

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and New Zealand

GM workers in South Korea strike over wages; Pakistan higher education teachers walkout; Psychologists continue industrial action in New Zealand

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South Korean GM workers strike over wages

Auto workers at GM Korea held a four-hour strike Friday over stalled wage negotiations. The walkout will be followed by six-hour strikes each day from next Tuesday to Friday.

The 10,000-member union demanded a 5.7 percent hike in the basic monthly salary, one-and-a-half months of wages in performance-based pay, and a cash bonus worth 6.5 million won (\$5,400) per worker.

GM Korea rejected the demands, citing a worsening business environment and the fact that the company is still mired in deficits. From January to August, GM Korea's sales fell 6.2 percent to 287,540 vehicles from 306,533 units a year earlier. It posted a net loss of 859 billion won (\$738 million) in 2018 after reporting 3.13 trillion won in accumulated net losses in the 2014–2017 period.

GM Korea workers have already held several rounds of partial and general strikes this year for an increase in wages, resulting in over 10,000 vehicles in output losses.

China: Minor league footballers protest wage non-payments

After a 2–0 victory by the Jilin Baijia over the Qingdao Red Lions last weekend, nine players from the winning team walked back on to the pitch to display a banner calling for the payment of wages in arrears and a promised bonus.

It is the sixth time that players from teams in China's League 2 have staged collective protests over wage arrears this year. Earlier in September, a number of players from Nanjing Shaye staged a protest, claiming that they had only been paid about three month's wages this year.

Other teams are in even more dire economic straits. In January, players from Hainan FC demanded 5.5 million yuan in wage arrears. One team member, Li Changliang, compared the players to migrant construction workers who had been cheated out of their wages by a labour contractor and were now desperate to get paid before the holidays.

India: Railway carriage production workers in Tamil Nadu oppose privatisation

Perambur Carriage Works employees demonstrated and held a sit-down protest outside the factory gate on September 18 against the Indian government's 100 Days Action Plan, which is aimed at privatising most of the national railway service. Hundreds of United Workers Union and Dakshin Railway Employees Union members and supporters were involved in the demonstration.

Workers denounced the Modi government, which plans to sell off seven

production units and 44 associated workshops and allow private companies to run passenger and goods trains.

India: Zomato staff protest incentive payment cuts

Zomato food delivery workers demonstrated against a new incentive structure by the giant company in parts of Bangalore and Mumbai on September 16 and 17. The delivery workers said that they would have to work much harder and for longer hours to earn the amount of previous incentives and reach bonus payment targets. Zomato has 230,000 delivery workers in India but over the last two months has laid off 600 people from customer support.

Noida authority contract workers on strike in Uttar Pradesh

Over 4,500 Noida Authority contract employees, most of them sanitation workers, struck indefinitely on September 16 to demand implementation of the 7th Pay Commission pay scales, affordable housing, and reinstatement of recently dismissed workers. Other striking contract workers included clerical staff, junior engineers, electricians, computer operators, sweepers and drivers.

The strike began around 9 a.m. outside the authority's Sector 6 gate. More than 1,000 workers held a sit down protest and blocked the road and the following day workers held a rally in Noida, a major city in India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh.

Andhra Bank staff protest against forced merger

Andhra Bank staff demonstrated on September 13 against a merger of the bank with the Union Bank of India. Andhra Bank Officers Federation and Andhra Bank Award Employees Union members were involved in the protest. Union members from both banks will participate in a planned national strike on September 26 and 27 over government demands for the merger of several Indian banks.

Nagpur Municipal Corporation employees walk out

Nagpur Municipal Corporation workers struck on September 13 to demand the government implement 7th Pay Commission wage scales. The corporation has 8,400 regular employees and 4,000 daily wage workers. The strikers have threatened an indefinite strike if their demands are not granted.

Indian transport workers denounce government policies

Nearly 8,000 transport operators from various unions and under the banner of the United Front of Transporters Association (UFTA) protested

in New Delhi on September 16 in protest against the government's amended Motor Vehicles Act policies which they allege will destroy thousands of jobs.

Demonstrators denounced excessive increases in penalties and ongoing harassment and extortion by the police.

Haryana computer teachers protest against police attack

Over 3,000 computer teachers in Haryana marched in Panchkula on September 18 in protest against violent police attacks on their protest two days earlier. The teachers said that police suddenly attacked them with batons and water cannons during the peaceful protest.

The original September 16 protest by computer teachers was for a salary increase and permanent jobs. The teachers have been demanding permanent employment for seven years and under their current contract, which expires on October 16, they would not have a job.

Sri Lankan doctors' strike cripples hospitals

Doctors in Sri Lankan hospitals held a one-day strike on September 18. The strike impacted on many government hospital services, including Outdoor Patients' Dispensaries and clinical services that were unable to function.

The Government Medical Officers Association members were protesting the government's failure to set standards for medical education, drug shortages in hospitals, handing over internships at state hospitals to unqualified students and violating procedures for medical transfers of doctors.

Sri Lanka public bus drivers walk out over salary anomalies

Sri Lanka Transport Board bus drivers struck on September 17 citing salary anomalies and other unresolved demands. Their main demand was for payment of a 2,500-rupee increment which was promised by the government for all its employees. With 85 depots joining the walkout, Sri Lanka's public bus service has ground to a halt.

Pakistan higher education teachers strike over funding cuts

Academic staff at government-run higher education institutes in Sindh province, including Karachi, boycotted classes and all academic activities on Tuesday to oppose a 10 percent cut to each institute's funding.

Karachi University will be hit by a 100 million-rupee funding cut, which comes on top of the government's failure to provide finance for PhD allowances and a 15 percent salary increase for academic staff.

The strike was organised by the All Pakistan Universities Academic Staff Association's Sindh chapter, which has threatened to hold a two-day boycott on September 25 and 26. It said that there could be national protests if the issue is not resolved.

The Pakistani government slashed the higher education budget for 2018–19 to 35.8 billion rupees and plans to reduce this to 28.64 billion rupees in 2019–20. Real government expenditure on education is expected to be much lower.

Last Sunday almost 1,000 headmasters, headmistresses and head teachers of public schools in Sindh, who were appointed to their positions in 2015, protested against the government's failure to make their jobs permanent despite years of service. Police attacked the protesters with batons, tear gas and water cannons.

Bangladeshi journalists protest over wages

Bangladeshi journalists held nationwide protests on Tuesday to demand a new wages board. The existing wages board has reduced allowances for house rents, halved an annual gratuity and introduced income tax payments on low earning individuals. The journalists are members of the Bangladesh Newspaper Workers' Federation or the Bangladesh Federal Union of Newspaper Press Workers.

Melbourne tram workers union announces limited strike action

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU), representing 1,500 drivers and customer service personnel from Melbourne's tram network, has informed operator Yarra Trams that its members will strike for four hours on September 26 and October 10 during the off-peak period between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m.

The strikes are in protest against the company's proposed new enterprise agreement (EA). They follow a similar four-hour stoppage on August 30. The limited strike had no effect on Yarra Trams management which has rejected most of the union's 107 claims. The union wants 6 percent annual pay increases and improved conditions.

The company's proposed agreement includes 3 percent annual pay increases over four years in exchange for lifting an existing cap on part-time work from 4 percent to 15 percent. The operator originally wanted the cap lifted to 35 percent and attempted to buy off workers with a \$1,000 sign-on bonus plus \$400 if they agreed.

Fenner Dunlop conveyor manufacturing workers strike in Melbourne

Some 50 workers from the conveyor system manufacturer Fenner Dunlop walked off the job indefinitely in Melbourne last Monday in support of a new enterprise agreement. Workers earlier this month voted unanimously for indefinite strike action over the dispute. The company is owned by the Michelin Group.

Strikers are picketing Michelin's head office in Melbourne with signs saying "Fair pay for Fair work," "Michelin show us the money" and "People B4 Profit."

The workers, who are members of the National Union of Workers (NUW), say that their wages are so low that they are forced to work a 60-hour week to get a decent wage.

Melbourne food packaging workers vote on industrial action

NUW members at the dried food packaging manufacturer Mansfields in Melbourne are voting on whether to strike in their dispute for a new work agreement. After five meetings with management, workers rejected an offer of a 1.3 percent wage increase, which is well below inflation and represents a pay cut.

Workers want a decent pay increase, permanent jobs for casuals after four years with the company, improved redundancy packages and an end to bullying from management. The protected action ballot closes on October 4.

Western Australian LNG offshore construction workers on strike

Around 130 members of the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) and the Offshore Alliance (a combination of the Australian Workers Union and the Maritime Union of Australia) involved in the construction of offshore LNG processing facilities in Western Australia walked off the job for 48 hours on September 21 in a dispute for a new enterprise agreement (EA).

The workers are employed by Monadelphous (Monos) which provides construction, maintenance and industrial services to the resources, energy and infrastructure sectors. It is contracted by global oil and gas exploration company INPEX to build gas processing facilities north of Broom for the Ichthys LNG Project.

Following nearly six months of failed negotiations, workers voted nearly unanimously to take strike action. The unions claimed that Monos has not agreed to a key EA claim that employees transitioning into full time permanent roles will not suffer a reduction in their hourly rates of pay. Other disputed issues have not been made public.

Paper mill workers in Victoria walk out over pay dispute

About 160 workers at the Paper Australia mill in Maryvale, southeast of Melbourne, walked off the job this week in a dispute over the company's

proposed enterprise agreement. Some 60 members of the ETU downed tools for 48 hours on Wednesday, joined by 100 members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the NUW the following day.

Workers began industrial action in July after six months of negotiations failed. However, although members from the three unions unanimously approved strike action in a protected ballot on July 22, it was restricted to bans on overtime, responding to callouts and performing higher duties. The unions delayed strike action until September 9 when ETU members were called out for 24 hours.

Workers are concerned about several changes to their current deal. Paper Australia wants to bring in a two tier agreement where the wage of new recruits would be 27 percent less than current employees, and freeze existing employees' wages until the pay of new starters catches up. Other concerns are that proposed changes could lead to full-time staff being replaced by contractors, a reduction of sick and personal leave and alterations in the way overtime is calculated and rosters devised.

The unions and company are currently in closed-room discussions in the Fair Work Commission. Further planned walkouts will begin on October 26.

Psychologists continue industrial action in New Zealand

Six hundred psychologists employed in the public health system across New Zealand are scheduled to take industrial action throughout the month of October. Psychologists will enforce a cap of two hours per day of face-to-face contact time with patients and patients' families.

October will be the third month of industrial action by the psychologists, who are members of the APEX union. The union has called for an unspecified "commitment" from the Labour Party-led government to resolve a staffing crisis.

APEX has highlighted that Hawke's Bay District Health Board employs just 2.4 full-time equivalent psychologists in its child and adolescent mental health services, when it should employ 9 to meet an international benchmark of 1 psychologist per 5,000 people. There are also six unfilled psychologist vacancies in the Waitemata District Health Board, a vacancy rate of 25 percent.

New Zealand clothing retail workers protest low wages

About 30 workers protested outside a Cotton On distribution centre in Auckland on September 16 against low wages. The members of First Union have been offered a pay increase of just 50 cents an hour by the clothing retail chain. The workers currently earn between \$17.70 (the country's minimum wage) and \$19 an hour.

New Zealand medical workers vote to strike

More than 1,100 medical imaging technologists (MITs) at public hospitals across New Zealand are scheduled to strike on Monday for 24 hours. The specialist workers, who are members of the APEX union, are also voting on whether to hold a second full-day strike on October 2.

MITs assist with radiology services in the diagnosis and treatment of patients. According to APEX, workers are being driven to strike by pressures resulting from understaffing. The demand for radiology services is far outstripping the capacity of the District Health Boards' workforce to provide them. The union says unfilled vacancy rates for MITs are at 30 percent in some areas.

Negotiations for a new employment agreement for the MITs have been underway since December 2018. In August, the MITs rejected a proposed settlement including a pay rise of just 3 percent per annum, the same inadequate figure imposed on nurses, doctors and other health workers.

The union is not challenging the main wage offer but says it opposes a claw back that would see MITs in the more specialised areas of CT and Angiography being paid 12 percent less a year for their first six years. A

press release from APEX says the offer fails to address staffing shortages, but does not specify what increase it is seeking.

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