

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

22 October 2011

## India: Punjab textile workers' strike enters fifth week

Around 2,500 textile workers at 155 factories in Ludhiana, in the north-west Indian state of Punjab are maintaining strike action begun on September 22. The strike erupted 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, weekly holidays and other holidays. Other demands include improved safety and bonuses.

## Mangalore Airport contract workers protest

On Monday, members of the Mangalore Airport Workers Association rallied at the airport's entrance to protest over several issues including the sacking of seven colleagues without any reason.

The protesters want the re-absorption of dismissed workers with no loss of pay, job security, extension of all rights and entitlements to contract workers as per existing labour laws and an end to management harassment. A union spokesman warned that an indefinite protest would be launched if a concrete decision was not soon made.

## Pakistan railway employees strike

Thousands of striking Pakistan Railways workers ended a two-day stoppage on October 18, after authorities agreed to pay more than two months' outstanding dues and allowances. The entire rail system was hit by the walkout, which saw workers laying down on tracks or climbing onto the roofs of rail wagons to stop trains leaving or entering stations. Pickets were established outside various government and railway department offices. The strike followed rail workers' protests in September over outstanding pay as well as complaints over the rundown state of the entire rail system.

The Pakistan Railways Employees Union, the Railway Workers Union and the Rail Mazduur Ittehad called off the strike after the government announced that a payment of one billion rupees (\$US11.6 million) would be made to Pakistan Railways and all dues paid within three days. The unions said protests would continue until the payments are made.

The International Monetary Fund has demanded the government cut all

subsidies to the utility and that it begin restructuring Pakistan Railways and downsizing its workforce.

## Bangladeshi postal workers in Khulna on strike

Over 7,000 extra departmental (ED) non-permanent employees from the Khulna Circle Bangladesh Postal Department (KCBPD) have been on strike since October 10 over a nine-point charter of demands. Over 2,500 post offices have been hit with tens of thousands of letters undelivered. The ED workers want a monthly salary rise, from 1,010 taka (\$US13.3) to 4,500 taka, a festival bonus, uniforms, introduction of a rationing system and special leave and increased rural post office recruitment and reservation quotas for rural ED employees. The Khulna Circle unit of the Postal Extra Departmental Employees' Union gave authorities until October 20 to respond to their demands.

National action by ED workers has been ongoing for over 12 months. More than 24,000 ED postal workers ended a 12-day national strike in July last year after the department promised to consider demands and respond by July 11. It failed to do so and more strikes were held in October.

## Cambodian garment workers walk out

At least 500 employees at the Meroson Cambodia garment factory in Phnom Penh walked off the job on Monday to protest the sacking of three colleagues for joining a union. While factory management has offered to reinstate the workers, strikers have refused to end their action until other issues are resolved. Their demands include, overtime Sunday work, non-compulsory work after 8:30 p.m., sick leave, legally recognised maternity benefits and an end to timed toilet breaks.

According to workers, bonus payments are deducted and employees are threatened with dismissal if their toilet breaks are longer than five minutes. One worker told the media, "Working conditions like these were what prompted the strike. We could not stand it any longer. The factory uses workers like animals," he said. The garment workers are picketing the factory gate in defiance of police attempts to stop them blocking the movement of materials in and out of the plant.

## Cathay Pacific flight attendants threaten strike action

For the second time this year, the Flight Attendants Union of the Hong Kong-based airline Cathay Pacific have threatened to strike if negotiations for improved wages and conditions are not resolved to its “satisfaction.” The union has demanded an 8 percent pay increase, the \$7,000 (\$US900) housing assistance for foreign flight attendants based in Hong Kong extended beyond the current limit of eight years, and transparency in disputes, such as unfair dismissal.

The union threatened a work-to-rule in January if their demand for a pay rise was not met. Although Cathay offered only 4.5 percent, the union took no action, declaring that it did not want to inconvenience travellers.

### **Patrick Stevedores dock workers continue rolling stoppages**

The Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) has announced that its members at Patrick Stevedores terminals in Fremantle, Western Australia and in Melbourne, Victoria will be holding work stoppages this weekend as part of a long-running dispute for a new work agreement. The MUA has put forward a 40-point claim to replace the current agreement that expired in October last year.

The action follows 72- and 48-hour stoppages at Patrick’s Fremantle and Albany ports respectively earlier this month. Fremantle dock workers will stop for 48 hours over the weekend while Geelong dockers will work short shifts then strike for 24 hours from first shift on Monday.

After a lockout in May, the MUA ended two weeks of limited strikes and bans, pleading with Patrick to resume negotiations. Prior to negotiations recommencing, MUA called for a 6 percent annual pay rise over three years (down from 30 percent over three years), an increase in the company’s superannuation contribution from 9 to 15 percent, a \$5,000 sign-on bonus, reduced casual employment, long-term casual employees to be offered permanent positions, and improved safety.

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 further reduced its claim to a backdated rise or sign-on bonus equivalent to a 5 percent pay rise, along with a further three annual 5 percent rises. Talks between the MUA and Patrick are due to recommence on Monday.

### **Qantas ground crews resume work stoppages**

The Transport Workers Union (TWU), representing 3,800 Qantas baggage handlers, catering workers and ground crew, has called a one-hour stop work meeting for Tuesday at Brisbane and Melbourne airports after rejecting the airline’s latest pay offer. According to a TWU official, Qantas is still offering below the cost of living pay rises and wants other trade-offs.

A TWU official claimed that Qantas proposed employing new staff on lower rates than existing staff, with 1,000 jobs to be axed and no limits on outsourcing jobs. The union wants 5 percent annual pay rises for three years, job security clauses to prevent outsourcing, and a limit on contract labour.

The airline is involved in a similar bargaining dispute with the Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) and the Australian and International Pilots Association (AIPA). This week, in a move repeated many times during the dispute, the ALAEA cancelled strike action planned for Thursday and Friday in an “act of good faith”

while talks in Fair Work Australia were proceeding. Overtime bans will remain.

Qantas claims that industrial action has forced it to cancel almost 500 flights and withdraw over 88,000 seats from the market. Virgin Australia has responded by adding more than 31,000 extra seats a week into the market.

### **Queensland health unions escalate industrial action**

Public service union Together and the Australian Workers Union told Queensland Health (QH) that current limited work bans will be escalated from Friday if it refuses to lift its 2.5 percent wage rise cap. Together has threatened industrial action at Brisbane public hospitals which includes bans on cleaning surgery rooms, taking blood samples in non-emergency situations and transporting patients to and from theatres.

Health support workers—administration, mental health, cleaners, wards men, stores, security and pharmacy staff—want annual pay increases of between 3.6 and 4 percent over three years in their enterprise agreement. QH has offered 0.5 percent extra per annum for productivity improvements. A union spokesman claimed that the productivity savings demanded by QH would slash health sector jobs.

The unions have applied to the Queensland Industrial Relations Commission to arbitrate on the dispute. The commission will hear from union representatives on Wednesday. At least 30,000 health support workers will be subject to any future agreement.

### **Queensland mine workers begin industrial action**

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members at the New Acland open cut mine, 150km west of Brisbane in the Darling Down region, began industrial action this week after a year of failed negotiations for a new work agreement. Overtime bans will be implemented during the weekend and workers will down tools for the last six hours of the Sunday night shift.

CFMEU members have rejected a 2 percent pay increase once an agreement was reached, in addition to a 3.5 percent increase awarded in January and followed by a 9 percent increase over two years, from October next year. The union wants the 2 percent rise backdated to January, and the 9 percent brought forward to January next year. The CFMEU also wants 74 of its members who are on individual contracts to be given the choice of signing onto the new enterprise agreement when it comes into force.

According to the media, New Hope, which owns the New Acland mine, recently increased its executive’s pay by 50 percent.



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