

Indian chrome miners strike over safety; Western Australian mine workers walkout over “wage theft”

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 November 2018

## India: Sacked power plant workers protest in New Delhi

Around 70 contract workers from the Badarpur Thermal Power Station (BTPS) marched to Parliament Street in New Delhi on November 8. They were demanding urgent relief for over 450 contractual workers who lost their jobs when the power plant was permanently shut down on October 15. The march was organised by the Mazdoor Ekta Committee and supported by the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the All India Trade Union Congress.

BTPS, which has 720 MW, is the oldest power plant in New Delhi and has been supplying about 400 MW to the city. The plant employs around 1,200 workers, most of them on contract. It is considered one of the most polluting coal-based power plants India and has faced repeated demands from environmentalists and activists that it be closed down. A Supreme Court-mandated Environment Pollution (Prevention and Control) Authority had called for the plant to be permanently closed by mid-2018.

The power workers were not given any prior notice about the closure and were only told on October 27 that their gate passes would expire at the end of October.

Contractors have sent a memorandum to Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the BTPS general manager and India's labour and power ministers. They want the workers to be given alternate employment in the National Capital Region (NCR), service certificates, adequate compensation and payment of all outstanding statutory benefits.

## Indian Metals & Ferro Alloys workers strike in Jajpur

Over 1,000 workers at Sukinda chromite mines owned by Indian Metals and Ferro Alloys (IMFA) remain on strike after talks on health and safety between labour union representative Pritiranjana Ghadai and the company broke down on November 8. Ghadai is a Biju Janata Dal party member in the Jajpur District legislative assembly.

The walkout in India's Jajpur District came after two workers were injured in a landslide on October 31. Strikers have refused to return to work until the two injured miners are discharged from hospital and the company agrees to provide drinking water facilities and adequate air ventilation at the mine.

Company authorities, who have only agreed to discuss workers' demands with IMFA senior management, claim workers' demands are “unreasonable.” Chrome is a key export earner for the mining sector. In

2017, India was the world's third-largest producer of chromium.

## Air India ground staff protest over dismissal of fellow workers

Some 400 Air India ground staff employees who handle subsidiary Air Transport Services Limited (AIATSL) walked out for 24 hours on November 8 in protest against the dismissal of fellow workers and non-payment of the Diwali Festival bonus.

The contract workers are mainly involved in checking-in passengers' baggage, loading and unloading cargo and the cleaning of planes. According to the media, eight domestic and 16 international flights were delayed by the one-day strike.

Passengers at Mumbai's Chhatrapati Shivaji International Airport were stranded by the strike. AIATSL currently employs 5,000 contract workers across India. Air India management attempted to deal with the strike using permanent employees and called in workers on leave.

## Police arrest demonstrating Chinese students

Two students were detained by police in Beijing on November 8 during a protest against exploitative employment conditions imposed by a supplier for tech giant Apple.

Students from vocational schools were allegedly forced to work grueling hours at an Apple watch factory in Chongqing in the country's south-west under the guise of “internships.” If they did not perform the unpaid labour, they risked having their degrees withheld.

The small protest occurred outside an Apple store and involved 10 students from Renmin University and Peking University.

One 21-year-old student told reporters that the police “said we were disrupting the order, disrupting law and order, and asked to check our IDs.” The police arrested two students shortly after but released them later that night.

The Chongqing factory is operated by Quanta Computer, a Taiwanese electronics manufacturer.

## Taiwan car rental operators protest restrictions

Contractors working for car rental operators demonstrated on Thursday outside the Ministry of Transportation and Communications in Taipei over government regulations cutting their hours of operation.

The workers disrupted traffic by parking cars on the intersection of the Hangzhou and Renai roads. They accused the ministry of killing car rental businesses through strict rules. They held signs that read “Justice is dead” and “Lining the pockets of big business.”

### **South Korean workers demand investigation into illegal business practices**

About 130 members of the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) protested outside the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office in southern Seoul on Tuesday, with some unionists occupying the building.

KCTU members demanded that prosecutors investigate Hyundai Motor and Kia Motors over allegations that the companies illegally treated contract workers and refused to transition them to permanent positions.

After an eight-hour sit-down protest in the lobby, Seoul Metropolitan Police arrested six members who refused to leave. Police released them at around midnight.

### **Indonesian workers protest at Coca-Cola plant**

Dozens of workers from seven unions affiliated with the independent federation of food workers protested outside Coca-Cola's Bandung plant in West Java on November 13 to oppose the company's victimisation of a number of workers and union officials.

After taking action against the Bandung plant's union president in mid-October, the company this month targeted other union leaders. Five active union members, including three in leadership positions, were ordered to accept voluntary redundancies on November 9.

When they refused, they were sacked under an “efficiency” program. The company also threatened to withhold dismissal pay they were owed. The five reported for work on November 13 and have refused to leave the plant.

### **Western Australian miners stage eight-hour walkout**

About 200 casual employees at Rio Tinto's Nammuldi iron ore mine in the remote Pilbara region of Western Australia refused to board company buses to travel to the site on Monday. The workers, who are employed by body hire companies Linkforce and Minprovis, were protesting against what they described as “wage theft.”

Strikers demanded compensation for the two-hour travel time to and from the mine site or for their shifts to be reduced from 12 to 10 hours. A Rio Tinto representative visited the camp site and threatened to “demobilise”—i.e., sack the workers, if they did not attend the site.

According to Linkforce, the strike ended within eight hours after the hire companies and Rio Tinto reached an agreement. No details of the deal have been released.

### **Patient transfer workers in Victoria vote on industrial action**

Employees of a privately owned non-emergency patient transfer service in Geelong have threatened to walk off the job if they continue to be paid much less than Ambulance Victoria staff. The Ambulance Employees Association accused National Patient Transport (NPT) of paying workers 20 percent less than their counterparts in the government-run patient transfer service.

NPT Ambulance Transport Attendants are qualified to be first responders to a large range of clinical problems and attend non-life threatening accidents. The workers are currently participating in a ballot, which closes on November 20, to decide if they will strike.

### **New Zealand teachers hold one-day strikes**

About 30,000 primary school teachers held a series of one day stoppages over the past week, with different regions striking on different days. Thousands joined rallies and pickets in Auckland, Christchurch, Wellington and many other towns and cities across New Zealand.

The action follows a one-day nationwide strike in August and the rejection of two pay offers from the Labour Party-led government. Teachers were offered an increase of just three percent per annum for the next three years, barely above the rising cost of living, after a decade of virtually frozen wages.

Members of the New Zealand Educational Institute (NZEI), the teachers' union, have called for a 16 percent pay increase over two years. They are also demanding smaller class sizes and more support staff for students with learning difficulties. Following the August strike, many teachers called for a two-day walkout. NZEI leaders, however, rejected this, limiting the action to one day.

In an attempt to avert the latest strike, the union had agreed to negotiations with the Ministry of Education mediated by the Employment Relations Authority. On November 9, however, the government's mediator rejected teachers' demands, calling them “totally unrealistic.” The government has falsely stated that it has “no more money” to address the crisis in schools.

### **New Zealand ambulance workers take industrial action**

About 1,000 St John Ambulance workers began industrial action on November 14 for improved pay and conditions, including more staff and better rosters. The workers are paid as little as \$19 an hour, just above the minimum wage. They work grueling shifts and are responsible for saving lives.

The workers are taking partial strike action by refusing to cover non-emergency sporting and other events run by private businesses. The action will continue until an agreement is reached between St John and four unions.

Successive governments have refused to provide fully-funded ambulance services. Since the 1990s, ambulance services have been outsourced by District Health Boards to private charities, including St John, which employs around 2,000 people and has 7,500 unpaid volunteers.

## Ongoing strikes by New Zealand court workers

Court workers employed by the Ministry of Justice have continued to hold strikes at short notice, and have taken other forms of industrial action, in pursuit of better wages.

The Ministry of Justice is offering a pay increase of just 5 percent over two years, which is effectively a wage freeze. The Public Service Association (PSA) initially claimed a 13 percent increase but a ministry spokesperson told the media the union had reduced its claim to 11 percent.

On November 13, the PSA announced that court registry officers at Auckland District Court and Manukau District Court would impose a ban on serving, checking and signing sentencing documents. The action will last until December 7 and has caused significant delays to sentencing hearings.

The Ministry had attempted to stop the strikes by applying for an injunction from the Employment Court. This was dismissed by the court on November 5.

operate as normal but drivers will refuse to take fares.

Hamilton bus drivers employed by Go Bus, which is contracted by Waikato Regional Council, have held five strikes so far this year. FIRST Union says the company is offering a pay increase of as little as 1.5 percent per annum. The dispute has been going on for two years.

Hundreds of bus drivers have also recently taken industrial action in Auckland and Wellington, protesting against grueling and unsocial shifts and wages that are barely above minimum pay rates. In each area, regional councils have contracted out public transport services to the lowest bidder, cutting costs at the expense of jobs, wages and conditions. The disputes remain unresolved.



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## New Zealand health workers vote to strike

Nurses, healthcare assistants and other health workers in New Zealand's East Coast region voted on November 15 to hold a 24-hour strike on November 27 after rejecting an offer mandating pay annual pay increase of 2 percent or less. This follows a 0 percent increase last year.

The workers are members of four unions: the NZ Nurses Organisation, the Public Service Association, First Union and E Tu. They are employed by Ngati Porou Hauora (NPH), a not-for-profit primary health organisation run by the Maori tribe Ngati Porou under contract from the government. It operates the Te Puia Springs Hospital and is the biggest employer on the East Coast, one of the poorest regions of the country.

NZNO says registered nurses working for NPH earn \$14,000 a year less than colleagues employed in public hospitals. In August, following a nationwide strike by public hospital nurses and healthcare assistants, NZNO worked with the Labour-led government to impose a sellout deal amounting to a pay rise of just 3 percent per year for most workers.

## Retail workers picket Auckland PB Tech store

Several workers picketed outside a PB Tech store in Penrose, Auckland on Friday afternoon, to protest low wages. FIRST Union released a statement claiming that workers are frequently penalised for being two minutes late to work, and that the company has broken minimum wage laws by underpaying staff.

The company has a chain of 11 stores in New Zealand, but there were no reports of pickets at any of the other stores. PB Tech general manager Darren Smith told the media the company had 612 employees. Around 13 took part in Friday's industrial action.

## New Zealand bus drivers to take industrial action

About 120 bus drivers in Hamilton are due to take industrial action from November 19 to December 3, demanding better wages. Bus services will