

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 April 2003

## Jakarta bus workers strike against asset sale

Some 3,000 bus drivers, conductors and other staff at the state-owned Jakarta Transportation (PPD) went on strike on April 9 after holding a rally the previous day outside the State Palace and the Ministry of Finance.

Strikers called on management to drop plans to divest assets that will lead to job losses and want Jakarta City administration to take control of the company. Currently, authority over PPD financial affairs lies with the Ministry of Finance, operations with the Ministry of Transportation and management control with the State Minister for State Enterprises.

An employee spokesman said that workers “suspect PPD is being used as a cash cow” by the government. He said the government disbursed 203.6 billion rupiah (\$US22.8 million) in subsidies between 1996 and 2001, “but we have yet to see any improvements in worker welfare, let alone new buses”. PPD’s 751 buses are more than 10-years-old and only 315 are roadworthy. After years of cutbacks, PPD only services 44 of its 152 original routes.

Workers have also complained that salaries are not paid on time. The January wage was distributed in installments, only half of February was paid, and March salaries are still outstanding. PPD currently employs 5,388 staff.

## Indonesian workers demand improved welfare

About 900 factory workers at PT Hancock Ceramics Indonesia in Tangerang went on strike for two days on April 4 demanding an improvement in welfare benefits and a transport allowance. The workers held protest rallies over three days prior to walking off the job.

Printing department employees began the rallies. While their main concern was for improved welfare, they were also bitter because management refused to honour a promise to provide a daily glass of milk. The milk is required to offset the effect of certain printing chemicals.

## Factory fire in China

A fire at the Qingdao Chia Tai company in eastern China’s Shandong province claimed the lives of 21 workers this week. About 500 employees were in the plant when the blaze broke out and the building collapsed. Around 2,395 workers died in industrial fires in China in 2002. Not counting mining deaths, 100 workers were killed in industrial accidents in China last month.

## Pakistani police attack protesting government workers

On April 7, police in Peshawar fired tear gas and baton-charged a demonstration by hundreds of local government and rural development employees protesting over the non-payment of their salaries for March. At least 10 demonstrators required hospital treatment.

Workers attempted to march on the chief minister’s secretariat building to present a statement of demands but were blocked by the large contingent of armed police. Employees later assembled outside the Peshawar District Government building to condemn the heavy-handed police action.

Chanting workers drowned out a district government official who attempted to address the rally and apologise for the police attack. The

angry demonstration decided to cut off water supply in protest against the assault and to demand suspension of police officials responsible. Union leaders, however, put off the action for two days to allow discussions.

## Pakistani university teachers fight against government privatisation plans

Pakistani university professors and lecturers held a national hunger strike on April 5 against education privatisation plans.

In Karachi, a hunger strike, which included senior professors from a number of city colleges, as well as from Sanghar and Sukkur, was held at the Government Islamia Arts and Commerce College. The Sindh Professors and Lecturers Association also called for a 100 percent salary increase and improved rent assistance for college teachers.

Similar protests were held in other provincial capitals, including Lahore, Quetta, Peshawar and Muzaffarabad. In Punjab province, university teachers also demanded the immediate reinstatement of seven of their colleagues and a doctor sacked by the authorities.

## Indian power workers strike against privatisation

Some 16,000 power workers and engineers in the Indian state of Bihar went on strike on April 7 to oppose power industry privatisation. They staged a *dharna* (sit-in protest) outside the state electricity board headquarters in Patna, the state capital. Protest rallies were also held at power sub-stations throughout the state.

Demonstrators chanted slogans against reintroduction of the Electricity Bill 2001 into parliament. The legislation is aimed at corporatising the remaining state electricity boards (SEBs) and providing the legal framework for their privatisation. Indian states previously had to enact a bill in their legislatures before privatisation could proceed.

## Sri Lankan doctors strike

Doctors at government hospitals across Sri Lanka went on strike on April 3 to protest against delays in resolving salary anomalies. Medical services at most hospitals, except emergency treatment, were brought to a standstill.

Even though the government agreed that salary anomalies exist, no steps have been taken to resolve the problem, a spokesman for the Government Medical Officers Association told the media.

## Sri Lankan Technical Officers demonstrate for improvements

Government Technical Officers began a “sick note” campaign on April 2 and rallied in central Colombo. They are demanding amendments to their salary structures to eliminate anomalies and an end to the delays in promotions and filling job vacancies.

Technical officers had planned to march on the Treasury but were stopped by police halfway. Technical Services Trade Union Federation leaders, however, managed to hand a letter containing the demands to Treasury authorities.

## Australian scrap-metal workers fight for improved working conditions

A dispute by 60 workers at scrap dealer Simsmetal, in Melbourne’s west, is continuing. Last week the workers established a picket outside the main gate after two-month long negotiations for a new enterprise work

agreement stalled. Three other company sites in Victoria are being picketed.

Employees want a seven percent pay increase, safer work conditions and an inclement weather policy. They are also demanding long service be granted after 10 years service instead of 15, parental leave and improved conditions for shift workers. The company has only offered a five percent pay increase with some improvements in the redundancy scheme. While the union considered the offer “reasonable under any other circumstances”, the workforce rejected it.

Simsmetal workers often handle items containing asbestos and dangerous gases. Ten years ago two workers were killed in an explosion at the company. There is an investigation into the dumping of radioactive scrap at the yard.

Several young workers spoke to WWSW. Dustin said he had found asbestos chunks up to 10 centimetres square. “Time after time we have picked off large bits of asbestos. The company has tested only once and we’ve never seen the results”. Another worker, Robert, said: “You never know what’s in there because it just all goes right through. We have explosions of not just gas, but ammunition. You see different coloured smoke and fumes. We’ve also had ammonia brought in. I know this because I felt dizzy and sick afterwards.”

#### **Union calls off protracted miners’ strike**

On April 8, the Australian Workers’ Union called off a 17-day strike by 120 miners at Pasminco’s Eloura mine in the western New South Wales town of Cobar. The workers walked out because of uncertainty over their future, after the company decided to sell the mine to Consolidated Broken Hill and put it in the hands of an administrator.

Strikers wanted to know how many workers would be retained, when the sale would occur, and if they would receive full entitlements if they were laid off. The strike was ended even though Pasminco’s administrator, Ferrier Hodgson, failed to provide any assurances and merely agreed to allow the issue to go to the Industrial Relations Commission (IRC).

#### **Talks fail to end New Zealand mill dispute**

Talks between the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and Carter Holt Harvey (CHH)-owned Kinleith pulp and paper mill management failed this week to end a five-week strike by production workers.

The 270 mill workers walked out after attempting for more than two years to secure a collective agreement. In January, CHH sacked half the 700-strong workforce and moved to impose new work conditions to make the mill “internationally competitive”. This included elimination of overtime payments and a progression clause linking increased skills with higher pay. Workers have rejected the changes and are demanding an 11 percent pay rise.

Last week, striking workers picketed the mill’s rail entrance to prevent products being moved out. While Tranz Rail drivers refused to take trains through the picket, citing health and safety risks, their employers have sought a court injunction ordering them to break the picketline. A welfare fund has been established and other pulp and paper workers are being approached for support.

#### **New Zealand shop staff stage protest**

Shop workers at the Nelson branch of H & J Smith walked off the job on April 2 in protest against the company’s South Island management and called on other employees in the department store chain to follow suit. The workers whistled, chanted and held placards outside the store during the protest.

Union delegate Sylvia Gregory said workers were striking because management intended to renege on a collective contract agreement that had been under negotiation for two years. She accused the company of trying to “claw back” terms and conditions. With the collective agreement due to be renewed, management wants to deny long-awaited pay increases

and change the bargaining process to give it more control. H & J Smith’s five Southland stores are also likely to be hit by strikes during April.

#### **New Zealand university staff prepare national action**

Teaching and support staff at New Zealand’s seven universities are preparing an industrial campaign for a collective work contract. The Association of University Staff (AUS) has already begun membership meetings to discuss the campaign, in line with an annual conference decision to seek a multi-employer collective contract.

The Public Services Association (PSA) and Association of Staff in Tertiary Education (ASTE) also flagged support for the campaign. They will ballot their members in June. Until now, universities have only bargained individually with staff. This week a Vice-Chancellors’ Committee spokesman rejected the proposed change, declaring that contract agreements deals were the “domain of individual universities”.

#### **Staff and communities protest rural school closures**

Teachers, students and supporters from five New Zealand rural primary schools earmarked for closure protested outside parliament in Wellington on April 8. Teachers and support staff from the targeted schools—Opunake Primary, Oaonui, Te Kiri, Pihama and Riverlea—earlier held stop-work meetings against the government closure plan. The five schools are to be replaced with two.

The closures mean that all the staff will be laid off and school boards shut down. The primary teachers’ union, the NZ Educational Institute (NZEI), has ruled out an industrial and political campaign to defend the schools. Instead, it is calling for a negotiated “restructuring” process involving the union.

The NZEI is not opposed to school “reorganisation”, so long as it is done on the basis of mergers deemed by the union to be “fair and transparent”. More than 50 schools are currently involved in network “reviews”, with the Labour government adamant that the present number of schools is “unsustainable”.

#### **Union leader arrested in Tahiti**

Police arrested French Polynesian Pierre Frébault, secretary of the Workers Union Confederation CSTP/FO union in Tahiti on April 4. He was detained over an incident in which workers seized executives from Bouygues, a French construction company, during a strike at a hospital building site last year.

In November, about 100 union members at the Taaone hospital construction site went on strike after the company threatened to close the project and sack 140 workers. Unionists established roadblocks at the capital Pape’ete’s two main access roads, preventing executives leaving the site. Frébault claims he was not consulted on the workers’ action.

Bouygues has been in dispute with French Polynesia’s government over the hospital site since last year. While the company is reported to have withdrawn from the project, French Polynesia’s President Gaston Flosse insists the hospital will be completed “no matter what”. Although Bouygues complied with a court ruling last year to reinstate the sacked workers it is now saying it will dismiss its entire 340-strong workforce in Tahiti.

#### **Nouméa public servants protest increase in pension contributions**

Over a 1,000 public servants demonstrated in Nouméa on April 4 against proposed changes to the current retirement scheme.

They were protesting against local government plans for a 73 percent rise in employee contributions to their pension plan. Government officials claim the increase is to overcome a \$US30 million deficit in the current retirement system. Last year’s deficit was partly caused by a sharp drop in the number of contributors.

Rather than demanding the government make up the short fall, Force Ouvrière union secretary Jean-Claude Nègre suggested that it incorporate contributions from metropolitan French public servants on short-term contracts into the local system.



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