

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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Korean workers strike against casualisation laws

About 160,000 workers from 231 workplaces in South Korea went on strike for four hours or engaged in some form of industrial action on April 1. Thousands participated in marches and demonstrations.

The Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) called the strike in opposition to two legislative proposals before the country's National Assembly that will clear the way for ever greater casualisation of the country's workforce. About 60 percent of all Korean workers are already employed on "temporary" or "irregular" contracts on lower wages and poorer conditions than those given to permanent workers.

In an attempt to intimidate workers and prevent further action the Ministry of Labor declared that further strikes over casualisation were illegal and those involved in the protests would be dealt with "severely".

Workers at US bases threaten to strike

Local employees at US military bases in South Korea last week threatened to strike over plans to cut nearly 10 percent or 1,000 Korean civilian staff jobs. US authorities announced the job cuts on April 1.

If the strike goes ahead it will be the first by Korean employees at US bases. USFK Korean Employees Union head, Kang In-sik, however, called on the South Korean government to increase its financial contributions to United States Forces Korea, declaring that the layoffs would "undermine USFK combat readiness against North Korean threats".

In mid-March, the US tentatively agreed to cut Korea's share of the budget for maintaining US troops in the country to 746.9 billion won (\$US622 million), less than the amount paid in 2004.

Rail workers demand colleague's reinstatement

Railway control room workers across Sri Lanka struck on the night of April 4, demanding the reinstatement of a colleague. The control room employee was suspended on charges arising from an accident that occurred last October in Veyangoda, around 40 kilometres from Colombo.

Several trains were delayed and others cancelled by the strike forcing many passengers to make alternative travel arrangements. Long delays occurred despite management using substitute staff to run services. The strike ended on April 5, after the transport minister gave an assurance that the suspended man would be reinstated.

Health workers protest

Long-serving volunteer health workers at the Valachchenai, Chenkaladi, Vakara and Kalkudah hospitals in the Batticaloa region in eastern Sri Lanka began a sit-down protest in front of the Ministry of Health and Indigenous Medicine in the port city of Trincomalee on March 30.

The 52 workers—with service ranging from two to ten years—are demanding permanent jobs. They worked in the region during the civil war, and without pay. Even though there are numerous vacancies in region's hospitals, the government is ignoring the voluntary workers' requests.

Hotel workers demand outstanding salary increase

Some 180 workers at the Sigiri Village Hotel, near Sigiriya—the site of a well-known ancient rock fortress in Sri Lanka—launched a daily two-hour picketing campaign on March 28 near the hotel.

They are demanding the payment of a 1,250-rupee (\$US12) monthly salary increase that was approved by the country's salary board to commence last November. The hotel management has only offered to pay a 750-rupee increase.

Agriculture officers begin sick-note protest

Around 1,000 agriculture advisory workers launched a sick-note campaign on March 30 to demand the processing of promotions and the filling of job vacancies. The officers did not attend work on the day, reporting-in sick instead.

The officers, who are employed in state-run seed farms, agriculture research institutions, botanical parks, agriculture schools and other agricultural bodies, are also protesting over unjustified transfers and the lack of infrastructure facilities. They allege that the last time the government paid any attention to employees' complaints was in 1994.

Indian teachers protest salary delays

District teachers in Tirupathi, in the south Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, protested outside the state Collectorate on April 4 over delays in the payment of March salaries. The United Teachers Federation (UTF), which called the protest, sharply criticised the state government for directing the Treasury not to pay the outstanding wages until April 15.

Clerks in Pakistan demand salary arrears

Clerks at the Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) began a protest hunger strike outside the Hyderabad press club on April 1 over the non-payment of salaries for last two months. Members of the Mehran Workers Union and several other unions joined the protest in solidarity with the WASA workers.

Speakers at the protest pointed out that while WASA had recovered water dues of 10.7 million rupees up until March 30 it had refused to pay the outstanding salaries. Protestors said that workers would not accept proposals that the outstanding amounts be paid on an instalment basis.

Paint workers strike for pay rise

About 350 workers at Watty Paints, one of Australia's largest paint manufacturers, walked off the job across the country on April 1 over a new wages and conditions agreement. The strike has hit the company's plants in New South Wales (NSW), Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia.

The workers, who are members of the Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union, want a 15 percent pay increase over three years and an improved redundancy agreement. The company has only offered 8 percent over two years and refused to make any changes in redundancy.

Watty management appealed to the Federal Court in Sydney on April 5 for an injunction to stop workers picketing its Blacktown plant in NSW.

Earlier this year, the company indicated that a major job restructure was planned. The union, however, does not intend to fight the retrenchments.

Teachers demand wage increase

An industrial campaign by public school teachers in Australia's Northern Territory (NT) for a new wages and conditions agreement is in its third week. The teachers want an 18 percent pay rise over two years. The NT Labor government has offered 11 percent. On March 30, 250 government schoolteachers went on strike in Darwin, Tennant Creek and other areas in the Territory.

The NT government has now offered free housing for teachers working in remote areas, reduced class sizes from 30 to a maximum of 27 and a "salary sacrificing scheme" which would let teachers defer wages and take a year off at a later date on full pay. The Australian Education Union says that unless the government improves its wage offer there will be further strike action.

Worker killed in furnace blast

A 21-year old worker was killed in a furnace explosion at Bradken Engineering in Henderson, Western Australia. Another man was hospitalised with minor burns and a suspected broken shoulder. The blast, which blew the furnace lid through the plant's roof and sprayed hot metal across the factory floor igniting several spot fires, occurred about 11.30 a.m. on April 6.

A fire department spokesman said that the upward force of the explosion probably saved other workers' lives because it limited the amount of shrapnel blasted through the factory. He warned, however, that the incident would have been a catastrophe if the factory had contained other explosive materials.

The explosion is believed to have caused up to \$300,000 damage to the factory, which was purchased last month by Sydney-based mining and rail industries supplier Bradken for \$28 million.

Western Australia averages 21 workplace deaths annually but so far there have been 19 industrial deaths this financial year.

New Zealand workers walk out over pay

Sixty employees at Colgate-Palmolive's Wellington factory walked off the job on April 4 and Morgan Furniture workers in Auckland struck the next day and picketed the plant as part of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) campaign for an across-the-board pay rise of 5 percent. The EPMU held mass stop-work rallies in Auckland and Christchurch this week attracting thousands of workers. The union represents nearly 50,000 manufacturing sector employees, including those in the aviation, forestry, postal, media, automotive and mining industries.

The Colgate-Palmolive walkout followed a 24-hour strike at the plant last week after collective contract negotiations collapsed. The toothpaste, toiletry and cleaning product manufacturer has offered a 5 percent increase over 15 months, which equates to just 4 percent on an annual basis. Morgan Furniture has offered its employees 3 percent for 10 months.

The Metals and Manufacturing Industries' collective agreement covers 2,000 workers at about 220 companies. The EPMU has recently reached agreement for 5 percent increases with 12 firms.

As part of the same campaign, Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members at Mid Central Health picketed Palmerston North Hospital on April 5 in a lead-up to strike action on April 18. A SFWU spokesman said that Spotless Services cleaners, orderlies and kitchen staff had been offered 3 percent, which was a "zero percent increase when inflation is accounted for".

New Zealand bus drivers strike for pay increase

Drivers employed by bus-company Stagecoach went on strike for 24 hours in Auckland on April 4 for a 15 percent wage increase. Some 150 workers joined picket lines at the company's depots. Nearly 900 drivers rejected a company offer made in negotiations late last week after a planned stop-work on March 31 was called off by union officials.

Stagecoach raised its offer of 12 percent over three years to 14.8 percent, to reach an hourly pay rate of \$16 by 2007. The drivers want 14.8

percent in the first year and have endorsed a log of claims with 109 separate terms. Criticising the strike, a Stagecoach operations manager pointed approvingly to the current campaign by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union for a 5 percent rise, saying the company's offer by comparison was "very fair ... in today's market".

The strike affected 80,000 commuters with suburban and inner-city link services, as well as school buses, which the company had managed to keep going during recent stop-work meetings, brought to a halt. Drivers have threatened rolling strike action next week, with walkouts at two bus depots at a time on four consecutive days.

Mediation fails to resolve Auckland University pay dispute

The Employment Relations Authority has referred a dispute between the Association of University Staff (AUS) and the University of Auckland to the Employment Court after mediation last week failed to resolve the issues involved. The dispute arose after the university's vice-chancellor refused to participate in negotiations for new national collective employment agreements and offered non-union staff a 4.5 percent salary increase.

In legal proceedings filed earlier, the AUS alleged that the vice-chancellor acted unlawfully because his actions undermined the bargaining process. The AUS wants an order requiring the university to participate in the national bargaining process, a declaration that the vice-chancellor has acted unlawfully.

Union members—who make up only 30 per cent of the staff—are due to hold a stop-work meeting to consider industrial action.

Port unions make deal after employer threatens lockouts

Unions at Christchurch's Port of Lyttelton struck a deal with the port company to end a long-running dispute over employment conditions. The tentative agreement comes after 15 months of negotiations between the company and unions, which culminated in a four-day strike almost a year ago. The parties announced on April 5 an in-principle three-year agreement that workers will vote on next week. The details have not been made public.

A deal accepted by union officials last month on overtime pay and the expansion of part-time labour was later rejected by port workers. The company raised the stakes last week, declaring that it was considering "other options" to break six weeks of ongoing industrial action, including an overtime ban. Some of these "options" were lockouts and suspensions.

A maritime union spokesman claimed that the proposed three-year agreement would provide a "period of industrial stability" while the company said the deal was "likely to please investors". The latest dispute followed a 1999 strike at the port during which mother-of-two Christine Clarke was run over and later died while picketing outside the wharf on December 29 of that year.

Displaced garment workers protest wages

Displaced garment workers in the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (CNMI) in the Pacific began gathering on Capitol Hill this week to demand the Governor's Office assist in securing back-wages owed by recently closed local garment factories. Some former workers of garment manufacturer La Mode (Saipan) Inc. said that they are owed \$US1,500. Many of the protesters are displaced non-residents who refuse to be repatriated without first receiving their entitlements.

The government's press secretary Pete Callaghan said court proceedings have been scheduled to hear the workers' cases and that 302 former and current non-resident employees of La Mode have been asked to attend administrative hearings scheduled for April 28 and 29.

More job losses are expected as Saipan's garment industry struggles to compete with Chinese manufacturers. The Saipan Garment Manufacturers Association revealed this week that its sales to the US in March had dropped by 22.8 percent. The Saipan garment industry accounts for 22,000 jobs and provides a third of government revenue.

Police serve notice on Fiji brewery workers

On April 1, Fiji Acting Minister of Labour Ratu Naiqama declared a strike by Carlton Brewery employees to be illegal and ordered them back to work. Police served the notice on workers on April 5, ordering them to stop picketing by 4 p.m., return to the factory, and begin negotiations with management.

Workers' spokesman Steve Wise, however, said that the company has refused to hold talks. "How can we reach a solution when the management does not even want to negotiate," he said.

The brewery workers—members of the National Union of Factory and Commercial Workers—are protesting over the company's decision to stop payment of gratuity on retirement and its lack of concern over casual employees injured in the factory.

Wise said the workplace is very dangerous with exploding bottles causing cuts and other injuries. Even when injured employees present a medical certificate, the company deducts lost time from their wages. Carlton's human resources manager has refused to comment on the issue.



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