Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

13 April 2002

Japanese workers demonstrate against unemployment

More than 13,000 workers marched through central Tokyo on April 10 in protest against the economic program of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and the country's rising unemployment. One worker at the demonstration told the media: "Who made Japan like this? It's the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) and the current coalition".

Unemployment is expected to climb to 6 percent this year from a record of 5.6 percent in December last year. A survey conducted by peak union body Rengo in February revealed that 40 percent of the jobless polled had been out of work for more than six months. According to a union spokesman, 50 companies go bankrupt every day and over 10,000 people loose their jobs. "Hundreds of people are killing themselves in desperation," he said. Despite growing opposition, Koizumi has declared that workers have no other choice but to "endure the pain of economic structural reforms".

The protestors also demanded better conditions for part-time workers. There are now 17 million part-time and contract workers in Japan, about 30 percent of the nation's workforce. They also denounced planned changes in the country's medical insurance scheme, which will mean higher charges for salaried workers from April next year.

Chinese workers evicted by company guards

Security guards at the Shuihe Electronic Factory in Dongguan, southern China, this week tried to evict workers from the plant who were protesting over unpaid wages. At least 10 workers were injured in the assault.

The plant manufactured toys for Wal-Mart and other major overseas retailers. Its former Hong Kong-based owners sold the factory to a Taiwanese investor who allowed it to go bankrupt. Some 1,500 workers were sacked on April 6 without being paid. Most of them are poor and come from other provinces and are now stranded in Dongguan because they cannot afford the cost of returning home.

Two separate mine accidents on the same day in China

Explosions at two coalmines claimed the lives of 31 workers in China's Heilongjiang province this week. The first blast occurred at the Donghai Coal Mine Corporation in Jixi City on April 10, as 70 miners were pumping water into a shaft in an attempt to stop a fire from spreading. The explosion killed 24 workers and injured 39. Most of the injured suffered severe burns and bone fractures and one remains in a critical condition. Hours later a blast ripped through the nearby state-run Jixi Mining Corporation, killing seven miners.

The latest disasters occurred on the same day as the government announced that it planned to close 8,000 small mines. More than 12,250 small mines have been shut down in China since May. While the government claims its move to cull mining operations is driven by safety concerns, the closures are primarily aimed at stemming an oversupply of coal that has held down prices.

Philippine construction workers protest over sackings

On April 10, construction firm Handumanan Development (HDC) called police to break a picket by 48 sacked workers at a site in Banawa, Cebu City. The police attacked and dispersed the picketers and escorted 600 workers into the site.

Police Chief Noel Gillamac admitted that the police had ignored laws requiring them to remain at least 50 metres from a picket, but claimed the attack was necessary to maintain "peace and order" in the area.

The 48 workers were sacked as part of a long running campaign by HDC to outsource their work to contractors. The sacked workers are demanding reinstatement and back wages and want the company to drop its outsourcing plans.

HDC management claims the workers were not direct employees but hired by a contracting company. The workers, however, say they hold pay slips bearing the HDC name, proving that the company hired them.

Doctors in India protest over assault

Doctors at the Guru Nanak Dev hospital in Amritsar in the Punjab rallied on April 8 in protest against inadequate security at the hospital and the recent assault of a junior doctor. Medical students also boycotted their classes and joined the demonstration.

According to the Junior Doctors Association (JDA), which organised the rally, a patient and two of his friends assaulted the junior doctor after he refused to issue a false medical report. The JDA is demanding medical authorities provide an internal security system at the hospital and medical college premises.

Sri Lankan doctors strike for staff increases

On April 9, doctors at Nuwara Eliya base hospital, in Sri Lanka's hill country, took strike action over low staffing levels. The Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) said

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that the hospital, which conducts 500 operations a month, has only three surgeons and one anesthetist. Nuwara Eliya base hospital is the main hospital in the Central Province and caters for 500 outpatients, 700 inpatients and 500 clinical patients per month. It also provides pediatric services for about 150 children per day.

Australian TV staff strike for pay deal

Workers at television broadcaster SBS walked off the job on April 10 after talks for a 14 percent wage increase broke down. After four months of negotiations, management has offered only 11 percent over three years. Workers are also demanding severance pay for long-term temporary employees, a 25 percent casual work loading and prohibition on solo camera crews.

The strikers picketed the Sydney headquarters of SBS in Artarmon from midday and returned to work at 11pm that night. Camera, technical, studio and editorial staff at the channel's *World News* and *Sports* who joined the current walkout had already taken industrial action on April 6. The workers are members of the Community and Public Sector Union.

NSW bus drivers reject government pay offer

Public sector bus drivers in Sydney and Newcastle rejected the NSW Labor government's latest pay offer in a secret ballot finalised this week. The government and State Transit have dismissed the drivers' claim for a 27 percent pay increase over three years and offered a 10 percent increase over two years.

The union agreed to the secret ballot after calling off a proposed strike. After the vote bus union leaders said that although union members had empowered officials to initiate a 48-hour strike at any time, executive officers would "decide on the appropriate strategy".

Drivers are also opposed to proposed roster changes on some Sydney routes which could reduce average monthly take-home pay by $135. The new rosters were due to start simultaneously with CityRail's new rail timetable on April 21 but this has been postponed due to a shortage of train drivers.

The bus drivers' dispute is currently before the Australian Industrial Relations Commission (IRC). State Transit may request that the IRC end the current enterprise bargaining period, which allows drivers to take legal strike action.

Airline unions continue limited protest stoppages

Over 200 Qantas maintenance workers marched to the company's domestic terminal in Sydney on April 10 demanding a resolution to their national pay dispute by the end of the week. The workers, who have rejected a company demand for an 18-month pay freeze, want a 4 to 5 percent wage increase.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Australian Workers Union (AWU) have been in negotiations with Qantas over the pay issue for almost eight months.

An AWU spokesman said this week that unless Qantas came up with "some sort of real wage increase in the next couple of weeks" the union would escalate the dispute. But over the last eight months the unions have limited maintenance workers' industrial action to a series of protest stoppages designed to minimise disruption to Qantas flights.

Meatworkers lockout continues

The Industrial Relations Commission this week terminated the current enterprise work agreement at Lakes Creek Meatworks in Rockhampton, Queensland. Some 1,350 workers have been locked out of the abattoir since December, when the company refused to reopen after the Christmas break. The company sought to use the lockout to shed jobs and cut working conditions.

The IRC decision came after Lake Creek's owner, the Consolidated Meat Group (CMG), and the Meat Industry Union failed to reach a new agreement in negotiations. CMG's executive chairman has announced that the abattoir would stay closed until further notice.

This week the Queensland Council of Unions (QCU) gave meatworkers just $5,000 for their campaign against the lockout. The QCU secretary claimed this pittance, which amounts to less than $3.70 per worker, would provide "some relief to workers who are doing it tough".

Union calls off New Zealand meatworks strike

A strike by 120 trades people at six New Zealand South Island meatworks was called off this week after the Engineers' Union reached a last minute agreement with the Primary Producers Cooperative Society on April 10.

Strike action at plants in Marlborough, Canterbury, Belfast, Harewood, Ashburton and Balclutha, was due to start just after midnight. Had the action gone ahead it would have closed the meatworks at the height of the killing season.

The workers claim their pay has fallen to more than $3 an hour below that paid to employees with similar skills in other industries. The settlement, which remains "confidential", is yet to be ratified by the full workforce. Engineers' Union delegates are recommending workers accept it.

Workers locked out at New Zealand cable-making plant

Some 250 workers at Generalcable, Christchurch's largest manufacturing plant, were locked out on April 10 after striking for a pay rise.

The trades and production staff walked off the job for 24 hours in protest against a company pay offer. The workers were seeking a 4 percent pay rise in line with the increase being paid at Olex in New Plymouth, the country's only other cable making company. Generalcable offered only 2 percent and refused to conduct further negotiations on the issue. The locked out workers are now picketing outside the plant.

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