

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

6 October 2012

Millions of Indonesian workers join national stoppage

Close to 3 million factory workers from 80 industrial estates in 24 Indonesian cities walked off the job on October 3 and demonstrated in the streets to demand the elimination of outsourcing and contract-based employment and a trebling of the minimum wage. The largest demonstration took place in the capital, Jakarta, where more than 700 companies were closed down. Up to 11,000 police officers and 4,000 military personnel were deployed to monitor protests in Jakarta and guard key government buildings.

Outsourcing allows companies to hire workers on lower wages and reduced benefits, and to terminate workers without compensation. Unions have called for wages to be increased from the current average of 1.5 million rupiah a month to a minimum of 3.75 million rupiah (\$US417) a month, and for the government to drop plans to force workers to pay 2 percent of their wages into health insurance.

The Indonesian Council of Workers (MPBI) warned that if the government failed to respond to the demands by October 15, a further strike would be called in November.

Bangladeshi teachers and support workers rally

Hundreds of teachers and support workers of non-government educational institutions across Bangladesh stopped work and rallied in Dhaka on October 1 for two days of protest over a charter of demands. Wearing coffin shrouds, they blocked the Topkhana Road for about six hours, affecting traffic in the city.

The action followed a six-day strike on September 9 by 500,000 teachers and employees of 28,000 non-government schools, colleges and madrassahs. The charter's 17 demands include speedy implementation of the National Education Policy 2010 and Monthly Pay Order benefits, increased house rent, medical and festival allowances, annual wage increments and a retirement age fixed at 65.

Bangladeshi hotel industry workers protest

On September 28, representatives of hotel and restaurant workers voted for a countrywide protest on October 20 to demand the minimum wage as set by the government in 2009 and full bonuses before the upcoming Eid-ul-Azha religious holiday. A rally will be held in Dhaka.

India: Kingfisher Airlines engineers strike again

Kingfisher Airlines engineers walked out in a flash strike on September 29 in a long-running dispute over unpaid wages. All Kingfisher flights in major metros like Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai were affected.

The action follows limited strikes since April. Most of Kingfisher's 1,700 employees have not been paid, or paid only a portion of their dues, since February. A large number of flight engineers have reportedly quit because of the delayed payments. Some workers from other sections have not reported for duty in several weeks.

The airline has not posted a profit since its inception by billionaire Vijay Mallya in May 2005. It has a total debt of about 70 billion rupees (\$US1.4 billion) and accumulated losses of about 60 billion rupees. Most of its fleet is grounded, the banks have refused to provide more credit and the government tax office has frozen many of the airline's bank accounts.

Voltas workers protest in Delhi

Workers from TATA subsidiary Voltas, which produces refrigerators and air conditioners, staged a day-long protest on September 29 in Jantar Mantar, Delhi. The All-India Voltas Employees Federation submitted a memorandum to the labour minister after the protest. There was an identical protest in September 2011 over the same issues.

The workers have been on a relay hunger strike for the past year over alleged gross violations of contractual labour laws by Voltas. The Mumbai-based company's production unit employs 8,000 contract workers, 3,000 management staff and only 600 regular workers. For the past 15 years, the company has been only hiring workers on a contract basis, in violation of an agreement with the union.

According to the union, management staff are also doing the work of other staff and drawing three times higher salaries, contract workers are being paid a "paltry sum" and made to do production work in violation of the Contract Labour Guidelines, and no bonus or ex gratia payments have been paid to contract workers in the past three years.

Bihar government workers maintain protest

Public sector workers in the Indian state of Bihar have been protesting for over three years in a dispute with various government corporations. The protest started in August 2009 when the Bihar State Public Sector Workers Union (SPSWU) was formed.

According to the union, 2,500 workers who remain employed in the

corporations, plus 10,000 who have left, along with 4,000 who have died, have not been paid salaries for up to 15 years. In 2003 the Supreme Court issued an order, which was ignored, directing the government to pay the salaries.

The employers involved are the Sugar Corporation, Bihar State Industrial Development Corporation, Leather Corporation, Finished Leather Corporation, Handloom Corporation and Small Industries Corporation.

Pakistan: Karachi municipal workers demand unpaid wages

Municipal workers in Karachi's Layari town and Saddar town have been on strike since October 2 in a dispute over non-payment of salaries. Workers have not received wages and other dues for two months. Some workers have become desperate. One worker in the sanitation department, which is the lowest paid, attempted to self-immolate after he could not meet household expenses and was harassed by his landlord over rent.

The workers have camped outside the city administration office, and warned they would drive garbage-filled trucks to city centres if wages were not soon paid. Other Karachi Metropolitan Corporation workers said they faced the same issue and threatened to join the strikers.

Cambodian garment workers strike

More than 2,000 workers from four garment factories in Phnom Penh, Kandal and Kampong Speu provinces protested for better wages and conditions on October 1. In Kandal's Ang Snuol district, 500 Tae Young employees picketed their factory to demand that management rehire 16 fired workers and drop its suit against eight of them for inciting a strike. About 800 workers from nearby factories marched to demand a minimum wage, lunch, transportation to work and various bonuses. In Phnom Penh, 500 workers at the Seung Sing Yien factory walked out to demand improved pay and conditions.

Cambodia's Labour Advisory Council awarded garment workers a \$US10 monthly pay rise on September 1 but union officials warned at the time that it was not enough to stop further strike action for improved wages and conditions.

Cambodian bicycle factory strikers clash with security guards

Close to 1,000 striking workers at the A & J bicycle factory in the Tai Seng Special Economic Zone in Svay Rieng province, east of Phnom Penh, clashed with security guards on October 1. A witness said workers responded to the attacking security guards by throwing stones, causing damage to factory windows.

Workers walked off the job on September 29 to demand a \$US10 monthly bonus, an end to salary deductions for arriving late and \$1 an hour for overtime work. In addition they wanted days off on Sundays and public holidays, and an end to evening work between 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m.

NSW public sector workers to defy strike ban

New South Wales public sector workers will strike this Monday in defiance of an order banning them from the industrial action. The Public Service Association (PSA) said its members would push ahead with four-hour work stoppages, protesting against job losses and a 2.5 percent annual wage cap.

The state's Industrial Relations Commission on Friday ordered the union to cancel its strike, but the PSA said it was too late to avert the stoppage. The union said 34,000 members had been authorised to stop work on Monday, with meetings to be held at 40 locations across NSW.

Over the past month, Premier Barry O'Farrell's state government has announced \$7 billion in cuts to public education and health, adding to the thousands of job cuts imposed over the past year, which the PSA and other trade unions have allowed to proceed.

Bathurst Hospital nurses demand increased staffing

New South Wales Nurses & Midwives Association (NSWNMA) members at Bathurst Hospital, west of Sydney, have stepped up their campaign for improved staffing levels in the hospital's emergency department (ED). They held two-hour daily rallies in Bathurst from October 3 to 5. Nurses said ED staffing was a long-standing problem and demanded an extra nurse on each shift.

Last month, the O'Farrell state government directed the health department to make more than \$3 billion in savings, including a \$775 million "labour expense cap."

Queensland firefighters hold rolling stoppages

Around 1,400 firefighters across Queensland took rolling strike action on October 4 and 5 as part of their campaign for a new work agreement. United Firefighters Union members had rejected the state government's proposed new work agreement, which would strip away up to 20 provisions and conditions, in return for annual wage increases of 2.7 percent over three years.

Of particular concern to firefighters is the government's proposal to erode workplace health and safety conditions. Instead of directing safety concerns to their employer, firefighters will have to report to divisional workplace health and safety officers. The firefighters are also opposed to management's plan to use "lesser trained" people as casual firefighters in metropolitan areas.

Queensland teachers' union signs sellout deal

The Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) has negotiated a new three-year enterprise bargaining agreement, dropping a demand for annual pay rises above 2.7 percent in return for the state government shelving a plan to remove 20 teaching and working conditions.

As part of the sellout, the QTU has thrown its support behind the Independent Public Schools Initiative (IPSI). Teachers oppose the IPSI, which gives principals autonomy to recruit staff, manage budgets and

engage directly with local industries. Among their concerns is that the scheme will restrict teachers' abilities to transfer between schools on the basis of seniority. Teachers are yet to vote on the union-government deal.

Melbourne train maintenance workers resume strike action

Following six weeks of limited stoppages and work bans, 700 members of four unions at Metro Trains in Melbourne plan to strike for 24 hours on October 11 in a work agreement dispute. The Electrical Trades Union, the Rail, Tram and Bus Union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Association of Professional Engineers, Scientists & Managers also propose a 48-hour maintenance ban on October 18-19, in the lead up to the Spring horse-racing carnival.

Track and signal maintenance workers are opposed to Metro Trains' proposal to slash the number of night-time rosters. Compulsory shift changes in the new enterprise agreement could reduce members' income by up to \$10,000 a year. Metro has threatened to outsource work and make 100 employees redundant if workers reject the roster changes.

The company wants longer shifts at less pay but with the option of a four-day week. This would lead to serious safety problems, with some train drivers working for more than 10 hours at a time, including up to 5.5 hours without a break.

Filipino seafarers on strike in Newcastle

Twenty Filipino crew members on the K Coral, an 80,000 ton Panamanian-flagged ship owned in Korea, have refused to sail with the ship, stranding it in the Port of Newcastle, north of Sydney. The crew have complained of daily physical abuse by the ship's officers, leading to an attempted suicide en route to Newcastle.

An International Transport Workers Federation (ITWF) official told the media the federation had arranged for the crew to be repatriated back to the Philippines but would allow the ship owner to recruit a new Filipino crew, who will most likely suffer the same abuse.

Meanwhile, police are investigating the death of a Filipino seafarer in Newcastle on the coal carrier Sage Sagittarius—the second aboard the ship in as many weeks.

New Zealand: Fishing boat crew occupy factory

On October 3, 12 Indonesian fishermen stormed into the United Fisheries processing plant in Christchurch, on New Zealand's South Island, to demand \$850,000 in unpaid wages. The fishermen are all crew of the Korean chartered fishing vessel, Melilla 201, which has been detained by authorities alongside its sister ship, Melilla 203, since February. They are employed by the Korean company Taejin Ltd, which charters its vessels to United Fisheries.

United Fisheries had offered to pay \$200,000 but refused to accept responsibility for non-payment of wages. Management told the fishermen that their complaint was with their employer Taejin.

In June 2011 the *Sunday Star Times* revealed that slave labour conditions are widespread in New Zealand's fishing industry, with physical abuse, poor nutrition and non-payment of wages. United

Fisheries has a history of abusive practices, dating back to at least 2006 when a Ukrainian crew staged a hunger strike in the Port of Lyttelton over non-payment of wages.



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