

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.

Asia

Cambodian police attack striking garment workers

At least 12 garment workers were injured and one hospitalised on September 18 when police attacked rallies by over 12,000 striking garment workers outside factories in Phnom Penh and Kandal province. Workers had walked off the job to protest the suspension of more than 200 union representatives following the end of a minimum wage strike by over 200,000 garment workers.

The *Phnom Penh Post* on Wednesday reported that at least 10,000 employees at three factories in Kandal province defied a court order to return to work and continue protesting over the suspension of more than 50 union representatives involved in the national stoppage.

On September 13, around 60,000 garment workers, led by the Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC), went on strike to demand that the \$61 per month minimum wage agreed to in July with the government, employers and the Free Trade Union of Workers be renegotiated and lifted to \$93.

Within three days of the stoppage starting more than 210,000 workers were involved in the strike. The CLC, fearing it would lose control, called off the strike after four days without any settlement. Social Affairs Minister It Samheng claimed that the government only promised to sit down with the employers and unions to discuss "benefits for garment and footwear workers" on September 27.

At least 10 factories have filed damages lawsuits against CLC officials and for suspension of workers identified as strike leaders. Garment manufacturers claim they have lost \$41 million because of the walkout.

Cambodia's garment industry, which manufactures for several international brands, including Gap, Benetton, Adidas and Puma, employs about 345,000 workers.

Pakistan brick-kiln workers protest against bonded labour

Hundreds of Pakistani brick-kiln workers rallied at the Islamabad Press Club on September 17 to protest against bonded labour and inhuman treatment by kiln owners. Although bonded labour has been prohibited in Pakistan since 1992 and formally abolished 12 years ago by the Supreme

Court, authorities allow employers to continue this form of enslavement. Under the peshgi (advance) system of bondage, employers advance money to workers who cannot leave until they repay the whole amount. Employers are trying to have it legally recognised again.

There are around two million workers in brick-kiln factories in Pakistan, most of them employed under the peshgi system and paid as little as 500 rupees (\$US11.20) per 1,000 bricks. This amount is paid to the male head of the family but the whole family works in the factory.

The rally was organised by the Pakistan Bhatta Workers Union, whose demands include the release of bonded labourers and their families and improved wages and working conditions in line with Pakistan's labour laws.

India: Tamil Nadu coal miners on strike

Over 13,000 contract workers at the state-owned Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) walked off the job on September 19 to demand regular employment, bonuses and equal pay for equal work. The Central Industrial Security Force and the local police have been deployed at mine-heads and the thermal power stations that use NLC coal.

The strike was led by the Labor Progressive Front (LPF), the Pattali Thozhilalar Sangam and the NLC Jeeva Contract Workers' Union. Authorities are concerned that if the strike is prolonged it will affect the state's power supplies.

Punjab power workers walk out

Nearly 65,000 power sector workers in Punjab struck for 24 hours on September 22 to demand the state government honour a previous commitment to improve salaries and conditions. In April, State Electricity Board (PSEB) unions called off a two-day strike opposing the privatisation of the PSEB, after making a deal with the government to drop its opposition to the privatisation. The government promised to implement workers' long-standing demands for improved pay and conditions.

Since then the PSEB has been split into two private corporations, the Punjab e Power Corporation Limited (Powercom) and Punjab State Transmission Corporation (TRANSCO) whilst demands by the power workers union have not been honoured.

Bihar public transport workers on strike

Bihar State Road Transport Corporation (BSRTC) employees walked off the job on September 17 to protest the arrest of work colleagues demonstrating the previous day to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission salary structure. Striking workers gathered at the Transport Bhawan on Birchand Patel Path in Patna and began a hunger strike. Union officials from the Path Parivahan Nigam Karmchari Samyukt Sangharsha Morcha said their members will remain on strike until the pay demand was met.

Bangladeshi garment workers protest sackings

Over 200 Padma Poly Cotton employees in the Tejgaon Industrial area demonstrated outside the factory on September 20 to demand reinstatement of 97 workers sacked on trumped up negligence of duty charges after the Eid holiday. Fearing an escalation of the demonstration, factory owners closed the plant and called in riot police.

Sri Lankan volunteer teachers demonstrate

Volunteer teachers working in the country's war ravaged eastern areas protested at the Provincial Council Office in Trincomalee on September 15 to demand regularisation. Protesters threatened to launch a fast-unto-death campaign if their demand is not addressed. The teachers claim they have been working in the schools for between five and ten years but the government has failed to act on repeated promises to make them permanent.

Protest over maid abuse in Malaysia

About 500 people staged a motorbike protest outside the Malaysian ambassador's residence in Jakarta on Wednesday to condemn the abuse of Indonesian maids by Malaysian employers. The protest was sparked by a report that Malaysian police had arrested a couple for burning their 26-year-old Indonesian maid with a hot iron and scalding water. The husband was also accused of raping the maid repeatedly.

The latest case was one of many shocking mistreatments of domestic workers in Malaysia, which prompted Jakarta last June to temporarily ban maids from working in Malaysia.

Malaysia, which is one of Asia's largest importers of labour and depends heavily on domestic workers, has no laws governing their working conditions. There are about 1.2 million documented Indonesian workers in Malaysia, as well as about 800,000 undocumented employees. In 2007, Indonesia received \$US6.6 billion in remittances from Indonesian migrant workers.

Philippine Airlines workers rally

On September 21, Philippine Airlines Employees' Association (PALEA) members, supported by other workers and various labour groups, demonstrated against plans by Philippine Airlines (PAL) to

outsource ground crew jobs. Up to 3,000 of the airline's 7,500 employees will be laid off under the proposal.

The lay-offs were originally planned for May 31 but suspended after the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) intervened and ordered the union and the company to enter negotiations. PAL wants to outsource airport services (ground, cargo and ramp handling), in-flight catering and call centre reservations. PALEA claims that the plan is illegal and current employees are rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union.

Meanwhile, the Flight Attendants and Stewards of the Philippines (Fasap) union has filed a strike notice with DOLE in its dispute with PAL over forced early retirement. The union said that PAL insists that female workers hired after 1996 retire at 45 years of age and those employed after 2000 retire at 40. Fasap wants the retirement age lifted to 60 and for the company to grant salary and benefits to pregnant flight attendants.

Australia and the Pacific

Western Australian hospital workers' union rejects pay offer

The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) this week rejected the state government's latest pay offer, which was 58 cents an hour less than the \$1.20 an hour its members want. It has told members to continue their work-to-rule action begun on September 13, which has had minimal effect on hospital services.

Around 8,000 hospital support staff throughout the state, including orderlies, patient care assistants, cleaners, catering staff and sterilisation workers, want a 15-18 percent pay rise over three years. Many of the workers earn less than \$40,000 per year.

Negotiations have dragged on for over three months and the state government wants trade-offs including the removal of anti-privatisation clauses in their agreement. LHMU officials, however, said they have no plans to escalate industrial action.

New South Wales drivers sacked for joining a union

Transport Workers Union (TWU) members and officials rallied outside the No Fuss Liquid Waste depot in Emu Plains, on the outskirts of Sydney on September 22, to protest the sacking without explanation of three drivers. The three workers claimed they were sacked for joining the union.

No Fuss management later told the media that the workers had been made redundant. Under the Gillard Labor government's Fair Work Act, No Fuss is exempt from most provisions of unfair dismissal laws because it employs fewer than 20 staff.

According to workers, they are forced to work 15-hour shifts when by law they are restricted to 12-hour shifts.

New South Wales shipbuilders stop work

Maintenance workers at the Forgacs Engineering Company in Sydney and Newcastle held stop-work meetings on September 22 against the Gillard government's plan to contract out defense maintenance work to

overseas companies. Manufacturing Workers Union National Secretary, Dave Oliver, told the meetings that the decision could lead to the loss of 400 jobs at Garden Island in Sydney and Carrington in Newcastle.

The government claims it has not yet made a decision, but according to the federal opposition at least one \$40 million contract has already been awarded to a Singapore-based company because its tender was \$10 million lower. Singapore shipbuilding firms employ a large number of immigrant workers from countries like Bangladesh on wages below \$US800 a month. While the AMWU complains that 15,300 manufacturing jobs were lost in New South Wales in 2009-2010, the union has failed to defend any of these jobs.

New Zealand medical laboratory workers suspended

On September 20, the New Zealand Blood Service (NZBS) suspended seven workers in Auckland and Palmerston North, while the Counties Manukau District Health Board (DHB) suspended eight from Middlemore Hospital in south Auckland, for their involvement in limited industrial action.

Members of the Medical Laboratory Workers Union (MLWU) implemented limited bans on non-critical functions 12 weeks ago after rejecting a new pay offer of 2 percent over two years. The pay offer does keep pace with inflation, which 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. Over 400 lab workers walked off the job for 24 hours on September 10 over the issue.

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. The MLWU has been vague about its demands, saying the strike is for a fair and equitable pay scale for lab scientists.

Secondary school teachers escalate strike action

The Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) has announced plans to escalate industrial action, following an unfavourable response from the education minister following their national strike last week that closed New Zealand's secondary schools for the first time in eight years.

The escalated action includes strikes on eight more days, beginning on October 4 and ending on December 1. Parent interviews and assisting pupils after school will be banned along with attending after school hours meetings and working on weekends. The bans will remain in place until January 27.

The PPTA wants a 4 percent pay increase in a new work contract, and a commitment by the Ministry of Education to address increasing class sizes through teacher retention and recruitment. Teachers have rejected the government's pathetic offer of a 1.5 percent pay rise, with an additional 1 percent after 12 months with the claw-back of conditions. The PPTA will finalise strike plans at its 28-30 September national conference.

Auckland port workers protest

Conlinxx truck drivers at the Port of Auckland picketed the company depot on September 16 in a dispute over the contracting out of the port's

shuttle service. Maritime Union of New Zealand members fear they will lose their jobs.

The picket was lifted in the afternoon after management agreed to meet with union officials the next day. Conlinxx is 70 percent owned by Ports of Auckland, which is driving the cost-cutting plan.

Papua New Guinea nurses ordered to end strike

The PNG National Court on September 17 ordered nurses at Madang's Modilon General Hospital to end their weeklong strike and return to work or be jailed. The judge told strike leaders to reach an agreement with hospital management on outstanding issues relating to working conditions and pay before the two parties appeared before him on September 24.



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