

# 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 remain suspended

More than a month after the betrayal by the unions of a four-day national strike, many Cambodian garment workers remain locked out by their employers for having participated in the strike.

According to the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union (CCAWDU), which called off the strike on September 16 to enter into negotiations with the employers and Prime Minister Hun Sen's government, 94 union representatives remain suspended. In addition, at least 10 factories have filed damages law suits against Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC) officials, and are seeking the suspension of workers identified as strike leaders.

More than 200,000 garment workers—over half the industry's workforce—had walked out for four days to demand that the \$US61 per month minimum wage, agreed to in July with the government, employers and the Free Trade Union of Workers, be lifted to \$93. As soon as the strikers returned to work on September 17, employers began to suspend factory delegates and initiate legal cases against them. At least 300 were singled out immediately.

The Ministry of Social Affairs has now demanded that 34 suspended union representatives at the River Rich garment factory in Kandal province sign a three-point pledge in exchange for their return to work. Workers refused to sign the pledge, which required them to respect company regulations, abide by the government's Labour Law and stop inciting "illegal" strikes.

The CCAWDU has threatened to renew work stoppages if the cases of suspended union representatives are not resolved by the end of the month. But the unions have already effectively abandoned the wage claim on which last month's strike was based, saying they will seek other concessions instead, such as daily food allowances and seniority payments. This is despite the fact that giant global clothing firms like Adidas, Levi Strauss, Gap Inc, Hennes and Mauritz, and Walt Disney are continuing to make super profits by exploiting cheap labour in Cambodia.

## India: Unions call off Maharashtra head-loaders' strike

A trade union quickly ended a strike by more than 100,000 head-loaders (produce carriers) employed at the Maharashtra state's Agriculture Produce Marketing Committees (APMCs) on Monday.

The strikers demanded better wages and housing and a ban on direct

sourcing of vegetables and fruits by 25 corporate companies which bypass the APMCs. All transport of produce in and out of the markets stopped during the strike.

The Maharashtra Rajya Mathadi Transport and the General Kamgar Union called off the strike later in the day, claiming the state government had given an assurance that their demands would be met within a month.

## Tamil Nadu temple workers strike

Ticket sales and other services at temples governed by the Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowment Board (HRECB) were briefly affected at thousands of temples in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu on October 27, when employees struck and occupied the temples to demand implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations.

The workers' demands included fixation of basic pay, with a rise equivalent to 1.9 percent of the present structure and monetary benefits, with effect from July 1, 2008; immediate lump sum payments of arrears; the filling of vacant posts and regularisation of services of temporary employees.

According to the Federation of Tamil Nadu Temple Employees Welfare Associations, the government had agreed to the 1.9 percent increase but the HRECB issued an order to raise salaries by only 1.7 percent. Strikers returned to work in the afternoon after the government gave an assurance that their demands would be "looked into".

## Sri Lankan nurses protest

On October 24, nurses held a national three-hour stoppage to oppose a new draft nursing document prepared by the health ministry. Government Nursing Officers Association members held protests at Colombo National Hospital's Bandaranaike Building and in eight provinces. Most hospital services were affected, except emergency, maternity and paediatric services.

According to protesting nurses, ministry officials had agreed to extend the nurses' training period but it had been reduced to three years and four months in the draft amendments. There was no mention of the nursing graduates and no commitment to increase the recruitment of males for the nursing profession up to 20 percent from the present 5 percent.

Protesting nurses said that if the government failed to grant their demands, all nurses would launch a sick note campaign on November 10.

## **Bangladeshi pilots suspended over industrial action**

At least five pilots of Bangladesh's national carrier, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, have been suspended since launching industrial action on October 22 to oppose changes to the retirement age. Most international flights have been affected, with many cancelled, as pilots book in sick to protest against a Biman decision in September to increase the retirement age from 57 to 62 years without extending insurance and rehabilitation benefits during the five-year period.

The Bangladesh Airline Pilots Association (BAPA), which represents 116 Biman pilots, said at least 60 members had stopped flying and others who were currently abroad would join the protest on return. Pilots want the retirement age to be extended to age 65 with full entitlements, in line with airlines in other countries. BAPA members are also protesting the recent leasing of five aircraft from foreign firms under an agreement that also includes pilots and crew.

Biman has given pilots until Saturday to end the strike or face legal action, which it said would include retrenchments.

## **Philippines media workers picket TV station**

More than 100 sacked employees of the media network ABS-CBN have been picketing the network's head office in Quezon City since October 12 to demand their jobs back. ABS-CBN's internal jobs agency Internal Job Market (IJM) began terminating staff from July for refusing to sign new short-term contracts. The ABS-CBN IJM Workers Union claimed that the contracts would limit workers' tenure to less than three years, or for as long as their specific TV programs would last.

At least 114 employees have been terminated, some of whom have been at the company for over 20 years. Although the Department of Labor and Employment has ruled that ABS-CBN's internal jobs agency is illegal, the company is still insisting that over 1,000 employees sign the new contracts with IJM.

## **South Australian public servants rally against job cuts**

Over 1,000 public servants, including fire fighters and nurses, marched to Parliament House in Adelaide on Tuesday to protest the state Labor government's budget cuts, which will eliminate nearly 4,000 public service jobs and unilaterally impose cuts to annual leave loading and long service leave.

It was the second rally in two weeks organised by the trade unions, including the Public Service Association (PSA). Regional rallies were also held in Port Augusta, Whyalla and Murray Bridge. However, the unions, which knew of planned job cuts well before last month's budget, have called no industrial action. Instead, they are urging their members to sit in the parliamentary gallery during the debate on the budget measures.

The PSA effectively signalled its acceptance of job cuts by writing to the Commissioner for Public Sector Employment on October 8, requesting consultation with the union before the implementation of so-called voluntary redundancies. The government has snubbed the request, and the redundancies are due to commence on Monday. In response, the PSA has lodged a dispute in the state's workplace tribunal, the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

The unions' efforts to divert angry workers into the dead-end of IRC

hearings suffered a blow on Wednesday when the Full Bench of the IRC ruled that it had no jurisdiction over the PSA's earlier bid to lodge a dispute over the government's legislation to cut leave entitlements, which violate a previous work agreement signed with the unions. The IRC judges declared that the union's application would "constitute an improper interference with the Parliament of South Australia" and "infringe parliamentary privilege".

## **South Australian bus drivers strike**

Bus drivers employed by Transitplus, which operates buses in the Adelaide Hills, have ended strike action to return to negotiations this week for a new work contract. Transport Workers Union members took limited strike action during the morning peak periods last week to oppose the company's pay offer of 4.5 percent, which included adjustments to penalty rates. A union spokesman said members rejected the offer because Transitplus wanted to cut rates in some areas to fund the wage increase.

## **Western Australian hospital union sells out pay and jobs dispute**

Union officials opened the way for further privatisation of the Western Australian hospital system by reaching an agreement with the state Liberal government and the Health Department on October 24. The deal provides for a 7 percent pay rise over two years for hospital support workers—well short of their original demand of 15 percent over three years.

An estimated 8,000 Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members had walked off the job for four hours earlier this month and re-imposed work bans following their rejection of the government's offer of a 10.5 percent increase over three years.

The hospital workers had also demanded that anti-privatisation clauses in their current agreement be retained. In the union deal, the government agreed only to put off attempts to remove the clauses for the next two years and claimed that the clauses apply only to existing hospitals. As a result, the government plans to contract out services at new hospitals currently under construction at Murdoch in Perth's southern suburbs and at Midland in the eastern suburbs.

Union officials presented the deal as a victory at meetings held in hospitals throughout Perth, claiming there were "no trade-offs" and privatisation had been held at bay for two years. The government has already announced its decision to select Serco as the preferred bidder to provide support services at the Fiona Stanley Hospital.

Most of the 8,000 support workers earn less than \$40,000 per year and are struggling financially following steep increases in electricity, gas and water charges handed down in May's state budget.

## **Victorian council workers apply work bans**

At least 140 outdoor employees at Melbourne's suburban Monash City Council have implemented work bans that include cleaning public toilets, painting over graffiti and mowing parks and sporting fields. Australian Services Union members are in dispute over a new enterprise agreement in which the union is seeking a 6 percent pay increase and a nine-day fortnight. The council is offering 3.75 per cent. An ASU organiser said the

union and council representatives would enter talks next week.

### **New Zealand radiographers plan further strikes**

Medical Radiation Technologists (MRTs) employed in public hospitals have announced a two-day, New Zealand-wide strike for November 9 and 10. It follows a decision last week by District Health Boards (DHBs) to withdraw their 2 percent pay increase offer in a long running dispute for a new work agreement.

The Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (APEX), which represents 1,000 MRTs, had already settled for the 2 percent offer after reducing its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February. MRTs had maintained industrial action over unresolved claims about better terms and conditions, rest breaks and proper allowances.

Over 20 DHBs and APEX have been negotiating for 14 months. DHBs have called on the government to “review” health workers’ right to strike.



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