

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

20 April 2002

Ten million Indian workers strike against economic restructuring

On April 16 more than 10 million public sector and finance employees in India staged a one-day strike against privatisation and labour reforms. The biggest-ever industrial action against the Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government's "anti-labour policies" shut down factories and banks and virtually paralysed financial markets and ports across the country. All the major trade unions except the Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), which is affiliated to main opposition Congress party, took part in the strike.

The stoppage followed cabinet approval of changes to a 55-year-old law, making it easier to lay off employees. Workers fear that the legislation, to be introduced in the current parliamentary session, will lead to big job losses in a country where there is no social security.

According to Centre of the Indian Trade Unions (CITU) general secretary Gurudas Dasgupta "workers have not reported in more than 220 state-run firms." In India's commercial hub of Bombay, thousands of bank employees rallied in the business district to protest against "anti-worker policies", while in the capital, New Delhi, workers crying "Down, down reforms" marched on parliament.

Disruption was considerable in some cities. Life in Calcutta came to a near halt with shops shut and taxis and buses off the road. In Madras nearly 30,000 employees of the public sector Neyveli Lignite Corporation went on strike, affecting power generation. Police resorted to a baton charge to disperse a slogan-shouting group of strikers. Although "essential" services such as telecommunications and railways were exempted from the strike, the government virtually accepted that the strike was successful in almost all other public sector enterprises, including banking, oil, power, electronics and coal.

Workers are irate over the government's plans to push ahead with privatisation to breathe new life into India's 11-year-old sell-off program. Port workers oppose, in particular, a government plan to "corporatise" ports, which would make them independent companies instead of government trusts, as a step toward privatisation.

The BJP-led government plans to raise 120 billion rupees (\$US2.45 billion) from the sale of state-run firms in 2002-03 and aims to sell off companies in the petroleum, telecom, metal and automobile sectors.

Trade union demonstrations and rallies called for the removal of

Finance Minister Yashwant Sinha, blaming him for "all the ills" of the economy. Dasgupta and other union leaders demanded Sinha's dismissal as a precondition to the "reversal of the anti-labour and other policies dictated by the multi-nationals and superpowers, adversely affecting the economy and the working class".

Pakistan government employees strike for an allowance

Civil secretariat and other government employees in Quetta in Pakistan struck on April 15, demanding a 40 percent special allowance. Government departments were brought to a standstill. According to the strikers, public servants from grade 1 to 15 have been denied the newly introduced special allowance.

Government doctors in Sri Lanka strike against assault

Doctors at Colombo's National Hospital staged a strike on April 15 to protest over an assault on an accident service doctor by people who accompanied a patient to be admitted. Almost all hospital services were halted. The doctors have demanded the arrest of those connected to the attack and the removal of unauthorised shops around the hospital.

Indonesian shoe factory workers rally for better wages

Thousands of labourers of PT Truba Raya trading, the producer of FILA shoes, this week staged a rally in Ciawa, Bogor, demanding the company raise their pay to the new provincial minimum wage and stop imposing income tax on their wages. More than 3,000 workers at the factory receive only 417,000 rupiah per month. After income tax, they are paid approximately \$US42.30. The provincial minimum is 576,000 rupiah (\$US60.50).

Truba Raya management is crying poor, claiming that it cannot afford to pay higher wages because shoe orders have decreased by 50 percent. But one worker said: "Who said the orders are decreasing? We have to work overtime all the time, even on Sundays, to fulfill the orders."

Australian power workers oppose privatisation

About 400 Pacific Power and Pacific Power International workers took strike action on April 18 against the New South Wales government's planned part-privatisation of the state-owned electricity company. Meetings were held in Sydney and Newcastle earlier this week to endorse the stoppage. Workers returned to work on April 19 but further industrial action is planned. The state government will meet with unions to discuss the sell-off.

Refinery workers stay on strike

Eighty contract maintenance workers at the Caltex oil refinery in Brisbane, who have been on strike since April 9, voted this week to extend their industrial action until April 23. The workers are

demanding substantial increases in their pay and conditions. Maintenance staff at other Australian refineries earn as much as \$100 more per week than those at Caltex operations. The workers, who can be laid off with little notice, also want income protection insurance and guaranteed protection of their entitlements—such as long service leave and redundancy payments.

The workers struck in March but returned to work following assurances from their union, the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union, that a settlement would soon be reached. Subsequent negotiations with the company broke down.

Maintenance workers strike over pay deal

Three hundred Canon photocopier service technicians took strike action for 24 hours on April 16 in Sydney and for a half day in Melbourne, Brisbane and Perth. The action followed a breakdown in negotiations between the company and the Australian Services Union over a new wage and conditions agreement. The workers are demanding a \$41 per week increase in pay and better redundancy packages. The technicians picketed Canon Australia's Sydney headquarters in the inner city in support of their demands.

Unofficial strikes by New Zealand teachers spread

Teachers at more than 55 secondary schools in Auckland began the first week of the new term on April 15 with ongoing unofficial strike action in their push for better pay and conditions. They were joined on April 17 by teachers in the Canterbury region. The teachers are protesting against both the Labour-Alliance government and their union, the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA). The two parties, who have been in mediated talks for the past two weeks, had previously agreed on a settlement package that was rejected in a national ballot by union members.

This week's action saw successive year levels of students rostered home each day after staff refused to teach them. The teachers expressed frustration that rolling strikes planned by the PPTA, which are not due to begin until the third week of term, are an inadequate response to the government's failure to agree to a new pay deal.

Teachers are demanding a significant increase on the 3.5 per cent pay rise and three "non-contact" hours per week offered in the rejected package. Education Minister Trevor Mallard said the government would not be "blackmailed into blowing the budget", and appealed to teachers to "show more confidence in their [union] executive".

Union prepares cuts to jobs and conditions at New Zealand mill

Union officials and Carter Holt Harvey (CHH) management have spent the last week negotiating redundancies and cuts to conditions at the Kinleith pulp and paper mill. Last month CHH announced it planned to eliminate more than half the mill's 772-strong workforce in order to cut costs.

The main union at the plant, the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), initially promised workers that it would fight the job cuts. When workers met to consider a response to the company's plans, union delegates told them to remain calm while a "battle plan" was put in place.

It is clear, however, that the EPMU is not only negotiating over how best to implement the job cuts, it also intends to break down the conditions of the remaining workforce. According to EPMU

national secretary Andrew Little, the union spent several days this week talking to CHH about "the restructuring and workers' employment contract terms and conditions". Little said they hoped to have made "progress" by the middle of next week.

New Zealand nurses protest against overcrowding

Nurses working for the Auckland Mental Health Service are refusing to admit patients unless hospitals have beds and staff available. The nurses say they have a chronic overcrowding problem, which is dangerous to both themselves and their patients, and are warning lives may be lost. Hospital administrators have publicly supported the nurses' action, saying the Auckland service is 30 per cent under funded by the government. Meanwhile, it was announced on April 12 that at least 70 management positions are to be cut by the Auckland District Health Board in an effort to reduce costs and "streamline" services.

New Zealand university staff escalate action

Staff at Victoria University in Wellington are planning to withhold mid-year exam results, the latest escalation in their long-running pay dispute. University staff went on strike on March 27 and 28, and last week authorised industrial action up to an indefinite withdrawal of examination results. While staff are prepared to accept a 3.2 percent pay rise offered by the university, they want some of the management's claims, including an alteration to the term of the contract, dropped.

Last week, Massey University staff voted at a series of union meetings to send the latest offer from their employer to formal ratification meetings. The offer includes a 3.5 percent salary increase backdated to January 2002 and continuation of collective bargaining procedures.

Striking Fiji paramedics return to work on a promise

Two hundred striking paramedics who walked off their jobs on April 15 returned to work on April 17 after the Public Service Commission and the Fiji Public Service Association (FPSA) signed an agreement to review their pay structure and to look at grievances dating back to 1997. A committee is to complete the review within three months.

The two-day strike affected medical services around the country. One striking nurse said the authorities had assured them back in May 2000 that their demands would be met but "there is still no sign of any improvement."

The Labour minister is seeking to intimidate the paramedics by declaring the strike illegal and referring the matter to the Director of Public Prosecutions. He has given the FPSA seven days to reply on why the union should not be deregistered.



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