

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Fiji aviation workers strike

The Fiji Civil Aviation Authority locked out 500 airport workers and air traffic management staff at the Nadi International Airport on April 12 after handing over operations to a private company, Airports Fiji.

Fiji Public Servants Association (FPSA) members responded by staging a sit-in and are continuing to strike even though the Fiji High Court ordered the Authority to withdraw all offers of voluntary redundancies and severance pay, and begin discussions.

The FPSA says the airport restructuring has vastly increased the danger of major accidents. A union spokesman revealed that Airports Fiji has employed personnel with suspended, lapsed or unrecognised qualifications to guide incoming and departing aircraft. Fifteen people with little experience have replaced 80 trained aviation emergency fire fighters.

Representatives from the union and the Aviation Authority were due to appear before the High Court on Friday.

Security guards attack strikers in Port Moresby

Over 200 striking public sector workers employed by the National Capital District Commissioners (NCDC) Office in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, marched on the city hall on Monday to press demands for improved working conditions, a 22 percent wage increase and the payment of benefits owed to retrenched workers.

When the protesters arrived and began calling for other workers inside the building to join the strike they were attacked by baton-wielding security guards. In retaliation the striking workers smashed windows and damaged council vehicles.

Earlier, the management called police to arrest union leaders who had entered the city hall for negotiations. Despite the organised provocation, union leaders promised the police that they would restrain the strikers from taking "violent action".

The strike, involving 900 workers, has closed down

markets at Gordons, Koki and Sabama because the gates normally opened by NCDC workers remained locked. The unfenced markets at Manu Autoport and Hohoa were open but there were no NCDC officials on hand to collect vendor taxes. The strike is also affecting services at the city's Botanical Gardens and the Nine Mile Cemetery.

Further protest action is being planned, including a student march from the university campus to Waigani. The strikers have vowed to remain out until their demands are met.

Australian software engineers take strike action

Software engineers at Toshiba went out for 24 hours last week in what is believed to be the first such strike in the information technology (IT) industry in Australia. The workers, members of the Australian Services Union, are involved in the development and installation of software for power stations in Japan.

The strike was called after negotiations for a collective bargaining agreement fell through and management refused to pay the engineers because they had imposed work bans. Toshiba is insisting that the workers remain on individual contracts, saying that it does not want to be "the first" in the IT industry in Australia to have a collective agreement.

Esso technicians strike

Seventy technicians at Esso's Longford oil and gas refinery in Victoria went on strike for 48 hours last Thursday. The strike was in response to evidence presented at the Longford Royal Commission into the explosion at the plant last September that killed two workers and left the state of Victoria without gas for two weeks.

Australian Workers Union secretary Bill Shorten said the evidence given by an American expert hired by the company was an attempt to make a scapegoat out of the workers.

The expert, Kenneth Baker, blamed the gas disaster on worker error, claiming that employees had "inadvertently" given incorrect evidence at the Royal Commission. He said he disbelieved the workers' evidence that they were not aware of dangers posed by the failure of a warm liquid system at the plant.

Miners union accepts job losses

Up to 66 miners will be retrenched from the BHP-owned

Elouera Colliery in Australia's Illawarra region. The sackings are the result of a review being conducted by a joint management-union committee to draw up a new plan to cut costs.

Under the plan, another 25 to 50 jobs will go from the company's mine at Appin and an undisclosed number will be axed at the Cordeaux mine. The job losses follow the decision by the company last week to retrench 140 mineworkers from its West Cliff colliery.

Southern District union official Howard Fisher said that faced with growing competition and price reductions for coal "the only way they (the company) can reduce costs is to retrench".

Construction workers oppose non-union labour

Union delegates from Melbourne construction sites will meet later this month to discuss a campaign against the use of non-union labour by the French-owned Accor hotel chain in the construction of a Formula-One motel in Tullamarine.

At the end of last month about 3,000 building workers rallied outside the Hotel Sofit in Melbourne's Collin Square and then marched on the Hotel Novotel. Both the Hotel Sofit and the Hotel Novotel are owned and operated by Accor.

New Zealand rail strike threat

Over 3,000 rail workers in New Zealand will go on strike in two weeks if Trans Rail refuses to back away from plans to cut manning levels of teams used for shunting rail freight cars. The teams presently involve up to three people but rail management is attempting to introduce one-man operations.

A spokesman for the Rail and Maritime Union said the job, that requires one man using a remote control assisted by two others, is far too complex for a "solo operation" and the changes demanded will "result in more serious accidents".

The union is demanding that Trans Rail give an assurance that the manning issue will be negotiated.

Seoul subway workers threatened with legal action

The South Korean government and the Seoul City Council have threatened to step up repressive measures against subway workers who are fighting the decision of the Metropolitan Subway Corporation to layoff 2,078 employees, or 18 percent of its total workforce of 11,492.

This week the government announced that it intends to mobilise 5,000 scabs, including 800 from the military, to maintain services if the all-out-strike called by the Seoul Subway Labor Union for April 19 goes ahead. Government prosecutors threatened to take "harsh legal measures" against any workers who engage in "illegal" industrial action in support of the subway workers. Two workers have already been arrested for posting up bills calling for support.

On Monday subway workers launched a "work-to-rule" and "go slow" campaign involving technicians, train inspectors and train crews as a lead up to the April 19 strike.

In an attempt to combat the effects of the campaign the company plans to put 238 officials to work carrying out duties normally done by rail staff.

The workers are demanding that the working week be reduced from 44 hours to 40 hours to spread the work and avoid layoffs. Unions covering workers in other public companies met on Tuesday and promised to take support action. They are yet to vote on joining the April 19 strike.

Bangkok garment workers sacked

Workers from Splendid Thailand, a German owned jacket manufacturer, in Bangkok, Thailand, are continuing their campaign against retrenchment. The company last month sacked the 150 workers and refused to pay them redundancy entitlements. The workers had submitted a demand at the beginning this year that their daily wage of 162 baht (\$4.30) be increased to cover rises in living costs.

In response to the wage demand, Splendid management claimed there had been a decline in production orders and instructed the staff to remain at home. When the workers refused to comply, the company locked them out.

The workers were finally dismissed at the end of last month when they mounted a 24-hour picket outside the factory gate. Earlier this month the sacked workers and their supporters staged a protest march on the Labour Ministry building in Bangkok to demand a meeting with government officials.

Later the company said it wished to reopen the factory but without union labour. Union leaders have offered to drop the workers' wage demands in exchange for recognition by the company.



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