

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.

Protesting Indian teachers arrested

Over 100 teachers were arrested on February 27 in Kapurthala, Punjab after they threatened to immolate themselves. The teachers are demanding recognition of their Elementary Teachers Training (ETT) qualifications. Two fasting protestors were also forcefully admitted to hospital. Two weeks earlier a 27-year-old teacher suffered burns to 90 percent of her body when she set herself afire during a protest.

The teachers, who are members of the Employment Guarantee Scheme Union, have long demanded that the government issue them with ETT degrees. The qualified teachers have been teaching in slums and remote areas of the state for over five years.

Indian transport workers walk out over petroleum price rise

Kerala state transport workers and operators struck on March 2 against the Indian central government's decision to increase petroleum prices. Nearly all transport services in the state were affected, including buses, lorries, taxis and auto-rickshaws. Shops in many parts of the state remained closed for the day while striking workers marched to district headquarters to protest. The Motor Transport Operators and Workers' Unions organised the demonstrations.

Tamil Nadu municipal workers strike

Municipality and Commune Panchayat employees in Karaikal, Tamil Nadu walked off the job on March 1 to demand wage parity with other government employees. Their demands include implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations, settlement of a pending pension

payment and regularisation of daily wages.

New Delhi nurses end strike

National Heart Institute nurses in New Delhi ended a 10-day strike on March 3 after being assured by the State Health Department and hospital management that their grievances would be investigated. The nurses want a 10,000-rupee (\$US215) per month pay rise, better working conditions, scrapping of the bond system and reinstatement of 30 nurses recently dismissed. The nurses also want disciplinary action against hospital management for a series of human rights violations, including illegal detention and victimisation of employees.

According to the Nurses Welfare Association, the strike was triggered after two nurses asking for better pay and conditions were locked inside a hospital room, on January 17 and again in February. The nurses were then dismissed. A staff nurse told the media that they only returned to work after hospital management agreed to take up their problems "on a priority basis".

Indian passport workers' union calls strike

All India Passport Employees' Association members in Patna, Bihar threatened two-day strike action commencing March 4. The union's walkout call came as Regional Passport Office workers in New Delhi held a lunchtime demonstration against government plans to outsource most of their work.

Association president Manish Jaiswal said that the employees' demands also include increased staffing levels, opportunity to work in embassies abroad, and the removal of pay scale anomalies. The association claims that staffing levels at passport offices have not changed in eight years, despite a massive workload increase.

Japan: Toyota union cancels annual wage rally

The 63,000-strong Toyota Motor Workers' Union has cancelled its annual call for pay increases. Around 3,000 members usually participate in the union's annual rally in spring, when most Japanese companies hold labour negotiations. The rally was planned for March 9.

Union spokesman Nobuyuki Nakamaru told the media, "We don't want people around the world to see footage of a rally demanding a pay raise" when Toyota is facing safety recall and financial problems.

Korean tyre union threatens strike

Kumho Tyre Workers' Union officials have threatened strike action by its 4,000 members at the company's Gwangju plant on March 16. The union walkout was called in response to a management announcement that it intends to lay off 1,200 workers on April 2.

Last week workers rejected a plan by the company's creditors for major job cuts and a no-strike period during restructure of the ailing tyre manufacturer. This week management rejected a union offer to reduce salaries and bonuses in return for no job losses.

Over the past two years the union has worked with Kumho 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, non-payment of scheduled 2008 bonuses and for talks over 2009 bonus schemes to be put off until the first quarter of 2010.

Burmese garment workers strike

Garment factory workers in the Shwe Pyi Thar Industrial Zone, north of Rangoon, downed tools on March 3 over low pay. The company's 20 employees are paid an average 30,000 kyat (\$US30.30) per month. Some are on a daily rate of 1,050 kyat (\$1.1) for shifts that end at 8 p.m. A nearby resident said that security around the factory was increased while workers and management negotiated.

According to media reports thousands of workers in another Rangoon area, the Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone, and at the Sky clothing factory in the western part of Rangoon's Insein township, struck last month in support of their demands for better pay and working conditions.

Queensland metal workers stop work

About 100 BlueScope Steel employees at Northgate and Eagle Farm

sites in Queensland implemented four-hour rolling stoppages across six shifts on March 3. The National Union of Workers (NUW) members have rejected the company's new work agreement, which only offers only a 3 percent pay rise over two years and includes a flexibility clause.

The NUW also claims that the company is refusing to accept union rights on site, such as delegate training and workers' participation in union meetings.

Queensland pharmaceutical workers locked out

Herron Pharmaceuticals workers in Tennyson, near Brisbane, have been locked out after striking on February 22. Around 25 workers have established a 24-hour picket outside the plant's main gate. One protestor was hospitalised this week after being hit by a vehicle entering the site.

NUW members are protesting against a redundancy package offered by the company which they claim is well below those at the company's other Australian sites. The plant is due to close later in the year following a decision to relocate to Melbourne. Herron has offered affected employees jobs at its distribution sites in Townsville and Toowoomba, 1,300 km north and 70 km west of Brisbane respectively.

Queensland university staff strike

Lecturers and general staff at the University of Queensland (UQ) struck for 24 hours on March 1 over pay and conditions. National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members want a 14 percent wage increase over three years, which they say will give them wage parity with similar universities. UQ has offered just 12 percent. The NTEU also wants improved conditions for casuals and staff on short- and fixed-term contracts.

The strike, which involved the university's academic, general administration and English-language teaching workforce, follows full-day walkouts in September and October last year. The NTEU said they have been in negotiations with the university for 20 months.

Victorian flour mill workers on strike

After weeks of unsuccessful negotiations and overtime bans over a new pay deal, 44 employees at Ballarat's Allied Mills, a food-processing and export company, walked off the job and set up a picket at the factory on March 4. NUW members have rejected the company's pay offer of 9 percent over three years claiming it will leave them \$100 a week worse off than co-workers in Melbourne doing the same job.

New Zealand: Ministry of Justice workers strike

Ministry of Justice workers held a one-day national strike on March 1, closing seven courthouses across the country and forcing trials and hearings to be adjourned. Last month the workers voted to stage day-long strikes every two weeks at courts until their demand for a wage rise is met.

Since October, 1,700 Public Service Association (PSA) members employed in courts, tribunals and other ministry workplaces 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.

In December the Ministry announced negotiations were over, despite the fact that no pay settlement had been reached. The ministry is ignoring an Employment Court ruling that it re-enter negotiations with the PSA. According to the union, Justice Department workers are among the lowest paid public servants in New Zealand, with some paid 9 percent below the average of other public sector workers.

Papua New Guinea: Students and academic staff boycott university

National Academic Staff Association (NASA) members at the University of Goroka (UOG) in PNG's Eastern Highlands resigned en masse last week. They joined some 2,500 students at the university who have boycotted classes since the start of the academic year to protest the administration's alleged misuse of funds, and what they claim is a discriminatory selection process for new students.

Students and staff are demanding the resignation of the UOG administration, including vice-chancellor Gairo Onagi and two pro-vice chancellors. The university is currently seeking a court order to force students and teaching staff to attend classes.



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