

# 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: Bihar state government employees walk out

More than 200,000 members of the Bihar State Non-Gazetted Employees Federation (BSNGEF) struck indefinitely on August 23 to demand implementation of Sixth Pay Commission recommendations and a seven-point charter of demands. State secretariat employees have threatened to join the strike if the non-gazetted workers' demands are not met within two weeks.

In February last year, the BSNGEF and Bihar Secretariat Service Association called off a 34-day strike over similar issues after the Patna High Court ordered them to end industrial action and enter negotiations with the government. None of the disputed issues have been resolved.

## Bihar transport workers on strike

At least 3,000 employees of Bihar State Road Transport Corporation (BSRTC) remain on strike after walking out on August 18 to demand a salary increase in line with Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Other demands include an end to arbitrary deductions from employees' salaries and withdrawal of the corporation's privatisation plans. The striking workers have been joined by former corporation employees demanding their post-retirement entitlements.

The BSRTC employees claim they currently receive salaries awarded in 1986 by the Fourth Pay Commission. This is half of what they are entitled to under the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. The administration has attempted to break the strike by offering a special 150-rupee daily allowance for employees who do not join the walk out.

## Kerala tourist houseboat workers on strike

Houseboat workers in Alappuzha, Kerala struck on August 21 to demand a pay rise. Workers want their basic pay increased from 3,500 rupees per month to 5,500 rupees (\$US117) and the current 110-rupee daily wage lifted to 250 rupees. Strikers claim they have not had an increase since September 2008.

## Jharkhand junior doctors and nurses end strike

Six hundred striking junior doctors and nurses from the Rajendra Institute of Medical Sciences (RIMS) in Ranchi, Jharkhand ended a five-day strike on August 21 after the government agreed to honour four out of six of their demands, including a wage rise and formation of a state nursing directorate. Doctors also wanted improved security, complaining that they are often assaulted by patients' relatives dissatisfied with delays.

## Volvo Bus workers end strike

Over 400 striking workers at the Volvo Bus factory in Bangalore, Karnataka returned to work on August 16, ending a two-week strike over pay and conditions. Management agreed to workers' demands for a pay rise and resolution of their two-year demand for permanency for temporary employees. The company has not agreed to reinstate four suspended workers.

## Apollo Tyres employees return to work

The two-month lockout at the Apollo Tyres factory in Perambra, Kerala ended on August 21 after the company and unions settled a new work agreement.

The LTS (long term settlement) agreement, which covers over 2,000 employees, will increase monthly average salaries by 5,250 rupees (\$US116) and lift the factory workforce by 200 to boost production from 308 to 340 tonnes per day. In return, the unions have allowed the company to hire secondary or contractual labourers for night shifts, weekends, holidays and periods of high absenteeism.

The three-year LTS agreement was to supposed be signed in November last year but management stalled and then imposed a lock-out on June 11 after workers imposed work bans.

## Pakistani telecom workers on strike

Pakistan Telecommunication Company Ltd (PTCL) employees across the nation are maintaining national strike action, which began on August 15, over pay demands. Some telephone exchanges have been turned off and hundreds of thousands of landlines are out of service.

PTCL employees want a 50 percent pay rise and the ending of the Unified Pay Scale (UPS), which they say is aimed at cutting regular employees' jobs. Workers claim that more than half of the 40,000-strong workforce are affected by the UPS.

The Lahore High Court has directed PTCL and the union to resume talks. PTCL has threatened strikers with disciplinary action unless they return to work.

### **Chinese garment workers protest**

On August 18, 100 garment factory workers from the Changtai Clothing Company in Kaiping, Guangdong Province demonstrated at the Kaiping government building to demand two months' outstanding wages. According to protesters, the factory owner disappeared suddenly, leaving 116 unpaid workers and debts of over 3 million yuan (\$US147,276).

The Kaiping People's Court has ordered the factory be auctioned and the proceeds of the sale to pay wages. Workers claim the amount will not cover their lost wages.

### **Vietnamese garment workers strike**

More than 400 workers at a Taiwanese-owned garment factory in the Tan Tao Industrial Park, Ho Chi Minh City struck on August 23 to demand higher monthly bonuses. Lee Shin International employees, who are paid just \$US105, want their monthly bonuses increased from 50,000 to 100,000 dong (\$5.30). Their other demands include clear policies on separate bonuses for high-productivity workers, rent and petrol allowances and more parking spaces at the factory for their motorbikes.

### **Queensland construction workers walk out over safety**

Construction workers walked off a Brisbane building site on August 25 after a colleague, 25-year-old Braedon Webber, was seriously injured after being crushed between equipment and a concrete beam. Webber is fighting for his life in hospital in an induced coma.

The Builders Labourers Federation, representing 300 subcontractors at the Albert Street site, said it has been raising safety concerns with the builder, Laing O'Rourke, for nearly two years. Union organiser Kane Pearson claimed the site had ongoing safety problems with several workers previously injured.

In August last year, Workplace Health and Safety Queensland (WHSQ) stepped up spot auditing of building sites following a series of construction-related injuries and deaths. Three construction workers were killed and at least six injured as a result of concrete-pumping accidents in the previous two years. In July workers walked off a Gold Coast site over unsafe scaffolding. WHSQ is currently investigating the Albert Street accident.

### **Victorian brake workers' strike enters third week**

Up to 250 Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members at the Friction Material Pacific (FMP) brake-pad factory in Ballarat are maintaining one-hour daily stoppages after management failed to submit a document outlining their proposals for a new work agreement at a meeting with the union on Monday. Workers had agreed in principle to the company's offer but want the agreement in writing before voting to end the strike.

FMP workers began industrial action on July 26, after six months of negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. The company wanted all wage rises tied to trade-offs, such as rostered days off, penalty rates on personal leave, the use of contract labour and a heat agreement for staff working in temperatures up to 45 degrees centigrade.

### **New South Wales IBM employees accept common law contracts**

A dispute over a new IBM work agreement at the company's "Flight Deck" facility at Baulkham Hills, Sydney has been resolved with IBM confirming that the 80 affected employees have accepted union negotiated common law contracts.

Despite official union silence on the deal, an Australian Services Union (ASU) negotiator told the media that the IBM workers had accepted contracts in exchange for an average three percent pay rise, six months' pay if made redundant and improved sick leave. The ASU negotiator admitted, however, that the agreement did not rule out future job losses.

### **Northern Territory government workers demonstrate**

At least 200 Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members rallied at parliament in Darwin on August 25 in protest against the Northern Territory (NT) government's minimal pay offer in a new enterprise agreement covering 10,000 public sector workers. The CPSU want 5 percent annual increases over three years. The NT government has offered just 3 percent annual increases over the same period.

A union spokesman claimed the offer is below local inflation and does not match the high cost of living in the territory. The government claimed that the global financial crisis had "dealt a blow" to government revenue and the pay claim is "unaffordable".

### **Peel health workers accept pay deal**

Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Union (LHMU) members, including enrolled nurses, patient care assistants, orderlies, kitchen staff and cleaners, at the Peel Health Campus in Mandurah, south of Perth, Western Australia voted this week to accept Peel's latest pay offer. Peel workers have not had a pay rise for 20 months and the settlement ends a dispute that involved work bans and a lockout.

The LHMU agreement includes an 11.5 percent pay rise over three years, backdated to July 5, with sick-leave penalties applicable after two days. This falls short of workers' original demands for a 12.5 percent pay increase over three years with nine months' back pay, retention of sick leave penalties and a 13 percent increase in superannuation entitlements. The LHMU admitted on its website that the agreement means "workers at Peel are still lagging behind their colleagues in government hospitals in

terms of their pay and conditions”.

The 181-bed hospital, with a staff of over 300, is owned by Health Solutions WA and part of a private/public partnership. The hospital is privately managed as part of the Western Australian public hospital system.

### **New Zealand radiographers on strike**

At least 65 medical radiation technologists (MRTs) at Auckland’s Middlemore Hospital walked off the job on August 26 in a four-day strike against a government-imposed pay freeze. About 1,000 MRTs from District Health Boards (DHB) across the country have been involved in rolling industrial action over a lack of progress in pay talks.

The decision to strike came after four radiographers employed by Counties Manukau DHB were suspended on Monday and another three MRTs suspended from Auckland DHB on Tuesday. Auckland City Hospital radiographers plan to strike for three days next week before a national day-long stoppage.

The Association of Professional and Executive Employees called off limited strike action by its members in February and again in March to facilitate negotiations, which subsequently failed. Radiographers want a 3 percent pay increase.

### **Public housing workers escalate action**

Public Service Association (PSA) members at the state-owned Housing New Zealand Corporation (HNZC) began a week of four-hour rolling stoppages at more than 40 centres across the country on August 23. The action escalates a work-to-rule campaign begun on June 30 after ten months of pay bargaining broke down. The PSA wants a 2 percent annual pay increase over two years and more clearly defined pay scales.

The union claimed that members are forced to work unpaid overtime in an attempt to manage over 600 properties each. This compares with 250 in the private sector. PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said HNZC plans to cut its maintenance budget by 21 percent, which will increase the workload on overworked staff. Wagstaff claimed job cuts had already begun in rural housing.

### **New Zealand primary school teachers stop work**

At least 18,000 public primary school teachers attended four-hour national stop-work meetings on August 24 and 25 to vote on possible strike action after overwhelmingly rejecting the Ministry of Education’s latest collective agreement offer. The offer includes a pay rise of 1.5 percent this year, and 1 percent next year in return for removing restrictions on class sizes.

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) wants a 4 percent pay increase, an additional 1 percent employer contribution to KiwiSaver retirement funds, a laptop for every secondary teacher and health and safety issues resolved.

The PPTA claimed a 4 percent pay increase will keep teachers’ salaries in line with inflation, but since inflation is expected to rise to 6 percent in 2011, driven by an increase in the Goods and Services Tax (GST) from

12.5 percent to 15 percent from October, the pay offer is in reality a pay decrease. The ballot result will be announced on August 30.

### **New Zealand workers continue protests over new industrial laws**

Thousands of workers joined Fairness at Work rallies in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin last weekend to oppose the Key government’s proposed employment law changes introduced into parliament this week.

The law changes will allow all new employees to be fired at any time during a 90-day “trial period” without the employer being required to provide any reason and with no right of appeal for sacked workers. Currently over 22 percent of new recruits have been fired under the act. Prime Minister John Key also announced new restrictions on sick leave and attacks on annual leave entitlements. The new laws will also restrict union access to work sites, requiring unions to seek consent from employers to enter premises.

The Council of Trade Unions (CTU) has announced that the next major event in the campaign will be a national day of action on 20 October.



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