complex in Tongi, Gazipur demonstrated outside the factory to demand it be re-opened and for the payment of outstanding salaries. Traffic on the Dhaka-Mymensingh highway was disrupted for five hours during the protest. Workers said the factory has remained closed since January 14 when electricity, water and gas were disconnected due to non-payment of bills by the company.

## Burmese garment workers strike

Some 2,000 employees of the Korean-owned Opal-2 garment factory in the Hlaing Tharyar industrial zone on the outskirts of Rangoon walked off the job on February 9.

An eye witness told the media: "There are about 40 riot police trucks, six lockup trucks and four fire engines at the scene. They don't need to show this much strength. It is just some workers calling for their rights." Faced with this show of force from the military government, employees returned to work after several hours with no resolution.

The strike began after workers heard that supervisors and advisors had received a 10,000 kyat (\$US10) per month increase but that basic level employees would not get a pay rise. Employees have also complained that they have to work up to midnight and that 5,000 kyat is cut from their pay for one day's absence.

A company proposal to pay an extra 10,000 kyat for just this month was rejected by the workers, who have demanded that factory owners not force staff to work beyond 9 p.m. or on weekends and national holidays and that restrictions on toilet breaks be eased.

## **Vietnamese workers strike over Tet bonuses**

On February 4, around 10,000 employees of the My Phong Leather Shoes Company in the southern province of Tra Vinh ended a 14-day strike after the company agreed to fully pay traditional bonuses for the Vietnamese lunar New Year or Tet Festival.

A day earlier 80 drivers at the Tuan Hiep VIP Taxi Company in the Mekong Delta province of Can Tho struck for a day over their low Tet bonus and against company proposals to increase the minimum daily turnover for each car. A spokesman for the drivers said that some employees were already using their own money to make up daily turnover quotas. Drivers also claimed that the company was not paying social and health insurance as required by law.

Last week around 200 workers at a rattan export company in the central province of Khanh Hoa began a go-slow strike over Tet bonuses.

## **Xstrata locks out New South Wales coal miners**

International mining company Xstrata imposed a seven-day lockout on 200 workers at its Tahmoor mine, south of Sydney on February 8. The lockout came after Construction, Forestry, Mining and Electrical Union (CFMEU) members struck last weekend for a new workplace agreement. Under the Rudd government's Fair Work Act employers can lock out workers if they take any form of industrial action. The miners, with support from other local workers, are maintaining a picket outside the colliery.

Xstrata claims its proposed Enterprise Agreement (EA) offers an average 25 percent base salary increase over the next four years, and when combined with other changes would boost the total salary packages to \$127,000 a year by 2014. CFMEU mining and energy district vice-president Graham White has disputed these figures and said that the extra money involved cuts in basic entitlements.

Negotiations at the Tahmoor mine have been ongoing for 15 months with more than 50 meetings between the company and unions. Xstrata has consistently rejected CFMEU demands for improved annual leave entitlements and an agreement to protect jobs and existing safety standards. On January 18, Xstrata locked out 250 workers for 24 hours at its Bulga open-cut mine in the Hunter Valley after a 48-hour strike over the company's last pay rise offer.

## **Alcoa workers in Western Australia stop work**

More than 1,200 workers employed at Alcoa's Wagerup alumina refinery, Willowdale and Huntley mines and the Port of Kwinana in Western Australia stopped work for two hours on February 12 over a long-

running enterprise bargaining agreement (EBA) and pay dispute. A "combined sites" EBA agreement for Alcoa employees expired last year.

Negotiations are continuing between Alcoa and the Australian Workers Union (AWU), which covers the workers. While industrial action is also planned for February 16, 17 and 21, the AWU has told the media that it hopes to negotiate an agreement with management.

## **Australian Synchrotron scientists implement work bans**

Staff scientists at the multi-million dollar Synchrotron research facility in Clayton, Victoria have imposed a work-to-rule, restricting their hours of duty to between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m. and week-days only.

On February 1, scientists at the 24-hour operational facility voted unanimously for the action in protest over the way the facility is being run. In the last two months the multimillion-dollar research complex has lost its entire senior management team and half its international scientific advisory committee.

A staff scientist told the media: "The vote in December was 70 per cent in favour, the vote at the end of January was 90 per cent in favour, and the vote on the first of February was 100 per cent in favour."

Issues in dispute include recent plans for funding of the facility, the balance between corporate and scientific priorities, and the surprise removal of the founding facility director, chemist Rob Lamb. The scientists said that they had been raising issues since May 2008 but received no response. In a statement this week the facility's board head Catherine Walter said there would be a meeting with all staff "in the next few weeks to discuss a range of issues".

## **Sacked Victorian metal workers picket factory**

Sacked Forgecast workers in Mitcham, Melbourne have been manning a 24-hour picket at the company's factory for 12 weeks over the non-payment of entitlements. The metal company went into voluntary receivership in November owing 57 employees over \$4.4 million in redundancy, superannuation and other entitlements. Some employees have worked at the plant for over 25 years.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers Union, which cover the sacked workers, have not opposed the shutdown and are restricting workers' demands to redundancy and entitlement payments. AMWU national secretary Dave Oliver met with the workers this week cynically claiming that "the protest at Forgecast is part of the larger battle for changes to the federal government's redundancy and insolvency laws".

Workers have lodged claims under the Federal Government's General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme (GEERS) but because this scheme is capped, they stand to lose at least \$1.4 million in unpaid

entitlements and super.

### **South Australian public school teachers' pay dispute ends**

A long-running pay dispute between South Australian teachers and the state Labor government was settled last week with the Industrial Relations Commission awarding teachers a 15.75 percent increase over three years. The rise is less than the 21 percent teachers were demanding and unresolved issues over conditions remain. For the first time TAFE lecturers will be on a different award to teachers and only receive a 14.25 percent increase spread over four years.

The decision also created a new top-pay classification for advanced teachers with \$83,009 per annum from October 2011 and new pay classifications for principals and pre-school directors at super schools. SA teachers' salaries are still lower than most other Australian states.

### **Tasmanian public school teachers to stop work**

Over 1,200 teachers at senior secondary colleges, the Tasmanian Academy and the Tasmanian Polytechnic are set to hold half-day stop-work meetings on February 24–26 in Hobart, the North-West and Launceston. The industrial action will be followed by a protest march to state parliament on March 16.

Although teachers will receive a 3.67 percent pay rise in March, Australian Education Union (AEU) secondary colleges' president Greg Brown said teachers were still concerned about Tasmania Tomorrow, the government's education reform package. The new measure will affect Year 11 and 12 students by turning colleges into campuses of the academically focused Tasmanian Academy and Tasmanian Polytechnic, which has a vocational focus.

Tasmanian teachers are concerned about inadequate resources, negative effects on teacher's health, top-heavy administration and loss of pastoral and educational support for teachers and students when the reform is implemented.

### **New Zealand prison workers protest over privatisation**

On February 9, around 100 members of the Public Service Association (PSA) and the Corrections Association (CA) rallied outside the New Zealand parliament in protest against the National Party-led government's plan to privatise prisons. Corrections Minister Judith Collins has asked the Department of Corrections to investigate privatising Mt Eden Prison, the Auckland Central Remand Prison, and a new prison it proposes to build at Wiri, in South Auckland. Cabinet will announce its final decision in May.

Prime Minister John Key admitted this week the plan is a cost-cutting exercise, claiming that private-run prisons are cheaper. CA president Bevan Hanlon told protesters that if Mt Eden Prison was privatised 450 jobs would be put in danger, and any staff retained by the private operator would face cuts to wages and conditions.



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