

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 October 2011

Philippine Airlines ground staff locked out

At least 300 Philippine Airlines (PAL) ground staff, including check-in and catering workers at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport in Manila, were locked out on Tuesday after walking out to protest plans to outsource ground crew jobs. Four workers were injured when police dragged away demonstrators at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport. PAL cancelled over 170 international and domestic flights scheduled for the day.

The airline sent 30-day termination notices to 2,600 of its ground staff in late August, due to take effect on October 1. Retrenched workers were told they could apply for jobs with the outsourcing company on salaries of just 11,000 pesos (\$US261) a month for a six-day work week. This is at least half their former pay, with the new starting rate 30 percent below the poverty threshold for a family of five. Only 7 percent of the workers endorsed the airline's "offer."

PAL has threatened to withhold termination payments of the striking workers. President Benigno Aquino III said that the government is seeking legal advice on whether the workers can be charged with economic sabotage.

The Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA) has ignored repeated calls since December from its members for coordinated national strike action to stop the planned outsourcing. Instead, the union has steered the dispute into the courts or made appeals to the government. The government and the courts both support PAL's outsourcing plan.

West Papua Freeport mine workers' strike enters third week

Over 9,000 striking workers at the giant Freeport McMoRan Grasberg gold and copper mine in the Indonesian province of West Papua remain on strike after government mediation failed. Workers walked off the job on September 15 to demand a pay increase of between \$US17.50 and \$43 an hour—up from the current \$1.50 to \$3.50 hourly rate—to bring them into line with Freeport mine workers in other countries.

A negotiator for the Freeport Indonesia's Labor Union said the company had refused to go beyond its first offer of a 22 percent rise over a two-year agreement. The union ended a nine-day strike in July after the company agreed to begin talks on a pay rates and hear allegations of mistreatment by some managers.

The Freeport mine has some of the world's richest gold reserves and is the highest single taxpayer to the Indonesian government. About 700 paramilitary police have been mobilised to support the company, which has threatened to use outsourced workers to break the strike.

India: Punjab textile workers' strike escalates

Strike action at 85 power loom factories on the outskirts of Ludhiana, in the north-west Indian state of Punjab, has escalated and now includes over 119 factories and 2,500 workers. The strike erupted on September 22 after factory managers refused to implement approved labour laws. According to the Textile Mazdoor Union, government representatives are supporting factory owners in negotiations while admitting that the companies are not implementing the laws.

Workers want a wage rise, job regularisation and implementation of labour laws which include provision of identity cards, employee-based insurance, muster-roll, overtime pay and holidays.

New Delhi electrical appliance production workers protest

All India Voltas Employees Federation (AIVEF) members protested outside Voltas' office in Jantar Mantar on Monday over the manufacturer's "regressive recruitment policy." The federation claimed that for the past 15 years Voltas, a white goods manufacturer, has only been recruiting on a contract basis, in violation of an agreement with the union.

The AIVEF wants equal pay between permanent and contract workers, implementation of a wage agreement signed five years ago, and payment of bonuses for the 2009-10 financial year.

Voltas, which has production facilities in Maharashtra, Uttarakhand and New Delhi, currently employs 8,000 contract workers, 3,000 management staff and only 600 permanent workers. It is part of the Tata Group, one of India's largest companies with interests in communications and information technology, engineering, energy, consumer products and chemicals, and exports products and services to 80 countries.

Bangladeshi garment workers occupy factory

Hundreds of Adib Sweater Factory employees in Sreepur, 30 km from Dhaka, downed tools and occupied the factory for six hours on September 28 during negotiations over dues and sackings. Workers accused management of planning to shut the factory in order to avoid paying arrears. Police were deployed and surrounded the factory. Workers ended their occupation after reaching an agreement with management.

Hong Kong lift workers strike

About 70 workers at ThyssenKrupp Elevator, representing 80 percent of its maintenance staff, walked off the job on Monday to demand a 20 percent pay rise to bring them on par with other Hong Kong lift maintenance employees. About 40 workers protested outside the German corporation's office in Hung Hom. The workers maintain 1,800 lifts and escalators in 600 buildings.

Neighborhood and Workers Service Centre secretary general Leung Kam-wai said ThyssenKrupp maintenance workers with four to 10 years' experience only earn \$8,000 (\$US1,026) to \$9,000 a month. Lift maintenance workers with other companies are paid around \$12,000. The maintenance workers threatened to strike again after a company representative said there would be no salary review until January 1.

Australian customs officers stop work

About 3,000 Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry (DAFF) customs, quarantine and boarder protection officers at 50 locations across Australia held stop work meetings on September 27 over a pay dispute.

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members held rallies outside customs headquarters in all states. Significant passenger processing delays occurred at international airports. CPSU members in Sydney voted to hold further stoppages at Kingsford Smith International Airport on Thursday and Saturday. The latest walkouts are part of ongoing industrial action by DAFF staff, Civil Defence workers and Department of Parliamentary Services when enterprise agreements for 120,000 commonwealth public servants expired this year.

Commonwealth public sector workers in all departments have rejected the Gillard Labor government's 3 percent annual pay cap and are angered over attempts to slash leave, flexitime and overtime payments, and other conditions. The CPSU, which covers most government employees, wants annual pay increases above 4 percent over three years to compensate for cost of living increases.

Qantas baggage and freight handlers strike again

Over 3,800 Qantas baggage and freight handlers stopped work for an hour on Friday morning at all major Australian airports in a dispute for a new work agreement. The stoppage by Transport Workers Union (TWU) members impacted on mail and express-handling services along with airport operations and catering in Perth, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney.

TWU members were locked out by Qantas for four hours on September 20 prior to implementing a previous one-hour stoppage. The TWU wants 5 percent annual pay rises for three years, job security clauses to prevent outsourcing and a limit on contract labour.

The airline is in similar bargaining disputes with the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA) and the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA). Like the TWU, the ALAEA and AIPA have ensured their actions have a minimal effect on Qantas.

ALAEA members are maintaining rolling stoppages and on Friday evening downed tools for one hour at Melbourne's Tullamarine Airport. AIPA has limited pilots' actions to in-flight announcements and non-compliance with the uniform code. All three unions want job security clauses inserted in new enterprise agreements. Qantas has rejected these

demands, claiming that they would block work flexibility.

Dock workers at Patrick Stevedores begin national stoppages

In an 18-month pay dispute, Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members employed at Patrick Stevedores' bulk and general cargo docks have begun a campaign of nationwide rolling stoppages and walked off the job for 24 hours at Patrick's Port Kembla terminal south of Sydney on Friday. Strikes are planned at Brisbane and Melbourne's Webb Dock from Saturday, and at the company's Fremantle container terminal on Saturday. Strike action at Geelong is also expected, with a further 48-hour stoppage planned for next week at Port Kembla.

After a lockout in May, the MUA ended two weeks of limited strikes and work bans and pleaded with Patrick to resume negotiations. According to the MUA, the latest industrial action was called because Patrick had ignored concessions made by the union during talks. Before negotiations recommenced in May, MUA demands included a 6 percent annual pay rise over three years, a \$5,000 sign-on bonus, reduced casual employment, long-term casual employees to be offered permanent positions, and improved safety. The company had offered annual pay rises of between 4 and 4.5 percent over three years with productivity offsets.

Patrick's latest offer included annual 4.75 percent wage rises offset by a 12 percent improvement in productivity and an extra annual 1 percent payment contingent on safety and productivity benchmarks being reached. The MUA has reduced its original pay claim to a backdated pay rise or sign-on bonus equivalent to a 5 percent pay rise, along with a further three annual 5 percent rises.

Australia Post workers stood down

Forty-four Australia Post mail delivery workers in Victoria and Western Australia have been stood down without pay in a dispute over how mail is sorted and delivered. The Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) claims a new protocol known as the separate-bundle delivery system requires postal officers to sort mail during delivery rounds rather than from a single bundle of pre-sorted mail. The union claims this is a health hazard because workers are required to spend an extra 1.5 hours on their motorcycles on the streets.

Australia Post has ignored a non-binding court decision that the new protocol be withdrawn until Fair Work Australia (FWA) rules on the dispute. FWA is not due to hear the case for at least another two weeks. The CEPU is not taking any industrial action to support the stood down workers and said it will await the FWA hearing.

Australian Capital Territory teachers stop work

Up to 1,500 Australian Capital Territory public school teachers stopped work for three hours on Tuesday to protest outside Parliament House in Canberra, following a deadlock in negotiations for a new work agreement. Teachers want wage parity with their New South Wales colleagues. The territory Labor government has capped public sector wage increases at 2.5 percent. The consumer price index (CPI) annual increase for Canberra is 3.6 percent.

The Australian Education Union suspended four days of rolling stoppages two weeks ago, claiming sufficient progress was being made in negotiations. Last week the union rejected the education department's modified offer, claiming casual relief teachers would be paid \$21 a day less than those interstate and all teachers would be worse off by the end of the three-year agreement. Territory teachers are currently paid \$6,000 a year less than their counterparts in New South Wales.

Teachers are maintaining bans on filing fortnightly absence forms, use of personal money and personal vehicles for work purposes.

New Zealand technical college teachers strike

Classes at the Christchurch Polytechnic Institute of Technology (CPIT) were cancelled on September 23 after 200 members of the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) walked out over proposed cost-cutting changes to working conditions. The walkout follows an August stop-work meeting where teachers voted overwhelmingly for industrial action.

CPIT management wants longer teaching hours and for administration to have greater control over when individuals are granted leave. Teachers have been holding one-day rolling strikes for several weeks and said they will continue until CPIT "revises its position."

New Zealand disability support workers vote to strike

After six months of failed wage negotiations, Service and Food Workers' Union (SFWU) and Public Services Association (PSA) members at Pact, a provider of support services to mental and physical disability patients in the lower part of New Zealand's South Island, have voted for industrial action.

Pact employees, who are paid a maximum of just \$16 (\$US12.50) an hour want a pay rise that reflects the official inflation rate of 5.3 percent. Pact is offering just 1 percent. Both unions were meeting this week to plan industrial action.



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