

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

24 April 2004

## Indian Telecom workers protest

Workers for the state-owned BSNL Telecom in the southern Indian state of Kerala rallied on April 19 to demand the company continue to recruit the dependents of employees who die while in service.

Speaking at the rally, a union spokesman reported that there were 29 dependents in Kollam district expecting employment at BSNL.

He said that since the government moved to privatise the BSNL, conditions and welfare benefits had been systemically attacked. The government has also moved to impose voluntary and compulsory retirement schemes to lay off workers. New staff recruitment has been suspended and popular communication services have been cut.

## Indian journalists protest against police harassment

Journalists in the north-eastern Indian state of Assam rallied outside the Guwahati Press Club on April 18, demanding a judicial probe into an incident of police harassment. On April 17, police forced a journalist and several other people to kneel down on the road during a routine operation by the elite Black Panther commandos.

The journalist, Kanji Mohan Rai, alleged he had to kneel for nearly 30 minutes even though he had produced his identity card and agreed to be searched.

The rally endorsed a demand from journalists' organisations that the government to take punitive action against the police official. The meeting decided to continue demonstrations and wear black badges while covering the elections for the six national parliamentary seats in the state.

## Indonesian workers demand governor stop plant closure

About 1,800 workers from household appliance company PT Kyung Dong Indonesia (KDI) in Sidoarjo rallied outside the East Java gubernatorial office on April 23 to demand the governor, Imam Utomo, prevent the company's closure.

The protesters, who arrived about mid-morning, carried placards and banners reading, "Uphold justice and pay attention to the plight and rights of workers" and "No to mass dismissal and stop discriminating against workers". The governor refused to speak to a workers' delegation.

In a separate dispute, 1,300 hotel workers also face job losses. Hotel Indonesia and Inna Wisata Hotel in Central Jakarta will close on April 30 as part of a major restructuring by their new

owner, PT Citra Karya Bumi Indah, a subsidiary of the cigarette giant Djarum.

Both hotels ceased taking bookings on April 22. Workers began protests outside the hotels this week.

## Workers demonstrate outside Indonesian High Court

More than 1,000 workers retrenched from state aircraft manufacturer PT Dirgantara Indonesia (PTDI) demonstrated outside the West Java High Court in Bandung on April 19 over its ruling that their sackings were legal. The company sacked some 6,000 PTDI employees last year. The High Court ruling overturned a February decision by the district court that the layoffs were carried out illegally and ordering the workers' reinstatement.

Police at the rally arrested Communication Forum head A.M. Bone and charged him with damaging a state facility. Warrants have been issued against other workers for "vandalism". Police claim they threw objects at the doors and windows of the High Court and "damaged several flowerpots in the office compound".

## Cambodian hotel workers sacked for striking

Workers at six luxury hotels in Cambodia are continuing to demand the re-establishment of a 10 percent service charge. The service charge was paid by hotel clients instead of giving individual tips, and constituted a significant portion of workers' wages.

Workers struck for six days from April 5 but were ordered to return on April 12 by the Cambodian Arbitration Court.

Two hundred workers at three of the hotels were sacked on April 20. Two days later the Cambodian Arbitration Council issued an interim order instructing the employers to allow all workers to return to their jobs and refrain "from pursuing any action against their employees with regard to participation in the strike from 5-12 April 2004".

## Chinese gas explosion causes deaths and evacuations

A powerful chlorine gas explosion at the Tianyuan Chemical Industry Plant in China's south-west industrial city of Chongqing killed seven people. The explosion forced the evacuation of tens of thousands of people from Chongqing and from the neighboring districts of Jiangbei, Yuzhong and Huanglongqiao as greenish-yellow coloured gas filled the air.

The explosion was the result of chlorine gas leaking from outmoded furnaces at the plant. It is the third serious chlorine

gas leak since last December. Late last year, a blast at another chemical plant forced evacuations of 60,000 people from a nearby village and killed some 200 people.

### **Victorian nurses launch industrial action**

Nurses throughout Victoria have been threatened with legal action by the state Labor government over their imposition of work bans. The nurses, members of the Australian Nursing Federation (ANF), began work bans at hospitals on April 21, resulting in the closure of 350 beds and the cancellation of 60 operations. They are seeking improved wages and conditions in a new enterprise work agreement

Up to 2,000 nurses met on April 20 and gave the government until May 4 to improve its offer of a 3 percent annual wage increase. The nurses are demanding an 8 percent increase and the retention of the existing ratio of five nurses to 20 patients.

In a separate dispute, Victorian ambulance paramedics are threatening strike action if the government does not improve its pay offer of 2.25 percent. The paramedics are demanding 8 percent. Also, 5,000 psychiatric nurses and health professionals are demanding the government honour its election promise to significantly improve their wages.

### **NSW public servants meet to defend jobs**

Workers at the Department of Environment and Conservation in the New England region of New South Wales are planning a campaign of industrial action against a proposal to eliminate 15 jobs. The department—which has had a \$20 million cut to its budget—presently employs 115 people. Staff met on April 23 to discuss the campaign but details are not yet available.

The NSW Labor government announced in a mini-budget last month that it intends to cut 3,000 public service jobs across 300 departments.

### **Meat company refuses to reinstate Tasmanian workers**

Meat processing company Blue Ribbon Products in Tasmania lodged an appeal on April 20 to the Full Bench of the Supreme Court to overturn an earlier order that it reinstate 17 workers.

The workers were locked out in April 2003 after refusing to be made independent contractors.

The company appealed against a decision by the Tasmanian Industrial Commission, which ordered it to rehire the workers. Last month, Supreme Court justice Alan Blow upheld the Commission's decision. It is estimated that Blue Ribbon now owes the sacked workers a total of \$500,000 in lost wages.

Blue Ribbon Products was resurrected by Victorian firm Perfect Pork in January 2002 after it went into receivership.

### **Strikes by New Zealand universities staff called off**

Planned strike action at New Zealand's seven universities next week has been called off following negotiations between university and union representatives. The unions, representing more than 7,000 university staff, have been in negotiations since October 2003 for two new national collective employment agreements intended to replace the 13 enterprise agreements negotiated at a local university level.

University staff are seeking pay rises of up to 30 percent over

three years. University employers had offered between 2 and 4 percent and had refused to agree to a national agreement.

Association of University Staff (AUS) general secretary Helen Kelly declined to release details of the negotiations but claimed "sufficient ground" had been made to avert the first of five days of nationwide strike action. Membership meetings will be held late next week to consider the employers' response to the union proposals.

### **New Zealand nurse condemns pay deal**

A New Zealand nurse has written to the *Dominion Post* newspaper to expose and condemn a pay deal recently signed between the NZ Nurses Organisation (NZNO) and seven District Health Boards. Clare Buckley from Napier said that for many nurses the deal equated to a pay cut.

Some 4,000 nurses, midwives and health assistants covered by the Lower North Island Multi Employer Agreement voted three weeks ago to accept a revised employer pay offer, after the NZNO had cancelled planned strike action and recommended the deal to members. The nurses were seeking pay rises of up to 13 percent. The NZNO claimed the settlement was a major victory and marked a "turning point" in the nurses' and midwives' campaign to win pay equity with their colleagues in Auckland and with other public service workers.

Buckley, a ward nurse in her third year of practice, says that under the deal her basic pay rate will rise by a "paltry" \$500 a year or \$48 per fortnight based on her contracted hours. What had not been reported was that nurses' penalty rates—allowances received for working unsocial hours—had been "significantly reduced" by up to \$32.38 per shift.

Buckley noted that she had written to the union expressing her concerns, "but it did not deign to reply". She concluded that the NZNO was not "an effective advocate" and continued to "undervalue nurses". "It (the union) is happy to take my membership fees but I am left wondering who exactly it works for, because it certainly doesn't appear to be nurses," Buckley said.



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