Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 April 2001

Indonesian bus drivers continue fight to defend conditions

Over 1,500 workers at the state-owned bus company Perum PPD in Jakarta are continuing the strike they launched on April 4 over unpaid wages and outstanding pension and insurance payments. They have also called on the government to replace the company's management, which they accuse of not transferring 2 billion rupiah ($US200,000) insurance payments deducted from workers' pay to the state social insurance company.

On April 5, union leaders succeeded in calling off a bus blockade of central Jakarta, scheduled for the next day, in which drivers planned to abandon buses to cause widespread traffic disruption. Before scotching the blockade plan Makmur Ginting, secretary of the Indonesian Prosperous Labor Union PPD chapter, said he feared the drivers' blockade would go ahead. “We may not be able to stop them (the drivers) because they are very disappointed with the management and the government, who have not responded to their demands,” he said.

The government is now threatening to shut down the company. Last week Minister for Finance Prijadi Praptosuhardjo told the media that an independent consultant “would decide whether PPD can continue or should be wound up”.

However, workers say they are determined to maintain the strike until their demands are met. Manasal, a 53-year-old father of two children, told the press: “We bus drivers and conductors have come out on strike because we can no longer put up with the terrible conditions we have to endure. We must have the courage to fight for what we want. We are not begging, just demanding our rights.”

Manasal said that he had been a bus driver for PPD for 18 years but never earned enough to adequately support his family. “My wife has been forced to work as a vendor in the Kramatjati market in East Jakarta to try to get some extra money so that we can take care of our kids and pay for their schooling.”

Manasal is paid 430,000 rupiah ($US43) per month. He was recently denied hospital treatment for his seriously ill daughter because PPD failed to pay the insurance premiums.

Sajuri, another PPD bus driver, said he had been unable to pay the monthly rent for his house. “What triggered the walk out was the management's failure to pay our wages for the last two months,” he said. “The wage levels in the company are below the government-set monthly minimum wage for the capital and its environs”.

Union leaders conspire to end Jakarta hotel strike

The protracted strike by 900 employees of the Shangri-La Hotel in Jakarta has been broken by the combined efforts of the local union leadership and their overseas counterparts. The workers went on strike on December 22 for increased pay and improved working conditions.

The management reopened the hotel during March using contract labour and the government provided police to assist security guards break up striking workers' pickets.

Last week local union leaders encouraged 400 of the strikers to resign and accept a redundancy settlement worked out at government-mediated meetings between the union and the management. Another 100 workers have decided to take legal action to try to regain their jobs and others have been re-employed to work alongside the contract labor at the hotel. Two hundred workers who were sacked early in the dispute have not been reinstated.

The mass resignation took place on the recommendation of a section of the local union executive. One executive officer, Nurdin Halilintar, alleged that the management had used three executive members, including union treasurer Budi Susanto and deputy chairmen Denny Setiadi, “to lure employees to resign”. Nurdin said workers had been told that they had to act before the redundancy offer ran out or they would get nothing. He said that the three union leaders were promised a “commission” for each worker who quit.

The IUF, the international body covering hotel, restaurant and catering unions, also assisted in the betrayal. After promising international support for the strikers, the IUF restricted their actions to calling on Indonesian government ministers to intervene in the dispute. The outcome was the mediated redundancy settlement. Very little assistance, either financial or otherwise, was organised to back the strike.

One worker said that he decided to resign because he needed the money. “I have sold my TV, VCD, refrigerator and other valuables to feed my four children, whose mother has just passed away,” he said.

Indonesian strikers demand full investigation into picket-line murder

Over 500 striking workers from car upholstery producer PT Kadera AR Indonesia in East Jakarta staged a demonstration outside the parliament on April 6 to demand the government fully investigate the killing of a worker by company-hired thugs.

The worker, 21-year-old Kimun Effendi, was killed by flying bomb fragments on March 29 when over 500 armed men attacked 400 strikers occupying the grounds of the factory. Three other workers were badly injured in the early morning assault. The PT Kadera workers had been in the factory grounds since March 19 after striking for a 100 percent pay increase.

The Minister for Manpower Al Hilal Hamdi promised that the police would fully investigate the incident and “all those involved, directly and indirectly, would be brought to court”. However, there are strong indications that both the police and the military were involved in organising the attack.

Workers reported that a large number of police were near the plant at the time of the raid but did not intervene to stop it. Others say that they saw several trucks containing troops in the area the day before the attack.

Damning evidence has also begun to emerge that directly implicates the company in the murderous assault. Investigators found that PT Kadera's deputy manager Amrin Gobel made calls on his mobile phone to an army officer who runs an outfit called Forum of People who Love Indonesia. The organisation is known for strike breaking activities.

South Korean workers strike against privatisation

Over 2,500 workers from the Korea Plant Services and Engineering

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Union went on strike on April 6 in opposition to the government's plans to privatise KPSE, a public utility company that maintains 46 of the country's power generation facilities.

The Korean Construction Workers Federation also announced that its members would strike this week against the non-payment of overtime benefits and unfair labour practices. The union said cement supplies to 2,000 construction sites around the country would be suspended as part of the action.

This week there was another clash between riot police and laid-off Daewoo Motor workers and their supporters. The incident took place on Tuesday when over 300 workers attempted to storm the company's headquarters in Pupyong, west of Seoul. Police charged into demonstrators with batons, injuring 20. Another 20 protesters were arrested.

Government printers demonstrate for wage increase in Sri Lanka

On April 3, workers at the Sri Lanka government press in Colombo demonstrated outside the plant demanding a 3,000 rupee ($US34) monthly salary.

Last year, as a result of a protest campaign waged by the Committee for Salary Increase in the Public Services (CSIPS), the government offered a 1,000-rupee ($US11.50) increase for public sector workers, including those at the government press who are paid a monthly salary of between 3,400 and 5,400 rupee.

However, a spokesman for the protestors said they were “faced with an unbearable situation” because the government increase was not enough to meet the rise in the cost of living. He said the press workers would seek joint action with other public sector employees to push for their demands.

Sri Lankan bank managers begin sick note campaign

Sri Lankan Samurdhi Bank (SB) managers have been staying away from work sick since April 4, in protest against the decision by the bank to withhold the March salary payment to a number of their colleagues.

Bank authorities claim that the non-payment of wages was because some bank managers were late in submitting their balance summaries by the stipulated time. However, a SB Managers Association spokesman said the managers were given only 10 days notice to submit the summaries.

Pakistani pilots impose go-slow for new contract

Pilots employed by Pakistan Airlines began a go-slow campaign on April 6 over delays in finalising a new work agreement. A spokesman for the pilots' association accused the management of stalling, saying that the negotiations over the agreement should have been complete by February 15. He accused the company of launching a “smear campaign” against pilots to stir up passenger resentment. The go-slow is causing serious delays to air traffic with several flights cancelled on Monday.

Australian mental health workers call snap strike

Over 250 workers at the Baillie Mental Health Hospital in Toowoomba, Queensland, walked out on a snap 24-hour strike on Monday. The workers are incensed over a management staffing profile document that proposes a reduction in the number of nurses to be employed in the Toowoomba mental health service. Management officially released the profile on March 1. Unions, however, had seen the document in February and taken no action.

One worker told the media: “We're not looking for more pay. We are looking for service for our clients and to retain the services that we now provide so that the people we look after have a satisfactory quality of life. Basically, we feel the changes are going to be to the detriment of the people we look after, both here and in the community”.

Victorian security guards strike over pay cut

Workers employed by Chubb Security Cash in Melbourne to service automatic cash machines walked off the job on April 12 after negotiation over working conditions broke down. A union spokesman said that the 100 security guards had voted to stay on strike during the Easter break.

The dispute is over changes to the terms of employment and attempts to reduce overtime pay rates. The union claims the company measures will cut workers' take home pay by up to 25 percent.

Automatic teller machines in central Melbourne, Geelong and Ballarat, particularly those owned by the Westpac and ANZ banks, will be hit by the strike. The workers, who are members of the Australian Services Union, will meet after Easter to decide on further action.

Mining union ends five weeks of strike action

The mining union recommended this week that 1,500 miners employed at five BHP coal mines in central Queensland end a campaign of rolling strikes called in the last five weeks over a new work contract.

The decision was taken under conditions where the Australian Industrial Relations Commission is considering a BHP application to terminate the enterprise bargaining period with the union. If the application were successful further strike action would be illegal under the provisions of the Federal government Workplace Relations Act, leaving the union open to legal damages.

Miners at the Saraji, Norwich Park, Gregory and Crinum mines returned to work, but workers at the Peak Downs mine have decided to maintain pickets at the site.

The dispute is over pay provisions and the demand by BHP for a greater use of contractors at the mines. The company also wants to abolish seniority at its coal operations, allowing it to hire and fire on the basis of “merit”. Although the union claims it will not give ground on the contractor and seniority issue, it has already allowed the changes demanded by BHP to be introduced by other mining companies, including Rio Tinto's mines in New South Wales.

Brisbane garbage collectors fear job losses

Brisbane City garbage collectors held a stop work meeting last Tuesday over council plans to use a new contractor. The workers fear that the arrangements will lead to a reduction in wages and jobs.

The Brisbane City Council currently contracts its garbage collection to Cleanaway and Pacific Waste Management, which employs workers drawn from the council's previous in-house collection staff. Union officials told workers that their “jobs were safe” but did not provide any written assurances from the council or the new contractor to back up the claim.

IBM workers strike over outsourcing

Shift workers employed at IBM's data processing division in St Leonards, NSW and Clayton, Victoria went on strike on April 6 for three days. The walk-out occurred following an announcement by IBM that 64 employees would lose their jobs because of a decision to outsource their work.

The affected staff were given minimal notice even though senior managers admit the changes have been under consideration for months. Last Tuesday shift staff at St Leonards were told to stay on site after their shift for an “important announcement.” After working a 12-hour night shift they were told their jobs would be gone by May 25 and they had two weeks to decide if they wanted to relocate, try for redeployment, or leave the company.

Following the announcement, IBM cancelled enterprise agreement negotiations with the union. Meetings of workers have demanded that management “negotiate in good faith” on the draft work agreement previously under discussion and provide reasonable time and alternatives, including improved severance pay for staff now facing redundancy.

New Zealand postal workers impose work-to-rule

Workers at the Auckland Mail Centre began a work-to-rule on April 11 to oppose a plan by New Zealand Post to pay ordinary time rather than time-and-a-half for working on Sundays.

The industrial action has caused 24-hour delivery delays for about 9 percent of the 1.3 million items dealt with at the centre each day. The delays have been mainly caused by workers refusing to do extra shifts, the method used by NZ Post to overcome staff shortages.

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At the moment only domestic mail delivery has been hit but international post could be affected if the dispute continues or spreads to other mail centres. Management has already redirected work to Wellington and other centres in a bid to stop further delays. A management spokesman said that NZ Post “was drawing up contingency plans” in the event of more widespread action.

Union close to accepting cuts on NZ waterfront

Government mediated discussions to end the long-running wharf dispute in New Zealand were thrown into disarray this week when a draft mediator's report, which backs attempts by wharf employers to cut jobs and conditions in South Island ports, was leaked in the parliament.

The dispute began last November when a major forestry company, Carter Holt Harvey, contracted Mainland Stevedoring to load logging ships at the ports of Timaru, Nelson, Bluff and Port Chalmers. Mainland largely by-passed local port workers, flying in its own contract workers for the duration of the job, then flying them out again.

The operation is seen as a drive to casualise the waterfront and undermine wages and working conditions. Workers and their supporters have mounted a series of protests and pickets over the past four months. The police have responded with increasingly belligerent tactics, resulting in a number of injuries and arrests.

The Waterfront Workers Union took the dispute into mediation last month saying it was seeking a “compromise solution”. While the leaked draft acknowledged that some of the “concerns” of the waterfront workers are “genuine”—particularly Mainland's employment agreement that guarantees workers only a minimum of 72 hours' work per month—it supports the moves by Carter Holt Harvey.

The mediator's report rejects union claims that Mainland is failing to give work to South Island waterfront workers, is working to casualise the workforce, undercutting other stevedoring firms, paying lower wages or introducing dangerous work practices.

The report recommends that Mainland should retain the right to operate in the ports with its casualised workforce but also give “some consideration” to hiring local workers. However, those workers hired would have to sign up under new contracts containing the very conditions that they have been opposing. Even so, according to the mediator, the union was close to reaching a settlement, claiming there was only “very limited” areas of disagreement between the parties.

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