

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

4 May 2002

## Japanese workers rally against unemployment

An estimated 900,000 Japanese workers took part in trade union May Day rallies around the country on Saturday, April 27. The focus of the rallies was a denunciation of the steadily rising unemployment in Japan. Officially, 3.79 million workers are unemployed, or 5.2 percent of the workforce. It is believed that the real figure—if the unemployed who are excluded from the official statistics are included—is at least double.

Some 100,000 people took part in the main rally in Tokyo, with large rallies in Osaka and other regional cities. In Tokyo, speakers from the trade union federation Rengo made demagogic threats against the right-wing government of Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi if it did not act to revive Japan's recession-stricken economy. Rengo president Kiyoshi Sasamori told the rally: "I will demand the administration be changed unless it hears the voice of the people."

Last year, however, Rengo invited Koizumi to address the May Day event and promoted him. This year, the union body used the rallies to promote the opposition Democratic Party, which advocates even harsher economic restructuring and austerity than is being implemented by Koizumi. Such is the alienation and disgust of workers with Rengo that its affiliated unions now cover just over 20 percent of the workforce, compared with more than one-third 25 years ago.

Rengo holds its May Day action on the first day of the "Golden Week" holidays—a string of public holidays from the end of April to early May—rather than on May 1. A rally on May Day itself attracted over 35,000 workers in Tokyo.

## Thai workers demand end to privatisation

Over 3,000 members of the Labour Coordinating Centre and the State Enterprises Labour Relations Confederation blocked the road in front of Government House in Bangkok on May Day. The protestors demanded the government of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra stop the privatisation of state enterprises and introduce a social security scheme by the end of this month. The protestors also called for an increase in the daily minimum wage and a debt write-off for farmers who are suffering losses from investment in agricultural projects promoted by the state.

The demonstrators burned banners bearing the logos of the Asian Development Bank, the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organisation, which are pushing the Thai government to carry out privatisations in order to create opportunities for private investors.

The government promised to establish an unemployment relief fund before its term of office ends in 2005 but has so far refused to give a specific timeframe. It is also moving to privatise 19 state enterprises over the next three years, including the Communications Authority, the Telephone Organisation, the Electricity Generating Authority, Thai Airways International and Krung Thai Bank.

## Indonesian bus strike continues

Eighty bus drivers who ply the route between Ampla and Pinang Baris in North Sumatra are continuing the strike they began on April 25. The drivers are opposing a decision by the Medan local government to increase the number of buses on the route. The move will increase

competition and drive down drivers' income.

The drivers are also demanding the end of an unofficial levy. One of the strikers explained that for the last 20 months, drivers have been forced to pay between 13,000 rupiah (\$US1.30) and 15,000 rupiah (\$1.60) every day to a foreman appointed by Medan Bus—the company that leases them the vehicles. The illegal levy is on top of the official 5,000 rupiah daily fee collected by the company.

In a separate dispute, 300 public minivan drivers working the Warung Jambu to Ramayana route in Bogor Utara protested in at the regional police headquarters on April 29 to demand an end to police extortion.

The drivers claim that police officers had been involved in a scam for over two months demanding a daily tax of 1,000 rupiah in return for "immunity stickers". The police officers warned that only vehicles with the stickers displayed on their front window would be exempt from minor traffic violations when stopped by the police. One driver said although they pay for stickers, "we still get tickets and have to pay the fine".

## Indian plantation workers establish road blockade

Over 100,000 tea plantation workers in the Valparai district near the western borders of Tamil Nadu have blocked all road access to the area since April 29. The workers are demanding that the plantation owners pay all outstanding back wages.

The plantations tried to reduce the daily wage of \$US1.60, claiming it was necessary because of a fall in tea prices. Following legal action by the unions, the Madras High Court issued an interim stay order and blocked the wage cut until the court issues a final verdict. In retaliation, the owners have withheld wages for the past four months.

## Sri Lankan estate workers demonstrate for a wage increase

Workers employed on tea plantations around Hatton, 150 kilometres from Sri Lanka's capital Colombo, demonstrated on April 28 for a wage increase. Defying a police order, the workers marched through to the town's central square, where they burnt a copy of the collective agreement signed between the union leaders and plantation owners in 2000 freezing wages. The workers demanded that the union not sign similar agreements in the future.

## Auto component strike ends in Australia

On April 30, 400 workers at car exhaust manufacturer Walker Australia in Adelaide accepted a union recommendation to return to work and end their 12-day strike. The workers walked off the job on April 19 in opposition to the company reneging on an agreement last year to establish a trust fund to protect workers' entitlements, such as holiday, long service and severance pay.

The company claimed it agreed to the arrangement only until the government established a national scheme to cover entitlements. The workers have rejected the government scheme because it is capped and will not fully cover entitlements if the company collapses.

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) recommended an end to the strike following an all night meeting with company management. The AMWU rushed into negotiations after the Federal Minister for Employment and Workplace Relations Tony Abbott

threatened to intervene and back legal action for damages from the AMWU. The strike had begun to seriously disrupt the supply of exhaust systems causing threats of widespread stand-downs at the country's four car manufacturers, Ford, Holden, Toyota and Mitsubishi.

The company has only agreed to cover entitlements by taking out a bank draft, rather than by the more reliable method of placing funds directly into a trust fund.

#### **Rail maintenance workers strike over agreement breach**

About 300 maintenance workers at the Maintrain workshops in Sydney struck for 48 hours from May 2, claiming the company has breached an agreement to protect workers' entitlements. The workers, who maintain the NSW passenger train fleet, went on strike for seven weeks last year to demand the company join Manusafe, a union-backed trust fund.

The State Labor government called in former Prime Minister, Bob Hawke to broker a deal and end the strike when it threatened to impact on passenger services. The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union dropped its demand that the company join Manusafe and substantially reduced its wage claim. Under the agreement the State government allowed Maintrain to use an existing \$5.5 million bank guarantee set up by the company to ensure performance schedules, to cover workers' entitlements. The company also promised to establish permanent arrangements with a designated trust fund by January 1. It has not done so.

The Maintrain workers will return to work on May 6 and hold a site meeting that afternoon to determine further action.

#### **Sydney ferry workers strike for superannuation increase**

A 24-hour strike on April 29 halted government-run ferry and JetCat services between Manly and Sydney, forcing State Transit to move hundreds of passengers by bus. The strike, by members of the Australian Institute of Marine and Power Engineers (AIMPE), went ahead after negotiations with State Transit for a five percent superannuation increase broke down on April 27. A last minute meeting failed to resolve the issue.

Other ferry services, operated by members of the Australian Maritime Officers Union (AMOU), could be hit by strikes over the same issue within days. The AMOU has given the State government until May 9 to grant the increase or it will begin industrial action alongside the AIMPE.

#### **Queensland meat workers forced to accept wage cuts**

This week, 1,300 workers at the Lakes Creek meat works in Rockhampton returned to work on terms dictated by the company, following a recommendation by the Australian Meat Industry Employee's Union (AMIEU).

The workers have been locked out since December when the abattoir's owners, the Consolidated Meat Group (CMG), refused to restart operations following the annual Christmas break. Citing financial problems caused by falling beef prices, CMG demanded the workforce accept substantial cuts in wage rates and working conditions.

The return-to-work agreement will see workers placed on Federal Award conditions, resulting in wage cuts of up to \$320 a week. The annual after-tax wage for an experienced boner last year was \$38,000; it will now drop to just \$30,000.

Despite attempts by local workers and residents to rally support behind the locked out workers, the AMIEU worked to contain the dispute and refused to organise any substantial backing from other workers. The lack of industrial and financial assistance left the Lakes Creek workers facing considerable hardship and created the conditions for the return to work on the company's terms. Media-publishing billionaire Kerry Packer is a major shareholder in the Consolidated Meat Group.

#### **Aged care nurses demand improved conditions**

Nurses employed at three Lutheran aged-care homes in Queensland went on strike for three hours on April 30 and marched through the Brisbane suburb of Milton to the Lutheran Church headquarters. The nurses, who work at the Nundah, Trinder Park, and Gold Coast homes, are demanding a wage increase in line with the wage rates paid in the public

health system. They are also demanding increased staffing at all 10 Lutheran aged-care establishments. Aged care homes in Queensland are experiencing serious staff shortages because of poor pay and working conditions.

#### **Emerald nurses impose work bans**

Nurses working in the Queensland mining town of Emerald imposed bans this week to oppose a shortage of midwives and unsafe workloads. The Emerald Hospital should have seven full-time registered nurses to cover midwifery shifts at the hospital. There are only five. The nurses are also concerned that there is only one registered nurse on duty in the accident and emergency department after hours and on weekends.

#### **New Zealand mental health nurses escalate action**

Mental health nurses in Auckland are taking industrial action over bed shortages in psychiatric units throughout the region. The staff at the Te Atarau Unit in west Auckland will stop working when wards become overcrowded. Similar action by nurses at North Shore's Taharoto Unit in March forced management to increase staff and restrict patient admissions.

The nurses say that the overcrowding jeopardises their safety and they will refuse to admit any more patients unless the government increases funding and improves conditions. The lack of room in psychiatric units in the region has meant that many suffering mental illnesses have been temporarily held in police cells.

#### **New Zealand teachers resume strikes**

Teachers in Hutt Valley, central Northland, Waikato and Thames Valley walked off the job on April 30 as part of a campaign for higher pay and better working conditions. The action was followed by similar stoppages in other regions on May 1 and May 2.

The industrial action went ahead despite a compromise draw up by the Post Primary Teachers Association (PPTA) that was endorsed by 74 percent of the membership in union-conducted branch surveys last week. The compromise proposal contains a national qualifications allowance of \$3,500 over three years, in addition to the original 3.5 percent pay rise over two years offered by the government. The government is yet to endorse the union deal.

Further work stoppages are scheduled in designated regions on May 7 and May 9 followed by a second round of rolling strikes beginning June 4.

#### **New Zealand nurses reject pay offer**

About 4,500 nurses, midwives and caregivers have rejected pay rises of up to 4 percent offered by Auckland's three district health boards. In a proposed three-year deal, the boards offered annual increases of 4 percent, 2 percent and 2 percent to experienced nurses and midwives with the offer for most enrolled nurses and caregivers was 3 percent, 2 percent and 2 percent.

A spokesman for the Nurses Organisation (NZNO) said that 96 percent of the nurses who attended ratification meetings in late April had voted to reject the offer. Nurses complained that the proposed contract term was too long, the salary increase was not fully backdated was inadequate to address the staff shortages affecting the public health sector. The NZNO will now resume negotiations with the Auckland, Waitemata and Counties Manukau boards.

#### **New Zealand university staff accept pay deal**

Members of the Association of University Staff (AUS) at Lincoln University voted on April 24 to ratify the authority's offer for a collective employment agreement. The offer is for an immediate 3 percent salary increase, a further 2 percent from 2 January 2, 2003, and a commitment to a further negotiated increase from April 1, 2003. Lincoln staff reluctantly accepted the offer that falls far short of what is necessary to make up for a decade of salary erosion.



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