

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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## **Sri Lankan state bank employees walkout**

The employees of Sri Lankan state banks staged a walkout at 3pm on March 4, making two basic demands--payment of arrears of an 8 percent wage allowance pledged by the government, and a halt to the politically discriminative recommendations of a government committee set up to probe the victimisation of bank employees during the previous UNP regime.

Most state bank workers participated in the walkout, which was called by the Ceylon Bank Employees Union (CBEU). About 1,500 employees from Colombo and suburb branches participated in a protest meeting at the Ceylon Mercantile Union hall in Colombo.

CBEU president P. Bandara said the union had reached a collective agreement with President Chandrika Kumaratunga for the payment of the 8 percent allowance from 31 December 1996, but had agreed to drop demands for arrears for 1995 and 1996, accepting Kumaratunga's argument that the financial situation of the state banks was not sound enough to pay the money.

Now the CBEU is demanding the arrears because the Peoples Bank is going to pay the arrears to bank officers, but not other bank employees. Despite the compromise made by the CBEU, the regime has favoured the bank officers above the heads of the workers of lower grades. This manoeuvre is in line with the policy of strengthening the managerial sections of the banks against the workers who face the loss of jobs and working conditions.

Bandara complained that under the restructuring, the monthly wages of higher-level bank officers would be raised from Rs40,000 to Rs90,000 (\$700 to \$1500), while many employees would be retrenched. He told the meeting the CBEU would fight these retrenchments but offered no program for such a struggle.

## **Chinese workers protest against wage loss**

Some 300 workers in Shuning City, Sichuan Province gathered in front of the city government building on March 12 to demonstrate against the termination of their wages. The demonstrators were unemployed workers from the Shuning City Mechanical Factory where 1,200 out of 1,300 have been sacked. The state-owned factory worth about \$US2.5 million was sold off last year to a private development corporation, and the local authorities have refused to provide the unemployed workers with their living fee after March 12.

The workers responded angrily to the news, but despite the demonstration, city government officials promised nothing. Hundreds of workers returned to the factory and overturned a wall being constructed on part of the factory's land. The police arrived at the scene but took no action and the demonstration broke up at about 6 pm.

## **Cathay Pacific pilots reject pay cuts**

Cathay Pacific senior pilots have refused to sign agreements involving wage cuts of up to 27 percent in exchange for stock options in the airline. The agreements were sent to pilots' homes last week with a demand that they be endorsed by April 9. Pilots have been threatened with retrenchment if they refuse the offer.

The wages of pilots based in Hong Kong will be slashed by between 7.3 percent to 18 percent, while those in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia will be slashed by the full 27 percent. The cuts will effect over 600 of the 1,300 pilots employed by the Hong Kong-based airline.

## **New Zealand health workers to strike**

More than 2,500 nursing, domestic and clerical workers employed at Health Waikato in New Zealand have threatened a three-day strike if their demand for a 2 percent pay increase is not met.

The workers were incensed when they learnt that Health Waikato management was forecasting a \$4.8 million operating surplus for next year while claiming that finances were not available to grant the pay rise.

The Public Service Association, the union covering the

workers, is complaining that Waikato management attempted to bypass the union and approach workers individually.

### **Arrests continue at Gordonstone**

Another 60 workers were arrested last week on the picket line outside the Gordonstone coal mine, near Emerald in central Queensland. This brings the number arrested to more than 250 in just under two months.

The bitter dispute at Gordonstone erupted 18 months ago when the mine's former owner, ARCO, sacked its entire workforce of 300 and tried to reopen the mine with non-union labour under reduced working conditions. At the end of last year the mine was bought by Rio Tinto, which is attempting restart operations with 150 non-union workers.

A poll conducted this month by the Rockhampton-based *Weekend Bulletin* showed that over 65 percent of the 1,203 people polled in the surrounding mining communities supported the sacked workers. Despite this wide support, the mining union refuses to organise industrial action in other mines in the region or widen the dispute to Rio Tinto's other operations.

### **Western Mining announces layoffs**

Western Mining Corporation announced this week that it will retrench 310 workers from its Kambalda Nickel Operations in Western Australia and halve the production of nickel-in-concentrate to 10,000 tonnes per annum.

The company also plans to place two other mines in the region on a "care and maintenance" basis. Kambalda residents have condemned the restructuring plans because they will result in the loss of many support jobs in the area and could mean the death of the town.

### **West Australian gold miners suspended**

Over 400 workers at the Mount McClure and Gidgie gold mines in Western Australia were suspended for two weeks without pay after the mines' operator, Australian Resource, placed itself in voluntary administration.

A company spokesman said the administrators were "trying to work out a strategy for us to continue" but pointed out that even since announcing the move gold prices had weakened further. World gold prices have slumped by more than 30 percent over the past three years. Over 18 smaller gold producers in Australia closed down their mining operations last year.

### **Strike hits two wineries**

About 350 workers at two wineries in South Australia went on strike last week over the terms in a new industrial agreement. The dispute involves workers at the Nuriootpa and Seppeltsfield wineries operated by Southcorp Wines,

Australia's largest wine producer. The strike has erupted as the grape picking season moves into its peak period.

### **Hotel workers protest cuts to conditions**

Building workers joined angry hotel employees protesting in front of the Accor group's three luxury hotels in Sydney's Darling Harbour last week. The hotel workers were demonstrating against attempts by the company to cut back working conditions.

The cuts included abolishing overtime loading and the introduction of flexible rostering to allow workers to be called in for duty without notice. The company is intent on slashing conditions even though it made a \$20 million profit from its Sydney hotels over the last six months.

Last year Accor attempted to cut shiftwork allowances and other penalty payments but retreated when workers staged a series of work stoppages and street demonstrations.

### **PNG public sector sackings**

The provincial administration for West Sepik in Papua New Guinea announced this week that it would slash 74 jobs from its workforce of 376 and redeploy many other workers in a extensive restructuring aimed at cutting costs.

A spokesman for the administration said: "The province is facing major budgetary problems because the funding for national grants has been drastically reduced. The province itself only generates 1 million kina in revenue and this is inadequate to maintain the budget."



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