

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 February 2010

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

## Indian steel workers on strike

Ongoing strike action by over 3,000 Steel Authority of India Limited (SAIL) contract workers has begun affecting production at the Durgapur plant in West Bengal. The striking workers are picketing the plant. Eighty delivery and pickup trucks are being held up outside the plant and production has dropped by an estimated 6,700 tonnes of steel per day.

The United Contractor Workers Union, an affiliate of the Centre of Indian Trade Unions CITU, began the walkout on February 13 to demand a wage rise and full-time employment. Contract workers are hired for cleaning, material-handling and transportation jobs. Contract workers at SAIL's Rourkela plant have threatened two-day strike action if their pay demands are not met.

The industrial action is part of a campaign by the CITU and affiliated steel workers' unions for wage rises for over 100,000 regular employees and 75,000 contract workers. The unions want a 28 percent Minimum Guaranteed Benefit, 3 and 3.5 percent increment benefits and 46 percent fringe benefits on par with SAIL executives. Talks between the unions and government are due to commence on February 23.

## Nurses strike at New Delhi private hospital

Around 300 nurses at the Mata Chanan Devi Hospital, New Delhi have been on strike since February 2 for improved salaries and conditions. While several rounds of talks have been held between employees and the hospital administration no agreement had been reached on the nurses' demands.

Staff nurse Lebin K. Shaji told the media that private sector nurses often have to work more than eight hours a day, have no night-duty allowance and have a bond system which requires them to work for over two years on minimum wages. "Those on strike," the nurse said, "have been demanding increased salaries to tide over the high cost of living in the

capital, better working conditions and fixed duty hours."

The Health Department recently claimed that it directly intervened to negotiate an end to strikes at Batra and Maharaja Agrasen private hospitals.

## Patna University non-teaching staff still on strike

A strike by non-teaching staff at Patna University (PU) has entered its fourth week. Hundreds of workers organised by the PU Employees' Joint Struggle Committee held a procession through the campus this week and warned administration that they would picket the university continuously from February 18 and that all gates would be locked.

The university workers have presented nine demands, including regular payment of monthly salaries, back payment of outstanding December wages and revised pay scales in line with Universities Grants Commission recommendations. PU has agreed to pay December salaries but rejected other demands and is refusing to pay salaries during the strike action.

## Sri Lankan public sector nurses demonstrate

Public sector nurses at 16 hospitals throughout the country, including the Colombo national hospital and teaching hospitals in Kalutatra, Galle, Matara, Kurunegala, Polonnaruwa and Trinicomalee, held lunchtime demonstrations this week for six demands. These include, establishment of a four-year nursing degree, promotion to first grade within 11 years, a 3,000-rupee (\$US26) risk allowance payment and professional salaries. The nurses also want their working week reduced from 36 hours to 30 hours.

The nurses work in a high-risk environment but are not provided with protective equipment or medicines. Recruitment procedures and education qualifications established in 1984 have not yet been formalised.

## Filipino garment workers locked out

Around 100 unionised employees at garment manufacturer Alto Mode Incorporated are picketing the factory after being locked out on February 15. The Alto Mode Workers Union (AMWU) had filed a notice of strike with the National Conciliation Mediation Board four days earlier after the company announced plans to close the factory for six months from March 15.

AMWU president Renante Paliño claimed the factory shutdown was a union-busting exercise. Alta Mode, which is in Cebu's Mactan Economic Zone II, is an exporter and subcontractor for global brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch.

One hundred workers established the AMWU in 2008, following attacks on working conditions and allowances. The union members are demanding that the factory remain open, that their union be recognised by the company and all union members reinstated.

### **Xstrata miners in New South Wales strike**

Two days after a seven-day lockout, miners at Xstrata's Tahmoor colliery, south of Sydney, called a three-day strike on February 17 and established a picket at the mine. The walkout is part of an ongoing campaign by Construction, Forestry, Mining and Electrical Union (CFMEU) members for a new workplace agreement. While the miners returned to work today they will only work half-shifts until Tuesday, with further industrial action planned next week.

Xstrata claims that its proposed Enterprise Agreement (EA) offers an average 25 percent base salary increase and, along with other changes, would boost miners' total salary packages to \$127,000 a year by 2014. The CFMEU has disputed these figures and said that the extra money involves 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. Xstrata has been using the Rudd government's Fair Work Act to lock out workers at Tahmoor and its Bulga mine in the Hunter Valley. Under the Act employers can lock out workers if they take any form of industrial action.

### **Telstra technicians in Western Australia walk out for 24 hours**

On February 15, 120 Telstra technicians in Western Australia stopped work for 24 hours over a new enterprise agreement. The Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members are involved in the upgrade and maintenance of phone and broadband systems in the Pilbara region, servicing in particular the major mining projects. Telstra technicians across Australia have been maintaining overtime and

emergency duty bans since December.

The union is demanding a base-pay rise of at least 12.5 percent over three years—equal to the increase granted to Telstra technicians on individual contracts. Telstra is offering 10 percent over three years—one percent less than non-union negotiated individual contracts—and a one-off 2.5 percent sign-on bonus.

CEPU members on a union-negotiated agreement have not had a wage increase for over two years. In an attempt to reduce worker discontent during stalled negotiations Telstra has granted an interim 2 percent pay increase backdated to February last year.

### **South Australian transport electricians stop work**

TransAdelaide electricians attended a two-hour stop work meeting on February 17. CEPU members voted in favour of a union proposal that the Fair Work tribunal be involved in negotiations over a deadlock in talks for a new collective agreement. The electricians have not received a pay increase since December 2007 and negotiations for a new pay deal with TransAdelaide have been ongoing since August 2008.

TransAdelaide, which operates train and tram services throughout Adelaide's metropolitan area, under contract to the Public Transport Division, has offered workers a pay increase which would raise their hourly rate to \$24.92. The union wants pay parity with transport electricians in other states who are being paid about \$30 an hour.

### **New Zealand contract cleaners strike**

Cleaners, who are members of the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), have taken industrial action over low wages. Cleaners at Auckland Airport, employed by ISS Facility Services Limited and OCS Limited, walked off the job on February 16, while cleaners at Parliament, employed by Spotless Services Limited (SLL), struck for the first time on February 17 and held a lunchtime protest.

The cleaners are paid just \$12.55 (\$US8.65) an hour—five cents above the minimum wage—and have rejected a 25-cent pay increase. The SFWU has been in negotiations with the three cleaning contractors since last May over a new multi-employer collective agreement. The union says that the contractors already pay \$14.62 an hour to cleaners in schools and public hospitals.

### **Ministry of Justice workers continue industrial action**

Over 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members from New

Zealand's Ministry of Justice and mainly employed in courts across the country, are continuing industrial action begun last October over a government-imposed pay freeze. Their industrial action includes work-to-rule, taking their breaks at the same time and a ban on overtime work. Stop-work meetings and three-hour long strikes were held in a number of towns during the first week of February and workers rallied outside courthouses.

According to the PSA, Ministry of Justice staff are paid on average 6.3 percent below the pay median for the public service, while the ministry's 1,200 court registry officers receive 9.25 percent below the median. While calling for an end to the pay freeze, PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff has previously said the union would be prepared to work with the Ministry to "reduce their costs" by "identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity."

### **Laid-off aged care workers protest**

Twenty-three Blue Dove Health/Pacificare Trust aged-care employees in Mangere, Auckland picketed Guardian Trust to demand their final pay and holiday entitlements. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) members were made redundant on January 31 after the Manukau District Health Board withdrew the contract for the facility, forcing Pacificare Trust into receivership.

Primero Trust, the appointed receiver, cannot guarantee workers will get their entitlements. According to the NZNO, the receiver told the union that if workers can provide evidence of who their employer is, then they will be the preferential creditors.

### **Papua New Guinea university staff stop work**

National Academic Staff Association (NASA) members at the University of PNG in Port Moresby walked off the job on February 11 to demand salary dues dating back to 2001. Registration for new students was postponed for the day.

NASA members resumed work after the university's vice chancellor directed his executive to make a lump-sum payment to staff.

Negotiations for the back pay and improvement in the salary structure began nine months ago with the Salary Consultative Monitoring Committee (SCMC) and the Department of Personnel Management. Agreement was reached two weeks ago but department representatives had not signed the agreement.

### **PNG agricultural and livestock workers protest**

Over twenty employees from the Erap Resource and Development Centre (ERDC), PNG's only production and distribution centre for livestock, grains and fruit trees, rallied outside the centre's office in Erap, Morobe Province on February 16 to demand termination entitlements. The protesters blockaded the ERDC's compound and prevented administrative staff entering the building

Vesson Bidigai, a livestock technician, said employees were laid off in March 2008 and later told that they were all terminated and should live outside the station and work as contractors. They have still not been issued official termination notices.

Bidigai said the ERDC claimed in 2008 that it did not have funds for termination entitlements but promised that the workers would be paid within two to three months. The ERDC employees have never received their entitlements.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](http://wsws.org/contact)**