

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 May 2004

Chinese footwear strikers arrested

At least 10 striking workers have been arrested during clashes with police outside the Taiwanese-owned Xinxiong Shoe plant in Dongguan, a major industrial city of Guangdong province.

Workers walked out on April 21 when management announced that an overtime shift on the weekend, when workers are entitled to double pay, would be moved to the weekdays, with no penalty rates. The factory employs over 4,000 workers, who work a 60-hour, six-day week for no more than \$US60—a significant portion of which was earned via overtime. A junior manager at the plant told the China Labour Bulletin that the company was not paying the workers' pensions and health insurance.

According to the factory's owners, several managers were beaten, two police vehicles were overturned and \$350,000 in company property damaged when workers resisted police attempts to break up their picket lines.

Thai workers walk out against privatisation

Up to 15,000 Thai electricity workers began a three-day stoppage on April 28 against a government announcement it intends to proceed with the privatisation of the state-owned Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT). To circumvent a ban on state employees taking strike action, the workers are calling the action "leave" and have instructed management to dock the three days from their holiday entitlements.

On April 23, the energy minister had agreed in talks with EGAT management that the corporation would not be sold. Within days, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra retracted this commitment. Thaksin told parliament that his cabinet had "a clear policy of privatisation" and it "absolutely won't give it up".

EGAT workers plan to hold a mass demonstration today as part of May Day.

Pakistani doctors on strike

Medical officers at the Lady Reading Hospital, Hayatabad Medical Complex and Ayub Teaching Hospital in Peshawar, the capital of the North West Frontier province of Pakistan, began strike action on April 27 to demand salary increases and better facilities. Doctors at the Khyber Teaching Hospital have threatened to join the strike.

Democratic Doctors Forum (DDF) president Dr Abdul Aziz said the medical officers perform strenuous duties and their monthly salary of 5,000 rupees (US\$100) was inadequate compensation. They are also dissatisfied with their hostel facilities. The doctors are demanding a 2,000 rupee (US\$40) pay rise and improved accommodation.

Indian doctors on strike

Junior doctors at the Government Medical College in Mysore, in the southern Indian state of Karnataka, began a boycott of non-emergency work at the KR Hospital and the Cheluvamba Hospital on April 28.

They are demanding a reduction in the fees for their postgraduate studies.

Indian primary school teachers protest

More than 1,500 primary school teachers at city municipal schools in the western Indian state of Gujarat protested on April 27, demanding payment of their outstanding March salaries.

Sanatkumar Pandya, president of the Vadodara City Primary Teachers Association, told the press: "We are left in a lurch. It is very difficult to manage if our salary does not reach us within first week of every month. We have commitments like bank loans and insurance premiums, among others."

The teachers have threatened to boycott government training programs and academic work until their salaries are paid.

Explosions kill, injure dozens of Chinese workers

An explosion at an illegal fireworks factory in China's Shandong province has killed 14 workers and injured five others. At least 10 homes were destroyed. The factory had been operating out of a local farmhouse in Jiaocunmiao village for 10 days.

Free medical treatment is reportedly being given to the injured, and 20,000 yuan (\$US2,400) will be given to the families of those killed.

Another explosion destroyed a private firecracker workshop in a two-storey house in Tieli village in Henan province. Four workers were killed and five injured.

According to official statistics, over 120,000 people were killed in workplace accidents in China during 2003. On December 30, at least 29 workers were killed in an explosion at a fireworks factory in the northeast province of Liaoning.

Victorian nurses continue work bans

Nurses throughout Victoria are maintaining the work bans they set in place more than two weeks ago, as part of an ongoing campaign for better wages and conditions. The action is continuing despite threats of legal action by the state Labor government.

The nurses, members of the Australian Nurses Federation (ANF), are demanding a wage increase of 8 percent and the maintenance of a nurse-patient ratio of five nurses to 20 patients.

The government and hospital management have asked the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to declare the work bans illegal. So far, the bans have led to the closure of 1,250 hospital beds and the cancellation of hundreds of elective surgeries.

The government has attempted to use the dispute to vilify the nurses as uncaring. The workers, however, have pointed to a letter sent out in 2001 by the then health minister, John Thwaites, to all registered nurses encouraging them to return to the public health care system with pledges of better nurse-patient ratios. The government subsequently dropped its commitment and is now demanding that a computer-based program be introduced to determine ratios.

The ANF has already indicated that it is prepared to compromise on its pay demand to get the government to return to negotiations. The government has offered only a 2.25 percent increase per year over the next three years.

In a separate dispute, mental health care nurses throughout Victoria imposed work bans last week in support of better wages and conditions. The bans are affecting health services to prisoners.

Tasmanian, South Australian nurses threaten industrial action

Tasmanian nurses will be staging a one-hour protest march through the streets of Hobart to parliament house next week as part of their campaign for better conditions and wages. The state's hospitals are so understaffed that nurses are being prevented from taking their holidays. An Australian Nurses Federation spokesperson told the media the nurses also want better ongoing professional training, on-call allowances and the provision of uniforms. The state Labor government has offered a wage increase of 22 percent over the next three-and-a-half years, but has not responded to the other demands.

In South Australia, nurses are threatening industrial action following the breakdown in negotiations between the ANF and the state Labor government over a new enterprise bargaining agreement.

The government is insisting nurses accept the abolition of a staff level safeguard. Under the existing agreement, a system called Excelcare is in place that calculates the number of staff required by each patient. If nurses believe that staffing levels are too low, they can ask the Industrial Relation Commission for a ruling that the Excelcare standard be met. If the safeguard is removed, nurses fear that staffing levels will plummet.

Steelworkers walk out in Port Kembla

Over 3,000 steelworkers employed by Bluescope Steel—formerly BHP—struck for 24 hours from April 29 over company demands for changes to their workplace agreement. Bluescope is demanding greater rights to use outside contract labour, new limits on industrial action and changes to clauses governing lay-offs.

After voting to strike, workers established picket lines at all six gates into the company's main Port Kembla plant. The pickets were lifted that evening after the Industrial Relations Commission scheduled a conciliation hearing for April 30 and ordered a return-to-work.

Victorian library staff strike against job cuts

Around 100 staff at the State Library of Victoria in Melbourne went on strike last week over the government's decision to retrench 30 workers in June from the library's VICNET Internet community network service.

The workers, members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU), passed resolutions condemning the job losses and cutbacks to services. They have vowed to carry out further industrial action if the decision is not reversed.

NSW rail workers strike over job losses

New South Wales (NSW) State Rail Countrylink reservation and support workers walked off the job on April 29 for 12 hours. The industrial action was sparked by a state Labor government proposal to eliminate 300 jobs from metropolitan, regional, and rural booking offices.

A 12-month review of country rail services has been initiated. The government intends to either completely replace rail services with buses or privatise Countrylink. As a trial, the XPT daily service from Casino to Murwillumbah will be replaced with buses immediately.

New Zealand port workers strike

Dock workers employed by the Lyttelton Port Company (LPC) in

Christchurch began a four-day strike on April 30 after negotiations toward a new employment agreement broke down. The port company had received six separate stopwork notices that industrial action would take place if outstanding issues were not settled. All areas of the Christchurch port will be affected except the signal tower, gatehouse and the monitoring of refrigerated cargo. Unions have also exempted LPG shipments as city hospitals and residential homes need them.

The port and the unions have been negotiating for two months over the employment agreement, which covers around 240 staff. The major sticking point between the company and the unions is the use of permanent part-time workers, and the ratio of permanent part-timers to permanent full-timers.

The port has a history of bitter disputes over its attempts to force through round-the-clock service. In 1999, Christine Clark, a port worker's wife, died after a car drove through a picket line during a protest over the company's plan to contract out coal handling.

NZ mental health workers settle pay deal

Public servants working for Mental Health Services at the Nelson Marlborough District Health Board (DHB) have voted to accept a salary settlement offer ranging from 11 to 20.3 percent for a term of 20 months. The settlement also provides improved penalty rates for emergency Child, Adolescent and Adult Mental Health nursing staff. A Public Service Association (PSA) organiser said the salaries and conditions negotiated at Nelson Marlborough DHB were now comparable with other DHBs in New Zealand.

NZ Inland Revenue staff rally over breakdown

New Zealand Inland Revenue Department staff rallied in Christchurch on April 23 to protest against the breakdown in talks for a new employment agreement. A spokesman for the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE), one of three unions representing IRD staff, said his union had called the rally to "attempt to persuade the IRD to change its position". It was the first step in an "escalating plan of action".

The workers accused the IRD of forcing unwilling staff members to work outside their normal hours but refusing to pay an additional duties allowance. Workers are also angry that an 8.8 percent pay increase given to team leaders was not extended to all staff.



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