

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.

Indian Foxconn strike in seventh week

Despite violent attacks by the police, thousands of employees at the Taiwan-owned Foxconn Corporation plant in Sriperumbudur, Tamil Nadu are continuing their walkout, which began on September 21. Workers want an increase in wages (which range from 2,900 rupees (\$US63) to 4,800 (\$104) a month), increased health benefits and recognition of their union Thozilalar Sangam (FITS), which is affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and the Stalinist Communist Party (CPM) of India (Marxist).

FITS, which claims a membership of around 1,500 out of the 1,800 regular Foxconn workers, told management on September 8 that it wanted wage negotiations. Management instead entered into an agreement with Foxconn India Thozilalar Munnetra Sangam (FITMS), a union affiliated to the Labor Progressive Front (LPF), which is aligned with the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam or DMK. The DMK is part of the Tamil Nadu state coalition government and has openly sided with management in all workers' disputes in the state.

On September 24, Foxconn management, with the full support of the Tamil Nadu government, used police to break up an occupation of the plant by workers, brutally beating dozens and detaining 1,200 workers for a whole day before releasing them in the evening.

The Stalinist-led FITS union has refused to mobilise other workers in the Special Economic Zone in a common struggle. Despite the militant mood and sentiments of the workers, there is every danger that the Stalinist CPM and CITU will abort the struggle, thus allowing the management to impose its will.

Indian GM workers call off strike with no clear resolution

On November 2, under pressure from the government, 900 workers at the General Motors India (GMI) Halol plant in Vadodara, Gujarat ended their four-day strike for a wage increase after the company signed a memorandum of understanding to raise their salaries. However, there was no agreement on the size of the wage increase and GMI's vice-president P Balendran later boasted to the media that no timeframe was agreed to.

GM operates two shifts at the Halol plant producing its small vehicle range, including the Aveo UVA, Aveo sedan, the mid-size Optra sedan, the Cruze sedan and the multi-utility Tavera. The four-day strike caused a loss in production of 450 vehicles.

NLC unions accept government pay offer

A six-week strike by contract workers at the Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) in Tamil Nadu ended on October 27 after intervention by state Chief Minister M. Karunanidhi. Some 13,000 contract workers, represented by six unions, began strike action at the state-owned coal and electric generating company on September 19 after putting forward a ten-point charter of demands that included regular employment, bonuses and equal pay for equal work.

Contract workers—miners, laborers and other ancillary workers—are paid between 3,000 rupees (\$US66) and 4,500 rupees (\$100) per month. This is one tenth of the salary that “regular” workers receive for doing the same work.

The agreement gives contract workers an additional monthly sum of 1,560 rupees (\$35), plus 1,000 rupees on top of a minimum bonus. There was also an assurance that the contract workers would not be victimised by taking part in the strike. The agreement fell far short of the unions' original pay demand for a 2,600-rupee monthly increase, excluding Sunday work.

The strike was marked by road blockades to power plants, mass arrests and police beatings. Two weeks into the strike two other unions—an affiliate of the Labour Progressive Front (LPF), connected to the Tamil Nadu ruling party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam, and the Union of Dalit Panthers—broke with the other unions and signed a five-year contract with NLC which delivered a wage rise of just 1,040 rupees (\$23) a month. The contract workers, including a majority of LPF members, rejected that sellout.

Delhi mosquito breeding controllers protest

At least 3,000 domestic breeding checkers (DBCs) employed by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) are protesting that they have not been paid wages for the past two months. Delhi civic officials admit that the workers have not been paid, but claim the MCD has run out of funds.

Delhi has a workforce of 3,200 DBCs who are hired on a contractual basis each year to check homes and commercial areas for mosquito breeding. Anti-Malaria Karamchari Sangh general secretary Ashok Chaudhary, told the media: “We have been working very hard during the [Commonwealth] Games, we worked without any holidays but our payment has been held up.”

Chaudhary has not called for any industrial action, however. In September, with dengue and malaria cases rising, he responded to government pressure and called off a three-day strike by DBCs demanding to be made permanent employees. The strike had threatened preparations for the October 3-14 Commonwealth Games in the city. The

DBCs have been demanding the regularisation of their jobs since 2008, when they struck for 47 days over the issue. Some of the sanitary inspectors have been working on contract for the past 15 years.

Bangladeshi pilots' union calls off strike without resolution

Officials of the Bangladesh Airline Pilots Association (BAPA), representing 116 pilots at Bangladesh's national carrier, Biman Bangladesh Airlines, called off industrial action on October 30 after a vague assurance from Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina that the government would "look into their concerns".

BAPA members walked off the job last week following the suspension of five union officials over industrial action that was launched on October 22 to oppose changes to the retirement age. The walkout forced the cancellation of nearly all Biman flights.

Biman made a decision in September to increase the retirement age from 57 to 62 years without extending insurance and rehabilitation benefits during the five-year period. Pilots want the retirement age to be extended to 65 with full entitlements, in line with airlines in other countries. BAPA members are also protesting at the recent leasing of five aircraft from foreign firms under an agreement that includes pilots and crew.

A government official told the media that matters concerning pilots' retirement age will be decided by a court, and other issues will have to be settled through discussion between the civil aviation authorities and the BAPA leadership.

Bangladeshi apparel workers protest against factory closure

More than 1,000 workers of Soft Tex Wears sweater factory in the Dhaka Export Processing Zone (DEPZ) at Ashulia, Savar rallied at the factory on November 1 to protest its sudden closure. Police were deployed to the factory. For several days beforehand, workers had been demanding pay increases and wages in arrears. According to demonstrating workers, the factory owners promised to pay arrears for the past two months on November 1, but instead closed the factory.

Taiwan: Retrenched Japanese airline employees protest

At least 50 former Japan Airlines Corp (JAL) employees protested at Taipei International Airport (Songshan) on Sunday, accusing JAL of illegally laying off 70 Taiwanese flight attendants. Protesters held banners and shouted "JAL's illegal layoffs bullying Taiwanese employees".

Former JAL employees have been protesting in recent weeks against the airline's layoffs in July of Taiwanese JAL union members and senior employees who were close to retirement. According to JAL, the retrenchments were part of restructuring plans that included a 30 percent cut in its global workforce. Protesting senior flight attendants said they were originally scheduled to retire from the airline within a year and alleged they were laid off because the company did not want to pay their pensions.

The protesters, who rallied outside the Council of Labor Affairs and Civil Aeronautics Administration, maintained their airport protest until Sunday afternoon, when former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe was

scheduled to arrive.

Philippines government rules PAL retrenchments legal

On November 1, dozens of members of the Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA), the ground crew union at Philippine Airlines Limited (PAL), marched to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) in Manila to protest the Labor Minister's decision allowing the retrenchment of at least 3,000 PAL workers. Workers carried a coffin with a placard saying, "RIP PAL workers".

Last year PAL announced a restructure in which half its workforce, including in-flight catering services, airport services (which includes ground, cargo and ramp handling) and call centre reservations, were to be outsourced to a contract company. PALEA claims the move is a cost-cutting exercise to increase profits and that workers will be rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union.

The union filed a notice of strike with the DOLE in February, but no strike action was called. In April, when frustrated workers began pressuring the union to call strike action, DOLE "assumed jurisdiction" over the dispute, making union action illegal. On October 29, DOLE made a judgment in favour of PAL's restructure plan.

According to PALEA president Gerry Rivera, the layoffs could affect almost all of the union's 3,700 members. PALEA said it has planned a series of protests by PAL employees and their supporters.

Russian sailors stranded in Vietnamese port

Seven Russian sailors have been left stranded on a Russian-owned fishing vessel in the port of Vung Tau, Vietnam. According to the Russian Sailors Trade Union, the vessel owner is not fulfilling contract obligations and the sailors have not received their salaries for up to two years.

The vessel's crew said in a statement that a "long-term absence of financing" made them "involuntary hostages of the company" and that their relatives "have been left without sustenance".

The union has approached the Russian government to help the sailors return home. The vessel, Phu Hai-1, belongs to Antel Investments. The company's president and co-founder live in Moscow.

New South Wales nurses demand improved staff ratios

About 100 nurses at Sydney's Liverpool public hospital held a lunchtime rally on Wednesday calling for an improved nurse-to-patient ratio in a new work agreement. Similar rallies were planned during the week for other Sydney hospitals, including Westmead, St George and Royal North Shore, as well as the Gosford and John Hunter (Newcastle) hospitals.

According to the New South Wales Nurses Association, the General Workload Calculation Tool inserted into the award in 2004 to determine nurse numbers on medical and surgical wards has failed to keep pace with changes in nursing, which involve a higher turnover of patients who live longer and develop more complex conditions. The union wants a minimum of one nurse for every four patients on medical and surgical

wards, dropping to 1:7 for night shifts. Other demands include a 5 percent annual pay rise and a 1 percent increase in superannuation contributions.

Queensland health workers implement rolling stoppages

An estimated 50 workers at Cairns public hospital, including occupational therapists, pharmacists and social workers, stopped work on November 3 as part of a statewide campaign by Public Sector Union (PSU) members in a bargaining dispute with the Queensland state Labor government. Workers at Townsville and Mackay hospitals planned to stop work on November 4 and 5 respectively.

According to PSU spokesman Kevin O'Sullivan, the government's offer of 2.5 percent annual pay increases over three years is a wage cut in real terms. The union is hoping to strike a deal with the government. O'Sullivan told the media that rolling stoppages will continue "until we get some attention from the [Health] Minister".

Newcastle university staff escalate industrial action

Academics and general staff at the University of Newcastle, 200 kilometres north of Sydney, this week voted to withhold student results as part of an enterprise bargaining dispute with management. More than 100 staff voted unanimously in September to reject the university's pay offer of 16 percent over four years and to implement work bans that include a ban on email communications with management and overtime bans for general staff.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has proposed a 16 percent pay rise over three years. NTEU branch president Dr Suzanne Ryan said almost every other issue had been resolved "in good faith". At other Australian universities, the NTEU has pushed through agreements that provide managements with increased flexibility in using casual and short-term contracts to meet the requirements of the Gillard Labor government's new market-driven funding regime.



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