

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

17 April 2004

## **Cambodian hotel workers ordered back to work**

On April 13, Cambodia's Arbitration Council ordered more than 1,000 hotel workers to return to work after it assumed jurisdiction over a long-running dispute. The workers, employed at four luxury hotels across the country, went on strike on April 5, demanding the restoration and proper distribution of a 10 percent service charge that was abolished earlier this year.

The service charge, which was paid by clients instead of giving tips, was shared between all staff and formed a substantial part of their earnings. Hotel workers in Cambodia are paid an average monthly wage of just \$US75. The strike erupted when hotel owners rejected an earlier arbitration ruling instructing them to reinstate the service charge and distribute 100 percent of the proceeds to employees.

While workers at two hotels were allowed back on the job, the management at the other two prevented staff from beginning their shifts. The hotels in question are waiting for the dispute to go to another round of arbitration on April 21 before considering allowing a return to work. During the dispute, police and the management continually harassed the striking workers and their union president received a death threat.

## **Filipino unions call rally for national pay rise**

Six major unions based in the city of Bacolod have grouped under the banner of Wage Increase Solidarity (WINS) to campaign for an increase in the minimum wage for 36 million Filipino workers. The current minimum daily wage is 180 pesos (\$US3.20). WINS is demanding an across-the-board increase of 125 peso (\$US2.20). The minimum wage has not been increased since January 2001.

WINS supporters will campaign at the Department of Labor (Dole) on April 15 to collect 10,000 signatures on a petition supporting its demand. A mass rally has been called for May 1 at the Bacolod Public Plaza.

## **Indonesian hospital workers demand improvements**

Over 200 workers at the Cipto Mangunkusumo General Hospital in Central Jakarta demonstrated in front of the hospital's emergency ward on April 14, against the management's refusal to honour a promise to improve workers' remuneration.

A hospital spokesman said the workers, who were representing the entire hospital staff, had agreed to end the demonstration after the management promised to act on the issue.

## **Industrial accidents in China cause multiple deaths**

Twelve workers died on April 10 after being electrocuted on a construction site at Guangdong Zhongrun Steel in Jieyang City, in China's southern Guangdong province. A number of workers were removing an iron-framed work shed when it came into contact with high-tension overhead power lines. Four other workers were injured in the incident.

According to one report, the accident occurred because the distance between the work surface and the power lines had been reduced to an "illegal level".

Other fatal industrial accidents in China over the past two weeks include an April 8 collision between an oil tanker and a cargo ship on the Yangtze

River, close to the city of Wuhu in east Anhui province, which killed five seafarers. Two workers died in an explosion at a chemical plant in Qingyuan County in the northern province of Hebei on April 12.

## **Indian transport workers oppose privatisation**

Transport workers from the State Transport Corporation in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu staged a sit-in protest on April 12 against the privatisation of bus routes. The protesters gathered in front of the government depot in Ranithottam, Nagercoil.

The workers demanded that the government amalgamate all transport corporations across the state under the Transport Department and retain staff as government employees. There are about 125,000 transport workers employed by the various corporations. Workers began a two-day strike on April 15 to push for their demands.

## **Teachers demand payment of salary arrears**

Teachers and non-teaching staff at government secondary schools and composite junior colleges in the Shimoga district of the southern Indian state of Karnataka demonstrated on April 14. They are demanding salary arrears and the payment of outstanding allowances.

Some 1,200 teaching and non-teaching staff work in 88 secondary schools and composite junior schools. The workers had not been paid their salary since January and allowances have not been paid since 2001.

The demonstrators marched from the office of the Deputy Director of Public Instruction to the Deputy Commissioner's office and staged a sit-down protest at the main entrance.

## **Pakistani teachers fight for log of claims**

Teachers at technical education institutes across Pakistan went on a strike on April 13 over nine demands, including issues related to promotions and transfers. The teachers were from the Government Institute of Commerce, the Government Polytechnic Institute for Printing and Graphic Arts in Lahore and institutes in Shahdara, Samanabad, Allama Iqbal Town, Sargodha, Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar and Fort Abbas.

The striking teachers held protest meetings at their institutions and are threatening to boycott upcoming examinations if their demands are not met.

The strike follows a protest by teachers at government colleges in Bahawalpur, Bahawalnagar and Rahim Yar Khan on April 7. The protest was called to oppose the privatisation of government schools and colleges. The demands also included the lifting of all obstacles to promotions and an end to contract labour.

## **Hospital workers protest police violence**

Hospital workers from the private charitable hospital in Hyderabad in Pakistan struck on April 13 to protest over the arrest and mistreatment of a ward employee.

The worker, Irfan Lal Mohammad, was arrested by the police over the theft of a number of injection vials worth 3,000 rupees (approximately \$US60). According to reports, he was stripped and severely beaten by 10 policemen while in custody on the night of April 12.

Striking workers gathered in the hospital with placards condemning the

actions of the hospital management and police. They demanded the hospital authorities issue an apology to the abused worker and pay him compensation.

#### **Sacked tram drivers to sue over job losses**

More than 30 tram drivers who were sacked by the now defunct M>Tram company are preparing a unfair dismissal case, claiming that they were the victim of a secret deal between management and the tramway division of the Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU).

At least 100 tramway workers, including 60 drivers, were sacked after the announcement by the government last month that Melbourne's other tramway company, Yarra Trams, was taking over the entire system.

The workers claim that they have been singled out because they were behind in their union dues or had suffered from work injuries. A spokesperson for the legal firm McDonald Murholme, which is representing the workers, said: "It appears that the two tram companies and the union have possibly gotten together to engineer some sort of clever termination to leave these people out in the cold."

RTBU tram division secretary Lou Di Gregorio has attacked the workers, claiming that if it were not for the union the company would have sacked more staff. The complicity of the union is shown by the fact that union has not assisted any of the workers in fighting to get their jobs back.

The sackings were in fact codified in the last workplace agreement signed by the union with the companies in January. The agreement stated that the companies would consult with the union over the dismissal of any workers who were excess to requirements.

#### **Labor government threatens use of emergency powers**

Members of the Electrical Trades Union employed by power generating company AGL in Victoria are to strike for 48 hours from April 19 over pay and working conditions. The union has served a notice of its intention to strike on AGL. Other industrial action will include placing limits on reading and servicing domestic meters. AGL supplies power to about 260,000 homes and businesses in Melbourne.

The ETU is demanding a 36-hour working week, the employment of more apprentices, improved safety conditions and a limit on the employment of contractors and outsourcing.

The state Labor government has threatened to invoke emergency powers to stop the strike going ahead. Energy Industries and Resources Minister Theo Theophanous said: "Any breach of the understanding by the unions which would threaten supplies will result in government action."

#### **Tasmanian nurses reject pay offer**

More than 300 public hospital nurses in southern Tasmania unanimously voted this week to reject a pay offer from the state Labor government. The government offered just 21.5 percent over three years and ruled out other demands for improved working conditions.

The nurses' demands include the introduction of specified days off, free of being on call, and a uniform allowance. Meeting at the Royal Hobart Hospital, the nurses endorsed a recommendation to give the government until April 29 to return with an improved offer or face industrial action.

An Australian Nursing Federation spokesperson accused the government of ignoring the issues of recruitment and retention. Launceston General Hospital and North-West Regional Hospital nurses are due to meet and consider the pay offer.

#### **Ambulance workers prepare to fight for log of claims**

Tasmanian ambulance workers, including drivers and paramedics, served notice on the state government this week that they will impose work bans in support of a log of claims that was lodged six months ago.

A Health and Community Services Union spokesman said the union anticipated it would get a response from negotiations that started in February, "but it seems we were lured into a false sense of security because our claim was thrown out of the window".

He said the 27.38 percent pay increase over three years offered by the

government was far less than that being sought by union members. He also claimed the government was refusing to negotiate on sick leave entitlements and staff numbers. Tasmanian ambulance workers get only 96 hours sick leave annually, compared to the 152 hours given to other health workers.

#### **Worker crushed to death by steel load**

Robert Keys, 51, was killed on April 14 at Consolidated Brass Extrusion Manufacturing when a load of steel fell on him. The site plant is situated at Ingleburn, west of Sydney.

All employees at the company were sent home on full pay until April 19 while the New South Wales Work Cover Authority investigates the cause of the accident. Since 2001 the firm, which is part of the Crane Group, has restructured its operation with the loss of up to 300 jobs.

An Australian Workers Union (AWU) spokesman said the union had "raised numerous issues about health and safety risks at Consolidated Extrusions" over the past few years. AWU NSW assistant secretary Matt Thistlethwaite said Keys' death "highlights the need for industrial manslaughter legislation in NSW".

Despite mass demonstrations by construction workers last year over deaths in the construction industry, the NSW Labor government ruled out the introduction of manslaughter laws.

#### **Health workers threaten industrial action over pay**

Australian Capital Territory (ACT) health workers are threatening industrial action over a new wages and conditions agreement. The Health Services Union this week rejected the ACT Labor government's offer of a 7.7 percent increase over three years.

The dispute involves radiation therapists, radiographers, ward assistants and catering staff. In a similar dispute last week, psychiatric nurses and metal health professionals in the ACT placed bans in support of a pay claim

#### **New Zealand university staff to strike over pay**

Academic and general staff at New Zealand's seven universities have voted to strike in support of pay claims and new national collective employment agreements. At a series of meetings held in the past week, staff voted by a 79 percent majority to strike over a five-week period from late April. Five national one-day strikes will take place between April 28 and May 25. Further strike action over five days is foreshadowed for July.

Unions representing more than 7,000 university staff have been in negotiations since October 2003, seeking two collective agreements to replace more than 13 separate enterprise agreements that were negotiated at a local level. Salary claims of up to 10 percent per annum for each of the next three years were filed in an attempt to address long standing national and international pay disparities. Employers have offered salary increases of between 2 and 4 percent and have refused national-based agreements.

Association of University Staff general secretary Helen Kelly blamed university administrations for failing to resist the government funding cuts that have reduced university budgets by 23 percent in real terms over the past decade. She said this had resulted in erosion of salary rates and affected the long-term quality of tertiary education. Kelly, however, is one of several key union officials on the Labour Party's peak policy council and is deeply implicated in the government's assault on public education.



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