

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.

Korean tyre workers reject restructure

Over 4,000 Kumho Tire Co. workers have rejected a restructure ultimatum from creditors of the ailing company, Korea's second-largest tyre maker. The creditors will only provide financial support if workers accept major cuts and do not strike during the restructure period. Kumho workers have been protesting this week in Seoul outside the Korea Development Bank to demand the bank release funds. Demonstrations have also been held outside Kumho Asiana Group's headquarters for payment of unpaid wages and bonuses.

Over the past two years the Kumho Tire Workers' Union-Korean Metal Workers' Union has worked with the company to convince workers to accept wage freezes and the elimination of bonuses to "save the company". Last September the union accepted Kumho's demands for a 2008-wage freeze to be extended throughout 2009, the non-payment of scheduled 2008 bonuses and for talks over 2009 bonus schemes to be put off until the first quarter of 2010.

Indian government employees walk out over privatisation

On February 23, nearly 30,000 workers from three state-owned power utilities—The Maharashtra State Power Generation Co. (Mahagenco), Maharashtra State Electricity Transmission Co. (MahaTransco), and the Maharashtra State Electricity Distribution Co. (MahaDiscom)—staged a 24-hour strike in protest against privatisation of the power sector. Workers ignored government threats to invoke the Essential Services Maintenance Act 1968 and illegalise the walkout and to take "strict action" against strikers. The government plans to privatise distribution and maintenance through a franchise system.

On the same day, over 7,000 United Bank of India (UBI) employees walked off the job for 24 hours in protest against an initial public offer (IPO) by the bank. The public sector bank is selling 15.8 percent of its

stake in the enterprise and offered 50 million equity shares at 10 rupees each. UBI Employees Union secretary Sukhomoy Sarkar told the press that more than two-thirds of the bank's 1,500 Indian branches were shut by the strike.

Pakistani hydro-electric workers demand wage hike

Water and Power Development Authority (Wapda) workers held protest rallies in Khairpur, Sukkur, Ghotki and Shikarpur on February 20 to demand technical allowances, bonuses and pay increases. The Pakistan Wapda Hydro Electric Central Labor Union and the Pakistan Workers Federation have also called on the government to stop blocking implementation of Pay Commission recommendations and to drop plans to privatise Wapda Hydro Electric.

Philippines steel workers' strike enters second week

Some 500 workers from Global Steel Philippines Incorporated (GSPI) in Iligan City remain on strike after walking off the job following failed mediation talks with the company and the Department of Labor and Employment on February 15. Operation of the steel plant, which the Indian-owned Global Steel Holding Co. bought from the bankrupt National Steel Corporation (NSC) in 2004, remains paralysed with strikers maintaining a 24-hour picket.

Global Steel Labor Union president Elmer Nelson Nasyon said workers' grievances included management failure to comply with the collective bargaining agreement; unpaid wages and 13th-month benefits for 2009; and the company's failure to remit workers' premiums for Social Security System, Philhealth and Pag-ibig. GSPI has not paid overtime for six months and failed to comply with basic safety and industrial waste standards.

Thailand: Triumph workers end protest

About 200 former workers of Triumph International, the swimwear and lingerie giant, have agreed to end their eight-month protest over the sacking of 1,960 employees last July. Triumph Labour Union members had established a protest garment factory in the Labor Ministry building in Bangkok and produced underwear for sale to office workers. They demanded the company reinstate them or pay fair compensation.

The workers were employed by Triumph International contractor, Body Fashions, at its Bang Phli factory, until it closed last year and moved to Nakhon Sawan province in central Thailand. Workers at the Nakhon Sawan plant are paid 180 baht (\$US5.30) per day compared to the 333 baht paid at Bang Phli.

The sacked garment workers agreed to end their Labor Ministry protest in exchange for 250 industrial sewing machines. The Labor Ministry also agreed to workers' demands for vocational training and skill tests as well as bank loans for them to establish a business.

Unions push through sell-out deal at Pluto

Construction unions pushed through a sell-out agreement at a mass meeting of workers from Woodside Petroleum's \$12 billion Pluto gas project in north-western Australia's Pilbara region on February 24.

The union-brokered deal, which involves the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union and Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union, allows the company to introduce "motelling" at the Gap Ridge Housing Village in Karratha. The new arrangement ends the previous practice of providing the fly-in, fly-out workers individual huts for the duration of their contracts.

The motelling system was previously rejected by the workers who struck for 48 hours in December and eight days in January. The January strike was in defiance of return to work orders from the Rudd government's Fair Work Australia (FWA) industrial policing agency, the threat of massive fines for non-compliance and multi-million damages claims by Woodside and 17 contractors.

The unions presented the change as a trial, claiming that FWA's deputy president Brendan McCarthy would assess how well the new system was performing in about six weeks' time. Construction workers on the site prior to December 3 now have to accept motelling or move to the Searipple village 30 kilometres away with all new employees forced into the system at Gap Ridge Housing Village.

CFMEU assistant state secretary Joe McDonald admitted the "mood at the meeting was still angry" but claimed this was "primarily" directed at the Rudd government which backed Woodside during the dispute. The unions, however, fully back Labor's industrial relations laws, including all anti-strike provisions, and are committed to enforcing them.

Telstra technicians on strike

Some 150 Telstra technicians in Western Australia walked off the job on February 24 over the company's two-tier pay arrangements. Employees on a union-negotiated agreement would be at least \$14,000 worse off for the life of that agreement compared to co-workers on an employer non-negotiated deal.

The striking Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union members are involved in the upgrade and maintenance of phone and broadband systems in large towns and major mining projects in the Pilbara region. The technicians have threatened to remain on strike until Wednesday next week. After breaking off talks with the union earlier this year, Telstra has now agreed to re-enter negotiations beginning this week.

Queensland public servants walk out

Nearly 100 staff from the Office of Fair Trading, which includes the Office of Liquor and Gaming Regulation, walked off the job on February 23 in Brisbane's CBD and travelled to Ipswich to protest the state government's decentralisation policy. The state Labor government plans to relocate 500 Office of Fair Trading staff to Ipswich (40 km west of Brisbane's CBD) as part of a plan to move 1,200 Brisbane-based public servants to Ipswich by 2012.

The Queensland Public Sector Union (QPSU) says the Blich Government failed to consult with staff before announcing its plans. According to the QPSU, none of the Fair Trading staff reside in Ipswich but there are 2,000 public servants already living in Ipswich who commute to the Brisbane CBD each day.

Minister for Fair Trading Peter Lawlor responded to the protest with claims that the state Labor government was "committed to involving and supporting staff through the transition process."

Tasmanian teachers implement rolling strikes

Over 1,200 teachers at senior secondary colleges, the Tasmanian Academy and the Tasmanian Polytechnic held a series of stop-work meetings this week to oppose the state government's Tasmania Tomorrow education reform package. Around 300 teachers stopped work for an hour in Hobart on February 24, followed by four-hour stop-work meetings in north-west Tasmania and Launceston. The industrial action will be followed by a stop-work protest march to state parliament on March 16, just before the state election four days later.

In an attempt to head off further protests the government has forced the dispute into the Tasmanian Industrial Relations Commission. Industrial commissioner Jim McAlpine has closed the hearing to the public.

Tasmania Tomorrow will turn senior colleges into campuses of the Tasmanian Academy and Tasmanian Polytechnic. Teachers are concerned about inadequate resources, negative effects on teachers' health and top-

heavy administration when the reform is implemented. Australian Education Union official Greg Brown claims that the reforms have already reduced student access to a wide range of subjects and threaten to create a two-class education system.

Xstrata miners suspend industrial action

The Construction, Forestry, Mining and Electrical Union (CFMEU), which represents 200 workers at Xstrata's Tahmoor mine south-west of Sydney, dropped threatened industrial action this week in what it claims is "an act of good faith" to get the company back to negotiating a wages and conditions agreement. Xstrata responded by filing an application with Fair Work Australia to have the old award removed while talks on a new award are under way.

Negotiations at the Tahmoor mine have been ongoing for 15 months with more than 50 meetings between the company and unions. The international mining giant has consistently rejected CFMEU demands for improved annual leave entitlements and an agreement to protect jobs and existing safety standards.

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.

Victorian radiator workers end strike

Strike action by 90 employees at Air Radiators in Lara, south-west of Melbourne, ended this week after workers accepted a union-negotiated agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members walked off the job on February 19 after six months of negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. AMWU members wanted a 15 percent pay increase over three years but the company offered only 9 percent.

Under the new agreement, workers have accepted 9 percent pay increase in return for improvements in sick leave, redundancies, career paths, work safety policies and back pay. AMWU spokesman Tony Hynds claimed the agreement was "within the industry standard".

Western Australian construction workers ordered to lift bans

Fair Work Australia (FWA) this week ordered 160 construction workers at a \$500 million power station for the Worsley Alumina Refinery in Western Australia to end all industrial action. The workers are members

of the Australian Workers Union and the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union.

FWA commissioner Cloghan claimed that the workers had engaged in industrial action by banning overtime or walking off the job on an overtime shift. He said that the CFMEU/AWU agreed less than 18 months ago that the standard hours worked per week would be 43 hours with "reasonable overtime". All parties, he continued, had accepted the norm that approximately 50 percent of employees work beyond those hours each Saturday, and approximately 15 percent, on Sundays.

Although the unions are not officially in dispute with the employer, they want overtime to be standardised to 6, 8 or 10 hours rather than the current system where individual workers work different overtime hours on the same shift.

Queensland pharmaceutical workers threaten to walk out

National Union of Workers' members at the Herron Pharmaceuticals plant in Tennyson, 7 km from Brisbane, threatened to strike yesterday after the company offered a redundancy package considerably lower than those at the company's other Australian sites.

The plant is due to close later in the year following a decision by the company to relocate production to Melbourne. The company has offered affected employees jobs at its distribution sites in Townsville and Toowoomba, 1,300 km north and 70 km west of Brisbane respectively.

New Zealand: Ministry of Justice employees escalate action

New Zealand Ministry of Justice workers have voted to stage day-long strikes at courts every fortnight until their demand for a pay rise is met. Since October 2009, 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members employed in courts across the country have been taking industrial action against a government-imposed pay freeze. Action has included taking their breaks at the same time, enforcing a work-to-rule and a ban on overtime.

While calling for an end to the pay freeze, PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff has said that the union would be prepared to work with the ministry to "reduce their costs" by "identifying and eliminating wasteful spending and improving productivity." Justice Department workers are currently paid up to 9 percent below the average of other public sector workers.



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