

# 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.*

## India: Jammu and Kashmir government employees strike in second week

Around 450,000 Jammu and Kashmir government employees are maintaining strike action begun on March 9 to demand payment wage arrears in line with the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Work in most government offices and institutions have ground to a halt.

The government 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.

This week Finance Minister Abdul Rahim Rather claimed there was no money to pay employees' arrears and warned that if workers "failed to see reason" the government would take "stringent measures" including imposition of "no-work no-pay" on strikers.

Employees Joint Action Committee chairman Khursheed Alam said that workers were simply demanding implementation of promises made by the government eight months ago. One striking worker told the media, "The government's commitment has become a joke. We will continue our struggle till our demands are met."

## Tamil Nadu marketing corporation employees walk out

On March 17, liquor outlet workers from the Tamil Nadu State Marketing Corporation (TASMAC) in Coimbatore walked off the job for 24 hours to demand a wage rise and improvements in conditions. According to the TASMAC Employees Union, the liquor outlet employees have worked 12-hour days for the last seven years on monthly salaries ranging from 2,100 to 4,000 rupees (\$US46 and \$88).

The workers want job regularisation, time-scale pay, promotions, an

8-hour day, one day off a week, compensation for extra working hours and for all TASMAC supervisors, bar attendants and salesmen to be given permanent payroll positions.

TASMAC employees demonstrated outside the marketing corporation's office in Egmore over the same issues last November.

## Striking Tamil Nadu weavers arrested

Striking weavers, including 118 women, were arrested and detained for several hours after demonstrating at Sellur, Madurai city on March 15. The weavers want the state government to increase their wages by at least 50 percent. The demonstration was led by Marumalarchi Labour Front and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions.

The textile industry is the highest employer of unskilled workers in Tamil Nadu. Wages are generally below 100 rupees a day with some as low as 40 rupees.

## Indian telecom workers protest against privatisation

Hundreds of thousands of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) employees held lunch-hour demonstrations across India on March 15 in protest against a government report recommending job cuts and partial privatisation. According to the Joint Forum of BSNL Associations and Unions of Executives and Non-Executives, the report proposes 30 percent disinvestment of BSNL and retrenchment of 100,000 employees.

The government-owned telecommunications company has a 350 billion rupee annual turnover, assets worth 880 billion rupees and currently employs over 300,000 workers. The report, which is part of a privatisation drive by the Congress Party-led Indian government, recommends that funds from share sales be used to offer voluntary retirement to employees. Workers have threatened to strike if the report is not withdrawn.

## Karnataka hospital contract workers protest

Sacked contract workers from Wenlock Government Hospital in Mangalore, Karnataka protested outside the hospital on March 15. About 40 cleaners, some of whom had been working at the hospital for 14 years, and 18 security staff, were dismissed after a staffing agreement was signed between the government and the Kasturba Medical College (KMC).

The workers have rejected a hospital management offer to re-employ some of those dismissed and said they will maintain their protests until all are given jobs. The contract workers also claim that their employer has not been paying a required 500-rupee monthly deduction into the Provident Fund. One worker said she had been making fund payments for 14 years but discovered that her employer had only paid in 1,000 rupees.

### **Bosch lockout in Karnataka ends**

The five-day lockout of 700 employees at Bosch's Naganathapura plant, Karnataka ended last weekend after a deal was made between management and the unions. Details have not been released to the media but the unions have agreed to end go-slow industrial action at the company's Naganathapura and Bangalore plants.

Bosch workers began industrial action on February 13, after 14 rounds of negotiations with the company became deadlocked. The last work agreement expired on December 31, 2008. The workers' charter of demands includes a 25 percent increase in basic pay, improvements to the variable dearness allowance and total medical reimbursement.

Bosch employs 3,200 at its Bangalore plant, which produces rail and diesel fuel injection systems. Naganathapura makes generators and starters for Maruti Suzuki, Hyundai, Tata Motors, Mahindra & Mahindra and Volvo, among others.

### **Bangladesh water transport workers on strike**

Around 150,000 water transport workers on 300 routes servicing Dhaka, Barisal, Chandpur, Sirajganj and Rangpur have been on strike since March 15 over long outstanding demands for better working conditions. The walkout has affected over 50,000 commuters daily and 17 cargo ships are stranded outside Chittagong Port waiting to be unloaded.

The Bangladesh River Vessel Workers' Federation called the strike after tripartite talks between the government, launch owners and employees broke down. The river workers' 22-point slate of demands includes establishment of a minimum wage and a proper salary structure.

While the Motor Launch Owners Association had termed the strike "illegal", the Bangladesh shipping minister has said the government cannot impose a solution and directed owners and workers to "resolve their own problems".

### **Hong Kong workers demand a minimum wage**

Over 100 people rallied outside the central government's offices in Hong Kong this week to demand implementation of a minimum \$33 (\$US4.28) per hour wage and an 8-hour working day. The rally was organised by the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions. The protesters said that they have been calling for a minimum wage law for 11 years and called on the government to make it sufficient to feed and support a family.

### **University of New South Wales workers walk out**

On March 18, about 200 academics, administrators and other members of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) walked off the job for 24 hours at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). The strike was part of a national campaign by university staff over pay, high workloads and the increased use of casual employees. Strikes are planned for March 31 and April 20.

NTEU members at 30 universities across NSW began industrial action in September last year for a 20 percent pay rise over three years, a cap on the number of hours staff are required to work and improved conditions for the growing number of casual staff. The union claims that over 50 percent of teaching is now performed by casual staff on contract.

NTEU members also want to restore conditions lost under the previous federal Howard government's WorkChoices legislation. In 2005, individual agreements were imposed on all university employees, limits removed on the number of casuals and union access to members restricted. Restoration of lost conditions has become the main sticking point in negotiations.

UNSW vice-chancellor Fred Hilmer this week indicated that university management would not relax any restrictions imposed under WorkChoices. "We're working under an EBA [work agreement] that has served us remarkably well for four years," he said, "and I'm puzzled and disappointed by the NTEU's decision to pursue industrial action."

### **Queensland Catholic school teachers to strike**

A large number of Catholic teachers from the Queensland Independent Education Union (QIEU) are expected to strike on March 24 to demand pay increases, in line with other states. The strike will affect 85 of the state's 288 Catholic schools.

Teachers rejected the latest offer from the Queensland Catholic

Education Commission (QCEC) of a 4 percent pay rise in July 2010 and July 2011 on top of a 4.5 percent pay rise granted in May last year. The QIEU claimed the offer failed to address key concerns. Queensland Catholic teachers remain some of the lowest paid in Australia's non-government sector.

Negotiations for a new work agreement have been underway for over 12 months. In October 2009, 2,000 QIEU members at 87 Catholic schools walked off the job for 24 hours while 400 marched on the QCEC city office in Brisbane over the issue.



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### **South Australian paint makers end strike**

Fifty workers at the Protec paint factory at Gillman, Adelaide ended a five-day strike on March 18 after the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) reached a settlement with the company. LHMU members have accepted a 16 percent pay rise over three years, which will bring their wages close to par with their interstate counterparts.

Settlement of the 15-month pay dispute includes improved redundancy provisions, opportunity for casuals to be made permanent and extra remuneration for team leaders.

### **Queensland childcare workers walk out**

Childcare workers at Griffith University's Nathan campus in Queensland stopped work for 12 hours on March 8 over pay. The strike was the third time the Nathan campus employees have taken action over the issue.

LHMU branch secretary Gary Bullock said university management had offered other general staff an annual 4 percent pay increase over three years but refused to offer childcare workers any increase. Bullock claimed childcare workers' wages at the university were significantly lower than other workers performing comparable roles.

### **New Caledonia nickel miners strike**

On March 12, New Caledonian nickel miners held a one-day strike over high pollution at the mines in the French territory. About 60 miners, who are members of the Federation of New Caledonian Workers Union (CSTNC), protested outside the Department of Mines and Energy in Noumea to demand that the territory government impose tougher sanctions on companies damaging the environment. The strike mainly affected the Société Le Nickel (SLN) mining company where the CSTNC has many members.