

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.

Bangladeshi jute workers on strike

About 1,200 workers from 14 jute baling presses in Daulatpur, Khulna struck on October 18 to demand a weekly wage increase from 863 taka to 1,726 taka (\$US24.65) for carrying 100 bales of jute each to the baling press. The strikers are supporters of the Wages Implementation Action Committee (WIAC).

A spokesman from the Bangladesh Jute Association claimed the strike was illegal because the association had begun negotiations with the Jute Press Workers Union to resolve the issue. A WIAC representative told the media the strike is legal because prior notice was given to press owners. The WIAC said workers would remain on strike until their demand is met.

India: Meghalaya deficit school teachers end strike

On October 19, union officials in the north-eastern state of Meghalaya convinced striking deficit school teachers to return to work because they had a “black and white” assurance from the state government that disputed pay arrears would be released before Christmas. The move came at a mass meeting in Shillong called by the Khasi Jaintia Deficit School Teachers Association and the Garo Hills Deficit School Teachers and Employees Association.

Such government assurances have proven worthless in the past. An estimated 2,400 teachers of deficit or charity-managed schools in Meghalaya walked off the job on October 4 to demand pay arrears as per the Meghalaya Fourth Pay Commission. Teachers accused the government of failing to honour an agreement made in April to release 40 percent of arrears by June. The teachers have not received their monthly salaries for June, July and August.

Other issues also remain unsettled, including teachers’ demands for service and management rules, medical reimbursements and pension benefits.

Vietnamese garment workers end strike

A six-day strike by nearly 2,000 workers at garment manufacturer Triple VN Company in Ho Chi Minh City ended this week after management

reached an agreement with strikers. Workers downed tools on October 12 to protest unreasonable production demands and poor quality meals. They also claimed ill-treatment by the factory’s Taiwanese managers. The company agreed to improve conditions, as well as pay the workers’ salaries while on strike.

Triple VN is a subsidiary of Taipei-based garment maker Makalot Industrial Co Ltd, which supplies apparel for brands like Wal-Mart, Gap and Target. Makalot also has production bases in China, Indonesia, the Philippines, Cambodia and Sri Lanka.

Vietnamese footwear workers return to work

Nearly 8,000 workers at the footwear manufacturer Sun Jade Vietnam Co in Thanh Hoa City resumed work Wednesday after staging a five-day wildcat strike for salary increases. According to the deputy chairman of Thanh Hoa province’s official trade union, which collaborates closely with the government and employers, the company had agreed to nearly all the workers’ demands. Originally, the demands included a salary increase from 1.11 million dong to 1.21 million dong (\$US64) a month, improved working conditions and dining facilities.

Western Australian hospital workers escalate work bans

This week, public hospital support workers throughout Western Australia stepped up their work bans. An estimated 8,000 Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members walked off the job for four hours last week and re-imposed bans following their rejection of the state Liberal government’s latest pay offer of a 10.5 percent increase over three years.

In return for a pay rise, the government is demanding the removal of anti-privatisation clauses from the existing enterprise agreement, which would allow the government to outsource jobs to contractors.

Hospital workers, including orderlies, patient care assistants, cleaners, catering staff and sterilisation technicians, many of whom earn less than \$40,000 a year, want a 15-18 percent pay rise over three years. Existing bans on the removal of rubbish, linen, meal trays and the sterilisation of hospital equipment for private hospitals have been extended to include no washing of dishes, or cleaning and servicing of administrative offices.

Since the dispute began, LHMU officials have endeavored to limit it. They have confined industrial action to work-to-rule guidelines and work bans, in order to minimise disruption to hospital services. The union is now trying to scuttle the dispute by referring it to the Industrial Relations Commission.

Western Australian local council workers locked out

A lockout of up to 50 Australian Services Union (ASU) members employed by the City of Albany council, south of Perth, has resumed. Initially, the workers had their pay docked and were ordered off the premises after imposing partial work bans to demand a pay increase. Bans included a refusal to remove graffiti, a ban on overtime and refusing to collect revenues at some of the council facilities.

Workers wanted a 26 percent pay rise over three years, but the union has reduced the claim in talks with the management. ASU industrial campaign coordinator Paul Burlinson told reporters that through negotiations, "the claim has been repeatedly modified" to 13 percent "to enable the City to make appropriate measures in the budget".

The ASU referred the matter to the federal industrial tribunal, Fair Work Australia (FWA), which ruled on Tuesday that the City's lockout had not been properly notified. However, when workers turned up for work on Wednesday, they were told to go home again. The City said it had lodged notification with FWA late on Tuesday to formalise its lockout.

New Zealand teachers resume strike action

Teachers in state secondary schools across the country resumed industrial action this week after contract negotiations broke down between the Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) and the Ministry of Education. Partial work stoppages were held on October 20 and 21, with teachers refusing to teach students in Years 9 and 11. Union members are also refusing to work after 5pm and on weekends.

Teachers suspended strike action last week following assurances from the Ministry that it would make an improved offer. After three days of negotiations, the PPTA rejected the revised offer of 0.5 percent and a \$1,000 one-off payment for the first year, and 1.9 percent for the second year.

The PPTA wants a 4 percent pay increase and a commitment by the Ministry to address increasing class sizes through teacher retention and recruitment. However, union president Kate Gainsford has indicated the union is willing to compromise. She told the media this week that this was not a "take it or leave it" demand.

NZ medical laboratory workers strike

Hundreds of medical laboratory workers struck this week over a long-running pay dispute. About 350 workers held staggered two-day stoppages at Auckland and Counties Manukau District Health Boards (DHBs) and at blood banks run by the Blood Service in Waikato and Auckland. The Medical Laboratory Workers Union (NZMLWU) says strikes will be held next week for another two days at the DHBs and at the Blood Service in Christchurch, Waikato, Palmerston North and Auckland.

The NZMLWU, with 400 members in the public health system, has been in dispute with 13 District Health Boards (DHBs) and the Blood Service for more than three months over a new collective agreement. Several DHBs had been standing down up to 30 laboratory workers for six hours each day from August 6 for taking minor industrial action, which

includes not answering phones and a ban on some tests.

Employers have offered an immediate pay rise of 1 percent and another 1 percent next January, but the offer does not keep pace with inflation, which is expected to rise to 6 percent in 2011, driven by this month's increase in the Goods and Services Tax from 12.5 percent to 15 percent. Lab workers want pay increases of up to 5 percent at different DHBs.

District Health Boards withdraw radiographers' wage increase

In response to the escalation of industrial action by 1,000 medical radiation technologists (MRTs) at public hospitals across New Zealand, including a 60-hour stoppage on October 8, District Health Boards (DHBs) have withdrawn a wage rise offer of 2 percent in a new contract. The Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex), which represents the MRTs, had settled for the 2 percent offer this month after reducing its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February. MRTs are continuing with industrial action over unresolved claims about better terms and conditions, better rest breaks and proper allowances.

Apex spokesperson Robyn Slater described the DHBs' withdrawal as a "provocative move" that would "inevitably lead to an increase in industrial action". The DHBs this week called on the government to "review" health workers' right to strike.

Hardware workers protest

Workers at the Mitre 10 Mega hardware store in the southern New Zealand city of Invercargill rallied outside the store on October 15 to demand better wages. National Distribution Union (NDU) organiser Ken Young said the workers were paid up to \$1.50 an hour less than colleagues at Mitre 10 stores in other parts of the country. The Invercargill management has been in contract negotiations with the NDU since March.

Papua New Guinea: Power workers take industrial action

Ninety-two linesmen and technical staff at PNG Power are refusing to work overtime to protest low wages. Papua New Guinea (PNG) Energy Workers Association general secretary Santee Margis told the media on October 19 that the workers had been overlooked in recent pay adjustments and were being made to work long and anti-social hours. As a result of the industrial action, he said, power supply to Port Moresby, the capital, could be disrupted.



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