

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.

Bangladesh: Police attacks on garment workers continue

At least 5,000 striking garment workers from three factories in Ashulia, on the outskirts of Delhi, were baton-charged by police as they demonstrated along the Dhaka-Tangail Highway on Wednesday for a six-point charter of demands. Workers' demands include immediate implementation of the new wage structure and extension of festival vacations.

The walkout was triggered when the apparel factory owners on Tuesday decided to pay the Eid festival allowance to workers according to the old wage structure. Witnesses said S. Shuhi Sweater, Toaha Textile and Pubali Sweater workers began demonstrating outside the factories, but when authorities ignored them the workers rallied at the highway and were promptly set upon by police.

On Monday, 16 workers were injured when police baton-charged over 2,500 striking workers on the Delhi-Mymensingh Highway in Gazipur. Workers from three factories in Savar and Gazipur had walked off the job to demand increased wage scales, payment of the festival allowance and in protest against cuts in the overtime allowance.

In another incident that day, Hechaung Sweater workers at Kaliakoir in Gazipur occupied their factory to demand the expulsion of five officials accused of harassing workers.

India: Tamil Nadu government employees on strike

The Joint Action Committee (JAC) Employees, Teachers and Workers—an affiliation of several public sector unions—this week began a relay hunger strike to demand that the government fill an estimated 400,000 vacancies in government departments across Tamil Nadu. Each affiliated group planned to hold a hunger strike for one day each until November 16.

JAC wants vacant positions filled by regularising 110,000 part-time and contract employees. Other demands include scrapping of the teachers' apprenticeship rule that restricts remuneration to 1,500 rupees (\$US33.90) a month, compared to the regular pay scales that averaged 14,000 rupees a month, and fixation of a house rent allowance for all government employees at 20 percent in district headquarter towns regardless of population and 15 percent for other centres.

Karnataka agricultural workers protest

Hundreds of landless agricultural workers who had worked on schemes under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) marched in Gulbarga and began an indefinite dharma (sit-down protest) on November 5. According to the Karnataka Pranta Raitha Sangha, the workers have not been paid for 10 months.

This is not the first time MNREGA workers in Karnataka have protested over non-payment of wages. In March, hundreds of workers held a dharma at the government offices in Kolar complaining they had not been paid for six months.

Sri Lankan nurses strike

On November 10, nurses at government hospitals launched a 24-hour national sick note campaign over several issues. Their demands include an upgrade to grade one position on completion of 12 years' service, amendments to the proposed Nurses Charter, increase of the training allowance, and an end to the reduction in the nurses' degree program from four years to three years. Last month, nurses walked off the job for three hours over the same issues.

The government attempted to stop the nurses from striking by cancelling all leave and demanding management provide a list of all nurses who had taken part in last month's walk-out.

Philippines airline union files strike notice

On November 5, the Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA), representing 3,700 ground crew of Philippine Airlines Limited (PAL), filed a formal notice of strike at the National Conciliation and Mediation Board. This is PALEA's second strike notice in a long-running dispute triggered by the airline's efforts to outsource nearly 3,000 jobs as part of cost-saving plan.

Last year PAL announced a restructure to outsource half its workforce, including in-flight catering services, airport services (which includes ground, cargo and ramp handling), and call centre reservations. PALEA claims 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 in February, but in April, when frustrated workers began pressuring the union to begin strike action, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) "assumed jurisdiction" over the dispute and made the union action illegal. On October 29, DOLE

ruled in favour of PAL's restructure plan, on the condition that an improved retrenchment pay-out was agreed to by workers.

The severance pay offer provides for an additional gratuity of 50,000 pesos (\$US1,150) per employee and 125 percent separation pay instead of 100 percent. Other entitlements include allowing vacation leave and sick leave balances to be convertible to cash and their absorption to the respective service providers for one year.

PALEA is alleging that PAL management has been directly bargaining with individual union members instead of the union leaders. It also claims that union officers face mass termination.

Cambodian garment workers on strike

Up to 600 employees who walked off the job on November 4 to demand improved pay and conditions have threatened to continue strike action outside the PY garment factory in Sihanoukville's Number 4 district until management reinstates their sacked union leader. The company has agreed to the workers' 12 demands but refused to reinstate union leader Mao Piseth, who management claim was fired last month for cursing the manager.

The provincial labour department has submitted the case to the Arbitration Council for resolution.

Queensland health workers continue rolling stoppages

Health workers in Queensland's public hospitals at Rockhampton, Gladstone, Bundaberg and Hervey Bay began rolling stop-work meetings on November 8 as part of a three-month statewide dispute with the state Labor government.

According to the Public Services Union 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. O'Sullivan told the media that rolling stoppages will continue "until we get some attention from the [Health] minister".

South Australian warehouse workers strike

National Union of Workers (NUW) members at a Pacific Brands warehouse in Port Adelaide on November 9 began the first of a series of 24-hour stoppages for increased wages as part of their enterprise agreement. Workers want a 13.5 percent rise over three years and an improved redundancy agreement.

According to the NUW, the company has offered just 10.5 percent over the same period despite having turned a \$230 million loss into a \$53 million profit over the past financial year—pushing the company's shares up nearly 15 percent.

The turnaround was achieved with the help of the unions and the Rudd-Gillard Labor government and involved the destruction of hundreds of jobs in Australia, New Zealand and China. In 2009, the company closed seven plants in Australia, resulting in the destruction of 1,200 jobs, three factories in New Zealand, and one plant in China, at the cost of 850 jobs.

The company's "transformation" program—outsourcing all manufacturing to contractors in cheap labour regions of the world—also

resulted in another 650 redundancies among non-manufacturing employees across the company's Asia-Pacific business. Hundreds more jobs were lost at suppliers, contractors and industries that serviced Pacific Brands plants.

The Port Adelaide workers want an assurance that the warehouse will not be closed in the cost-cutting plan.

Transport workers vote for strike

At least 400 members of the Transport Workers Union (TWU) at Australian Air Express (AAE) have voted to take industrial action for a new wage deal. TWU members endorsed action ranging from overtime bans to rolling 24-hour stoppages and an indefinite strike that would disrupt international and domestic air freight operations.

Workers want a 16 percent pay rise over the next three years and superannuation contributions increased from 9 to 14 percent over the next five years. Other demands include additional annual leave, a new mobile phone allowance for drivers, safe-manning levels, improved rules for the use and conversion of casual staff, and better workplace consultation and training for union delegates. The company has offered a 9 percent pay increase over three years.

The TWU claims that the escalation of action at AAE—a joint venture of Qantas and Australia Post—was the first in a series of strikes in Australia's transport sector as the union pursued similar bargaining claims on behalf of 35,000 workers. The rolling stoppages at AAE are expected to begin next week.

New Zealand: Public servants strike

Public Service Association (PSA) members at the state-run Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) held a one-day strike on November 8 to protest a government-imposed wage freeze. The union has been in negotiations with ACC since July 2009 over a new pay settlement.

In a statement earlier this year, PSA national secretary Richard Wagstaff said ACC workers were being paid 4 percent less than the market rate. In a statement this week, Wagstaff said workers were unhappy with the current performance pay system, which paid many experienced employees the same salary as new employees.

Radiographers' union cancels strike action

The Association of Professionals and Executive Employees (Apex) has called off a two-day strike of Medical Radiation Technologists (MRTs), due to take place on November 9 and 10. The union, which represents 1,000 MRTs in public hospitals across New Zealand, said it would resume pay talks with District Health Boards (DHBs). Apex members are maintaining low-level industrial action, including bans on overtime.

Last month, DHBs withdrew their offer of a 2 percent pay increase in the long running dispute for a new work agreement. Apex had already settled for the 2 percent wage offer after reducing its pay claims three times since rolling industrial stoppages began in February, but 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.

Secondary teachers’ union calls off strike action

The Post-Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) this week called off a partial strike which would have cancelled all Year 10 classes in public schools on November 11. PPTA president Kate Gainsford said suspension of the industrial action had been required by the ministry of education before negotiations could proceed over a new pay deal. Last month, the PPTA rejected a revised pay offer of 0.5 percent and a \$1,000 one-off payment for the first year, and 1.9 percent for the second year.

Teachers want a 4 percent pay increase and a commitment by the ministry to address increasing class sizes through teacher retention and recruitment. However, Gainsford has indicated the union is willing to compromise. She told the media last month that this was not a “take it or leave it” demand.

Meanwhile, primary school teachers, members of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), have voted by 93 percent to reject a pay offer from the ministry of education, consisting of a \$1,000 lump sum payment in the first year and a 1.8 percent pay increase in the second year—well below next year’s expected 6 percent rate of inflation. The NZEI said teachers will vote on strike action early next year if a deal is not reached with the government.

Packaging company workers take industrial action

Some 117 Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members at packaging company Cryovac Sealed Air voted unanimously on November 3 to begin work-to-rule industrial action and put a ban on overtime work. Around 70 workers picketed the company’s premises in Porirua on November 8. Talks between the EPMU and the Cryovac broke down after the company refused to increase wages by more than two percent for the next 12 months. The EPMU has not announced any counter-claim.

According to the union, Cryovac’s profits reached \$16.8 million (\$US13.15) last year, an increase of \$11 million compared with 2008. The company is owned by the multi-national Sealed Air, which employs over 17,000 people in 52 countries.



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