

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.

Workers are angry that government authorities in Nagaland, Mizoram, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh have already implemented the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

India: Jammu and Kashmir government employees strike

Work in all Jammu and Kashmir government offices and institutions, including education and health care, ground to a halt on March 9 as part of five-day strike action by 450,000 public employees. The workers want implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Departments affected included Consumer Affairs and Public Distribution, Power Development, Water Works, Public Health, Engineering, Drainage, Roads and Buildings. All Outdoor Patient Departments in hospitals remained closed.

Workers also want the retirement age increased from 58 to 60 years, regularisation of ad-hoc, daily and temporary employees, conversion of the cost of living allowance into a Dearness Allowance and House Rent Allowance increases.

Employees Joint Action Committee chairman Khursheed Alam said that workers are demanding implementation of government promises made eight months ago. Protests are planned for Srinagar, Jammu and Ladakh regions from March 12, he said.

Manipur government employees strike

Non-Gazetted Employees' Welfare Association members at Jawaharlal Nehru (JN) Hospital in Imphal this week joined strike action launched January 16 by the Manipur state government workers. Other medical department employees at the hospital, along with workers from some state and district level health centres, joined the strike action on February 24.

The Joint Administrative Council of All Manipur Trade Union Council and All Manipur Government Employees Organisation want full implementation of the revised Sixth Pay Commission effective from January 2006 with travel and dearness allowances. Most Manipur government departments have remained paralysed since mid-January.

Indian footwear workers locked out

Around 6,000 Apache Footwear India Private Limited employees from Mambattu village, Tada Mandal have been locked out after they walked off the job and demonstrated outside the factory on March 9. Police were called to prevent workers re-entering the factory while management declared that the footwear employees were suspended without pay until the factory reopens on March 17.

This is the second time this year Apache workers have walked off the job to demand better wages and conditions. Management responded to the last walkout with threats of "serious consequences" against workers if there was future industrial action.

India: Thousands arrested in nationwide protests

Over one million workers participated in national rallies on March 5 to protest against the Indian government's economic policies. Demonstrators demanded the government take immediate action to control the rising cost of essential commodities, stop privatisation of the public sector and to fully implement labour laws and provide social security to organised and unorganised sector workers.

The protests, which were held in 200 centres, were called jointly by seven union federations, including Centre of Indian Trade Unions, All India Trade Union Congress, Indian National Trade Union Congress and All India Central Council of Trade Unions. According to media reports, thousands of protesters were arrested throughout India.

In Tamil Nadu, for example, over 4,000 protesters, including 800 women, were detained by the police in Tirunelveli after their rally disrupted traffic. Another 700 protesters were arrested while picketing Tamil Nadu post offices and over 3,000 were arrested during street demonstrations in seven other towns in the state.

Toyota has reportedly offered a bonus of five months' salary, minus 180,000 yen (\$US2,000), as well as automatic pay raises averaging 7,100 yen for union members. The union-management negotiations have set their deadline for March 17.

Bosch workers in Karnataka locked out

Over 700 workers at Bosch's Naganathpura plant in Karnataka have been locked out since March 8 after imposing work bans three weeks ago in support of a new work agreement. Management claims that the bans reduced production by 40 percent and have threatened to close the plant permanently. Workers at Bosch's Naganathpura and Bangalore plants began a go-slow strike on February 13, after 14 rounds of negotiations with the company became deadlocked. The last work agreement expired on December 31, 2008.

Bosch employs 3,200 at its Bangalore plant making rail and diesel fuel injection systems, while the Naganathpura unit produces generators and starters for Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra and Volvo, among others.

The Bosch workers' charter of demands includes a 25 percent increase in basic pay, enhancement of the variable dearness allowance and total medical reimbursement.

Burmese garment workers strike

On March 6, around 4,000 employees at two SGI garment factories in South Dagon township's No. 2 Industrial Zone, Rangoon, took industrial action to demand better pay. According to the media, workers arrived at the industrial zone on the company bus but refused to enter the factory compound. Riot police arrived soon after and company management closed the factories and sent the workers home.

The previous day, several thousand garment workers in Shwepyithar, on Rangoon's western outskirts, staged a sit-in to demand higher wages and better working conditions. Last month, thousands of workers in Rangoon's Hlaing Tharyar Industrial Zone and at the Sky clothing factory in the township of Insein, struck over similar demands.

According to an industry report, Burmese garment workers are paid between \$US30 and \$50 a month, significantly lower than an average \$120 a month that their counterparts receive in Cambodia and Vietnam.

Japan: Toyota rejects union wage demand

Toyota Motor Corp has rejected union demands for five months' bonus pay plus 100,000 yen for the fiscal year beginning April 1. The 63,000-strong Toyota Motor Workers' Union has agreed not to seek a wage hike in this year's negotiations and is pushing for automatic raises based on age and years of service.

Japanese foreign workers demonstrate

Over 400 foreign workers rallied in Tokyo on March 7 to demand better job security and benefits. National Union of General Workers Tokyo Nambu deputy general secretary Louis Carlet told the protest that foreign workers had no job security or social insurance, such as pensions and health care. "One of the biggest problems is that most foreigners are being employed as non-regular workers, and more and more Japanese are being used the same way," he said.

Over two million foreign nationals work in Japan, mostly on short-term contracts of 3 to 12 months.

Pakistan irrigation workers tear-gassed

Irrigation workers were arrested and injured when police used teargas and baton charged a protest march from the Karachi Press Club to the chief minister's house on March 5. Members of the Employees of the National Programme for Improvement of Watercourses (NPIW) were demanding the government regularise all 3,000 contract irrigation workers in the Sindh districts.

Hundreds of NPIW employees from five Sindh districts marched through Khairpur demanding permanent status last November. The workers have pointed out that while 150,000 NPIW employees had been regularised in the Punjab, the Sindh government has refused to do the same.

Bangladeshi riverboat workers strike

On March 8, Bangladesh Noujan Sramik Federation and Launch Labour Association members launched indefinite strike action. The walkout, which affected 18 inter-district routes operating from the Barisal River port, erupted after four workers were sacked on March 2 for alleged "misbehaviour".

Launch owners have agreed to reinstate three of the workers but refused to reinstate launch-master Nazrul Islam. The riverboat employees have refused to end their strike work until all the dismissed workers are reinstated. The government has formed a five-member committee, headed by a magistrate, to attempt to resolve the dispute.

petition with 14,000 signatures to Labor premier Anna Bligh. Electrical Trade Union spokesman Peter Simpson claimed surveys showed that 80 percent of Queenslanders do not support the asset sales.

Last December State Treasurer Andrew Fraser claimed that rather than privatising the state's port and toll-road businesses outright the Labor government would sell 99-year leases. Rail assets will also be sold through a public float rather than private sale with rail workers being offered free or cheap shares.

Queensland: Industrial action at Herron ends with dispute unresolved

Forty-five Herron pharmaceutical workers have been told they will be made redundant following a lockout at the company's Tennyson plant, south of Brisbane. The lockout followed strike action last month by over 140 Herron employees over moves to close the plant.

The pharmaceutical workers are members of the National Union of Workers. NUW organiser Duncan Pegg told the media that those made redundant had been victimised for being on a picket line outside the plant the previous week. Rather than mobilise its 90,000-strong membership, the NUW has told its Herron members that victimisation of those on the picket line will be challenged in Fair Work Australia, the federal government's industrial court.

NUW members have been protesting against a Herron redundancy package, which they claim is well below those at the company's other Australian sites. The plant is due to close later in the year and relocate to Melbourne. Herron had offered its 144 employees jobs in Melbourne or at distribution sites in Townsville and Toowoomba. The NUW claims that there are only two jobs in Queensland and that the company has not discussed any relocation payments. .

Public sector workers protest in Western Australia

Around 1,000 Community and Public Sector Union members rallied outside Parliament House in Perth on March 11 against state Liberal government plans to privatise government services. The state government has said public/private partnerships will be used in health, corrective services and other government services.

Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union official Greg Croston said jobs would be destroyed in maintenance and catering. Many workers fear that 100 public sector jobs will be privatised at the new hospital in Albany.

Queensland catholic school teachers resume industrial action

Queensland catholic school teachers began state-wide industrial action this week to demand pay increases. The teachers, who are members of the Queensland Independent Education Union (QIEU), have imposed overtime bans on school sport and cultural activities.

Last October, 2,000 QIEU members in 87 schools took 24-hour strike action in line with a pay campaign by state school teachers. The teachers were fighting for pay parity with their interstate counterparts. Queensland teachers are among the lowest-paid in Australia.

While state public school teachers have now accepted a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years they will still be earning between \$4,000 and \$7,000 less than interstate teachers. Queensland catholic school teachers currently earn \$6,000 a year less than their interstate colleagues.

Western Australian school support workers' dispute in court

A long-running pay dispute between public school support workers and the Western Australian state government came before the WA Industrial Relations Commission (WAIRC) this week. Around 500 cleaners, education assistants and gardeners stopped work to attend a rally outside the WAIRC on Wednesday, the first day of the hearing, to support their case.

Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union members want a 20 percent pay rise over three years and permanency for part-time workers employed longer than 12 months. The government has offered 8 percent over three years, which represents an increase of 44 cents an hour. Many of the workers earn less than \$35,000 a year.

The state's 10,000 school support staff began industrial action in August over their claim. Action has included bans and numerous stop-work meetings. Workers rejected a government offer in December of an extra 1 percent for education assistants in exchange for giving permanency and the right to minimal hours—conditions they fought to establish six years ago. The WAIRC hearing is expected to take five days.

Queensland workers protest state asset sales

Around 4,000 workers marched on Parliament House in Brisbane on March 9 in protest against a \$15 billion state government plan to sell parts of Queensland Rail, forestry interests and ports. The protesters presented a

New Zealand bus drivers stop work

Bus drivers employed by GO Wellington walked off the job on March 8 to attend a stop-work meeting over a new collective agreement. Most buses in Wellington were off the road from 9.30 a.m. to 2 p.m. The agreement will also cover Tramways Union members in two other regions serviced by Valley Flyer and Mana Coach Services. At the meeting, bus drivers also complained about the run-down state of GO Wellington's bus depot facilities and the fleet's chronically faulty pay-in machines.

Go Wellington and Valley Flyer are subsidiaries of NZ Bus. Last year NZ Bus was involved in a bitter wages dispute with 900 drivers and cleaners in Auckland, which included strikes and a lockout.

Solomon Islands: Government lawyers threaten mass resignation

Over 37 government lawyers, including criminal prosecutors and public legal service providers, say they will resign en masse unless their demand for increased pay, medical benefits, clothing, transport and housing allowances are met. The Solomon Government Lawyers' Association (GLA) has been seeking negotiations with the government since last year, but has received no response. The lawyers' major concern is housing.

According to a GLA spokesperson, housing costs have increased drastically due to the presence of Australia's neo-colonial occupying forces, the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands. The spokesperson claimed some lawyers are sleeping in their offices because they cannot enter the government rental scheme which restricts the rent entitlement to \$3,100 (\$US407) per month. The lawyers are demanding that this be increased to \$5,000. Only a few GLA members have been able to obtain rent under \$5,000.

Papua New Guinea: Bank workers threaten industrial action

Bankers Union (BU) members at Bank South Pacific, PNG's largest bank, announced on March 9 that they will take industrial action if their demands are not met. The bank employees want increased housing allowances and back-payment of unpaid shift allowances which the company agreed to pay in 2007. The union has threatened to call industrial action in two weeks.



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