

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

3 April 2004

## **Anti-privatisation demonstrators rally outside Thailand's stock exchange**

More than 1,000 workers from five state enterprises rallied outside the Stock Exchange of Thailand (SET) on March 31 to protest against the government's privatisation plans. The protestors carried a wreath emblazoned with the slogan "Not for sale," and signs calling for the dismissal of Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

The workers came from the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat), the Metropolitan Electricity Generating Authority, the Provincial Electricity Generating Authority, the Metropolitan Waterworks Authority and the Provincial Waterworks Authority.

They also denounced SET president Kittiratt Na Ranong, who appeared on a television talk show the previous week to voice support for the sale of key government-owned utilities. Demonstrations against the privatisations have continued for more than 37 days.

## **Sacked Chinese workers threaten suicide**

Workers laid off from the former state-owned Guangzhou Hotel in Guangdong are demanding that the management pay their outstanding pension benefits and honour a promise to purchase retirement insurance for them. The hotel's new private owners have already dismissed 628 staff since last year and will soon terminate the work contracts of the remaining 1,000 employees.

This week, about two dozen of the workers threatened to jump from the roof of the 63-story Guangdong Trust and Investment Corp building, which houses the hotel, unless their demands are met. As protestors left the roof to use toilets, they were grabbed by police and not allowed to return. Representatives of the laid-off workers have taken their complaints to the Guangzhou provincial government but it has refused to intervene.

## **Indonesian workers rally for reinstatement**

About 2,000 laid-off employees from the state-owned aerospace firm PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) protested on March 26 outside the West Java High Court in Indonesia. The workers called on the president of the court to uphold a lower court verdict last month instructing the company to reinstate 6,651 workers it sacked illegally last year.

Reinstatement is being held up while the PTDI management appeals against the court's ruling. At the rally, the chairman of the workers' union denounced the High Court for being slow to act.

## **Long hours blamed for East Timor death**

East Timor Maritime and Transport Union (UMTTL) secretary Jose da Costa this week alleged that long hours and poor training caused the death of a worker on March 17 at the Port of Dili. The worker, employed by stevedoring company Perkins, was crushed by a container while unloading an Indonesian ship. He had been working 19 hours straight before the accident.

Costa said it was normal practice for Perkins to force employees to work double shifts when a ship was in port. Perkins pays workers in Dili around \$US1 an hour.

## **Pakistani sanitation workers fight for back pay**

Sanitation workers in Nawabshah, Sindh province, went on strike on March 30, demanding the payment of two months' outstanding salary. Workers walked out on strike in February over the same issue.

The current strike has resulted in garbage piling up in many areas of the city and sewage spilling onto roads and streets. According to the officials of the municipal council, it is unable to meet salaries on time because of a shortage of funds.

## **Pakistani teachers demonstrate for allowance**

Primary school teachers in the Dadu district of Pakistan demonstrated on March 29 to demanding the payment of eight months of outstanding travel allowances. During the rally, a union spokesman said the allowance had been denied to teachers and the lower staff of the department. He warned that the protest campaign would continue until their demand was met.

## **Indian school staff strike**

Striking teachers and non-teaching staff from government-aided schools in the state of Kamataka rallied outside the education deputy commissioners' office in Dharwad on March 27. The striking school staff demanded the payment of two months' salary still owing to them.

Before the rally, the protestors marched to the offices of the Joint Commissioner for Public Instructions and the Joint Director of Collegiate Education to present their demands.

According to the Chief Executive Officer of the Zila Panchayat, the organisation responsible for paying salaries, the government has not released the required funds needed to make the payment. The authorities have now promised to pay by April 10.

## **Sri Lankan health workers on sick note campaign**

Health workers in the Matale district of Sri Lanka's Central province reported in sick on March 29, demanding the same pay increase recently granted to other health workers. While hospitals that come under the national government were paid the pay increase in January, hospitals and health establishments under Central province administration have not yet received it. The workers struck on March 24 over the same issue.

The main Central province hospitals in Matale and Dambulla, 160 kilometres and 148 kilometres from Colombo respectively, along with other health establishments in the area, came to a standstill as workers stayed away from their workplaces.

## **Australian university staff strike for pay increase**

Academic and general staff at Sydney's Macquarie University walked off the job for 24 hours on March 31 in a dispute over a new

wages and conditions agreement. The employees are demanding a 15 percent pay increase over three years, in line with increase recently awarded at Sydney University.

The National Tertiary Education Union has been negotiating with the university's management for a year but has failed to reach an agreement. The union has raised other demands such as the capping of casual staff numbers, career progression for employees and improved management communications with staff.

#### **Construction workers support community picket**

Construction workers refused to cross a community picket line this week at the Aldinga Beach housing development in South Australia. About 50 people, including women and children, gathered at the site to protest against the building of 691 houses. They are concerned that the development will destroy wild life in the area and adversely affect the water table.

Some locals chained themselves to a grader and to the compound fence, but removed the chains when police threatened to lay charges. A spokesman for the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union said workers would not enter the site and will support the community picket until the issue is resolved.

#### **Court upholds reinstatement of sacked Tasmanian meat workers**

On March 30, the Tasmanian meat workers' union demanded that Blue Ribbon Meat Products immediately reinstate 17 workers it sacked last year for refusing to become independent contractors. The union made the demand the same day as the Supreme Court rejected appeals by the company and its labour hire firm, Newemploy, to overturn a Tasmanian Industrial Relations Commission decision last October ordering reinstatement.

A spokesman for the Australasian Meat Industry Employees Union said the 17 men, who were locked out and then sacked last April, are owed nearly 12 months' wages, totalling more than \$500,000.

#### **New Zealand university staff protest over pay**

Staff at Waikato University protested outside the university's administration block last week to demand that the administration sign a multi-employer collective agreement. University workers at the country's seven other universities are also campaigning for the same demand.

University unions and employers have held 14 days of negotiations since August 2003. Academics are seeking a 10 percent annual pay rise for the next three years. General staff want a 10 percent pay increase for the first year, with an increase equalling the Consumer Price Index (CPI) for the following two years. They have rejected pay offers of between 2 and 2.8 percent. The universities have refused to consider a multi-employer agreement. Workers have resolved to strike for one day a week over five weeks from the end of the month if there is no settlement by April 7.

#### **New Zealand resin plant workers on strike**

Workers from the Dynea resin plants in Nelson and New Plymouth went on strike last week in a dispute over pay. They want an increase, plus pay parity for workers at the Nelson plant who earn up to \$10,000 a year less than the New Plymouth staff. Dynea makes resins and glues used in the forestry and boat building industries.

On March 25, the driver of a truck crossing the picket line sped up and drove at a striking worker who was videoing him. The truck came within centimetres of hitting the worker. Other truck drivers have refused to cross the picket lines and the strikers have been receiving strong support from other workers in the region.

#### **NZ council workers reject pay offer**

More than 70 Hamilton City Council workers downed tools on March 24 and voted against accepting a council pay offer. They warned they were prepared to take industrial action if pay talks failed. They also rejected a proposal to introduce shift-work and abandon penalty rates. The council has been negotiating with National Distribution Union (NDU) members, mainly parks and gardens and utilities staff, to renew a collective agreement covering about 100 workers. The NDU has taken the dispute into mediation.

#### **New Zealand union settles "Metals" contract**

Workers represented by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) voted to ratify the key "Metals" industry collective agreement in a series of meetings last week. The deal provides for a pay rise of just 2.9 percent for 2,500 manufacturing sector workers in some 220 firms, and is likely to set the trend for many other settlements. On the union's recommendation, a "large majority" of workers in the 43 "original party" companies involved in the negotiations voted to accept the offer.

The agreement falls short of workers' initial demands, which included a 5 percent pay increase, a 37.5 hour working week, longer tea breaks, improved health and safety provisions and tool allowances. The EPMU dropped these demands early in negotiations.

Bargaining to renew the agreement began on February 24 and broke down two days later when employers only offered a 2.5 percent pay rise. Workers then held a series of stop-work meetings, culminating in a mass stop-work meeting in Auckland on March 17, at which more than 600 workers rejected the barely improved pay offer of 2.7 percent.

Union secretary Andrew Little blamed the metals employers for making the bargaining "harder than usual," but claimed "satisfaction" with the 2.9 percent rise.

#### **Solomon Islands public service pay dispute settled**

The Solomon Islands government and the Public Employees Union this week signed an agreement which will deliver a 2.5 percent salary increase, backdated to 2003, plus an 8 percent cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) backdated from 2002.

The agreement comes after a mediation panel ruling in favour of the payments, following repeated strike threats last year. In an unprecedented move during the dispute, the Australian High Commissioner to the Solomon Islands, Patrick Cole, summoned the general secretary of the Solomon Islands Public Employees Union, Clement Waiwori, to the High Commission in order to pressure him to drop the wage claim.

The union's original demand was for a 5 percent pay increase and a 45 percent COLA. Public servants have not received a pay rise since 1996.



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