

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.

Cambodian garment workers continue national stoppage

Over 200,000 garment workers from 90 factories across Cambodia are maintaining a five-day strike begun on Monday to demand an improved minimum wage. The media reported that the strike, which began with less than 60,000 workers from 20 factories, has been gaining numbers daily. At least 10 factories have sought injunctions to ban the strike and force employees to return to work within 48 hours.

The Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC) called the strike after 60,000 workers signed a petition demanding the government and garment manufacturers renegotiate a new minimum wage structure due to be implemented on October 1.

The new structure was agreed to in July by the Free Trade Union of Workers, which has over 130,000 garment workers as members. The union had dropped previous demands for a 53 percent minimum wage rise and accepted a \$US5 monthly increase offered by the Labour Advisory Committee. The rise means the minimum monthly wage will be \$61, far below the \$93 workers were demanding.

Manufacturers claim they will not be internationally competitive if the minimum wage is above \$61. The minimum monthly wage for Bangladeshi garment workers is \$43 and \$90 in Vietnam. The CLC and other smaller unions are demanding that the minimum wage be set at \$95 a month, and have threatened to extend the strike if their demand is ignored.

Thailand fishnet factory workers end strike

More than 1,000 Burmese migrant workers at the Dechanpanich fishnet factory in Khon Kaen, Thailand have ended a seven-day strike after the company agreed to partially meet their demands. Workers walked out on September 7 after six colleagues who were sacked for taking sick leave discovered that their passports and other work documents held by the employer had been tampered with, which meant that they could not work for another employer and would face immediate deportation.

The strikers demanded the workers be reinstated and called for all work documents held by the employer to be returned as required by law, that labour camp shops, which were closed by management, be re-opened, proper payment of the minimum wage and overtime in compliance with Thai labour laws, and an immediate end to the de facto bonded labour system.

The company has agreed to restore the sacked employees' cancelled visas but they will have to find work somewhere else. Workers will be allowed to hold their own documents and migrant workers will be paid the same rate as Thai labourers (157 baht [\$US4.9] for an eight-hour day) if their work meets the same standards, as deemed by management. The company has warned that it will adhere to these arrangements only until new work contracts are renewed in three months.

Chinese electronics manufacturing workers walk out

Several hundred employees at the Japanese-owned Brother Industries plant in Shenzhen walked off the job on September 7 to demand better pay and working conditions. Brother Industries manufactures sewing machines and electronic office machines including faxes, printers and telecommunications equipment.

The strikers, mainly female, rallied outside the factory shouting, "Heavy workload, no increase in pay, you are treating us like rabbits." After several hours police arrived and forced the strikers back into the factory compound while government officials held talks with management.

The strikers claim that each employee was now doing the work of two and overtime had been reduced causing a wage decrease of between 200 and 300 yuan per month. Workers also complained that their housing subsidy was fixed but that housing costs were constantly increasing and that the food from the staff canteen had seriously deteriorated.

India: Meghalaya school teachers strike

Over 2,400 teachers of deficit or charity-managed schools in Meghalaya walked off the job for 24 hours on September 13 to demand pay arrears as per the Meghalaya Fourth Pay Commission. An official from the Deficit School Teachers' Association (DSTA) claimed that the government had failed to honour an agreement given in April to release 40 percent of arrears by June and that teachers have not received their monthly salaries for June, July and August.

The Education Commission claims that the government does not have the 520 million rupees (\$US11.7 million) needed to pay the arrears of all the state's teacher workforce. Association president E.D. Nongsain said that the teachers would demonstrate again on September 15, 16 and 17 at various places across the state.

Punjab elementary training teachers on strike

The Punjab government declared on Monday that a week-long strike by teachers involved in Elementary Teachers Training courses was illegal and ordered them back to work or face suspension. Nearly 200 protesting teachers have so far been arrested by police.

Teachers want their services brought under the state's education department in order to secure pay and conditions improvements on par with other government teachers. This would ensure the payment of the dearness allowance (DA), annual increments, establishment of a Contributory Provident Fund (CPF) account, clearance of probation periods and the regular payment of salaries.

Uttar Pradesh police baton-charge protesting teachers

At least 25 teachers were injured on September 14 when police baton-charged a demonstration by several hundred temporary public school teachers in Wazirganj, Lucknow. At least 40 protesters were detained by police.

The temporary teachers had rallied to demand regularisation of their services and a wage rise. When the teachers refused to disperse police called senior district administration officials to arrange a meeting with the protest leaders and education department officials.

Andhra Pradesh council workers end strike

Local council (panchayat) workers in Kadapa called off their 27-day strike on September 10 after the Gram Panchayat Workers Union and the Commissioner of Panchayat Raj reached agreement. Under the deal workers employed on contracts and similar categories will be paid in accordance with Government Order 4271.

The Commissioner also directed the District Panchayat Officer to issue identity cards to workers and provide uniforms, soaps, oil and slippers through the panchayat funds.

Victorian bolt manufacturing workers end strike

Around 25 metal workers employed at Megabolt in Campbellfield ended their two-week strike on September 15 after settling a new pay agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members struck on August 30 for improved conditions and a 20 percent pay increase over three years, which they claimed would lift their pay above the minimum wage for the first time. Megabolt had offered just 18 percent over three years with no improved conditions. Workers also raised concerns about the high number of accidents at the factory.

Under the agreement, employees will receive a 19 percent pay increase over three years, back-dated to June 2, and a \$750 sign-on bonus. Workers also gained monthly rostered days off and an award-aligned classification structure. All casuals with the company for over six months will be made permanent. While the union has claimed victory it has admitted that many workers will remain on the minimum wage of only \$15 an hour.

Western Australian public hospital workers implement work-to-rule

More than 8,000 public hospital staff throughout the state have begun work-to-rule action to demand a better pay offer from the state government. The limited action by Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members, which began on September 13 and includes cleaners, patient-care assistants, orderlies, catering staff and sterilisation workers, is having minimal effect on hospital services.

Workers have rejected the Liberal government's offer of 8.25 percent over 3 years with trade-offs that include the removal of anti-privatisation clauses from the current enterprise bargaining agreement. The government is seeking to privatise or contract out cleaning and catering services at two new hospitals under construction and wants to privatise services at existing hospitals.

Hospital workers, most of whom earn less than \$40,000 a year, want a 15 to 18 percent pay rise over 3 years with no trade-offs. The government has offered a 9 percent increase over the same period, which they falsely claim is in line with the current consumer price index.

Although negotiations have dragged on for over three months, LHMU state secretary David Kelly said there were no plans to escalate the industrial action.

One-day strike by New Zealand secondary teachers

New Zealand secondary school teachers held a one-day national strike on September 15, following a breakdown in contract negotiations. It was the first strike to close schools in eight years. Teachers demonstrated in many centres. Over 2,000 teachers from 75 schools marched through central Auckland, while in Wellington 1,000 rallied outside parliament.

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) wants a 4 percent pay increase, and a commitment by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to address class sizes and teacher retention and recruitment. The *NZ Herald* quoted teachers saying their current workload was "insane" because of an overhaul of the assessment system that required them to redesign new standards.

Teachers voted by 95 percent to reject the MoE offer of a 1.5 percent pay rise, with an additional 1 percent after 12 months, but with the claw-back of conditions. They also voted for an ongoing program of sending students home next term if the dispute continues.

Auckland medical laboratory workers strike

Over 400 medical lab workers in Auckland walked off the job on September 10 for a new pay deal. The action marked the first full-day strike by lab workers and followed recent strikes by hospital radiologists over pay. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union has been vague about its demands saying the strike is for a fair and equitable pay scale for lab scientists. The lab workers earn about 18 percent less than teachers and nurses. Several health boards have suspended union members for up to five days in an attempt to intimidate them after they began imposing bans in August. Lab workers in Northland and Wellington are taking action and half-day strikes are planned by staff at Middlemore Hospital later this month.

New Zealand doctors prepare to strike

Junior doctors at public hospitals throughout New Zealand are preparing to strike following ten months of stalled negotiations with District Health Boards (DHBs) for a new contract. The forecast date is October 1, but the Resident Doctors' Association (RDA), which represents 2,000 junior doctors, has not made public any plans.

The DHBs have proposed a new collective agreement, with greater flexibility to change junior doctors' working hours and changes to overtime payments. The union wants the current contract to be rolled over with a 1 percent pay increase, claiming it will give both sides more time to negotiate a new agreement.

Junior doctors went on strike over pay during 2006 and again in 2008. Any future strike action could coincide with continuing industrial action by radiographers and medical laboratory workers. The senior doctors' union announced this week it had reached a deal with the DHBs for a 2 percent pay rise from next January.



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