

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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The *World Socialist Web Site* invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature by e-mailing information to: [editor@wsws.org](mailto:editor@wsws.org)

## **Sri Lanka workers protest against land seizure**

On April 6, around 2,000 cooperative workers in Sri Lanka's southern province demonstrated in Galle—one of the country's tsunami-devastated cities. They were protesting against the state appropriation of land belonging to the cooperative. The government had already laid a foundation stone to build a supermarket complex on the disputed land.

The demonstrators marched from the Delgahawatta National Cooperative House to Galle city where they handed a petition to the provincial governor.

## **State workers protest over work irregularities**

Some 300 state service workers demonstrated in Badulla in Sri Lanka's Uva province on April 6 against irregularities in salaries, allowances, training facilities and promotions. The 300 workers, who were recently recruited under the United Peoples Freedom Alliance government's graduate employee scheme, were not given work designations or a list of duties.

The demonstrators marched from the Peoples Park to Uva provincial council office. After picketing the office, they presented a petition to the provincial council secretary with their demands. These included establishment of proper transfer and promotion schemes and a service code.

## **Transport workers demand unpaid salaries**

Transport workers at the Kandy South Bus Depot in Sri Lanka's hill capital went on strike on April 10 over the non-payment of March salaries. The angry workers surrounded the depot manager's office on April 9 to demand their wages but police were called to disperse them.

## **Apparel workers killed in Bangladesh factory collapse**

At least 26 apparel workers were killed when a nine-story knitwear factory collapsed without warning at midnight on April 10. The concrete construction is located in Palash Bari, around 30 kilometres northwest of Dhaka, near the industrial town of Savar. The region is the centre of the country's knitwear industry.

It is believed that up to 500 people on the sixth floor of the building may have been working late to complete a large export order. According to police, a boiler explosion may have caused the building to collapse. One survivor, Mahubur Rahaman, said: "The whole building started to shake violently. The next thing I remember is waking up under some machinery."

By the April 12, 80 workers had been rescued but it was feared at least 200 remained trapped in the building. Narrow access roads, swamps and paddy fields surrounding the disaster site made it difficult for rescue teams to bring in heavy equipment, forcing them to use hammers and crowbars to try to reach the trapped victims. Anxious relatives joined firefighters, police and soldiers using their bare hands to search the wreckage.

Local reports say that the factory—constructed only three years ago—was built on marshland and without planning permission. When first erected,

the building was four-storeys high but five floors were added, increasing the instability of the structure.

Around 1.8 million workers toil in 2,500 apparel factories in Bangladesh. There are frequent industrial accidents.

## **Pakistani sanitary workers demand back pay**

Sanitary workers at the Kandhra Union Council in the Pakistani city of Sukkur in Sindh Province demonstrated and held a hunger strike on April 7 against the non-payment of salaries. According to a workers' spokesman, the council secretary has refused to issue salaries for the past five months. He said the workers would continue to protest until the issue was resolved.

## **Indian childcare workers demonstrate**

Around 100 childcare workers held a sit-down protest on April 8 outside the deputy commissioner's office in Ludhiana in the Indian state of Punjab. They were protesting against being assigned additional work, including a district economic survey.

One protester, Sharda Rani, explained that childcare workers receive only 1,200 rupees (\$US24) a month. "The areas where we have been assigned duties [for the economic survey] are quite far away and the 350 rupees that each of us receives is hardly enough to cover the expenses we incur," he said. The workers would also have to carry out the duties in the heat of the day.

## **Dock workers demand correct pay rates**

About 650 dockworkers at shipping companies PT Pan United and PT Inter Media Engineering Service in Batam, Indonesia, protested outside the city council on April 11. They were demanding the payment of correct rates for meal, overtime and transportation allowances.

According to a union spokesman, the workers had been paid overtime rates of just 5,500 rupiah (\$US0.55) an hour since December last year, far below the correct rate of 7,000 rupiah. He said employees could be called on to work between five and nine hours overtime a day, so the reduction in pay was "significant".

## **University workers demand reinstatement of officials**

An overwhelming majority of the 254-strong membership of the Union-Federation of Free Workers (USAEU-FFW) at the University of San Agustin in the Philippines voted on April 7 to strike over the sacking of 22 union officers. The strike date is yet to be determined. The union is demanding reinstatement of all union officers and that the university to cease collecting "unjustifiable" fees from the students.

University president Fr. Manuel Vergara sacked the union officers after a decision by the Court of Appeals on March 4, which overturned a Secretary of Labor and Employment decision to declare a strike at the university on September 19, 2003 legal. The 2003 strike was called after the union and university administration reached a deadlock in negotiations for a Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA).

The union held an emergency meeting on April 8 this year and drew up a "manifesto of contempt". It accused the university of union busting and believes that management decided to terminate the union officers because it is facing upcoming CBA negotiations.

### **Power company attempts to silence workers**

The Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (Egat) is threatening punitive action against employees who resist the privatisation of the state-owned enterprise.

In an attempt to close down a yearlong campaign of opposition, the company this week issued an order that forbid employees from providing anti-privatisation information via computer networks, or through the distribution of leaflets or by speeches through loudspeakers. It warned that any worker defying the order would be severely punished.

Egat union president Sirichai Maingarm claimed that the management had dismantled the union's main meeting place at the company and banned all workers' gatherings. He said employees opposing privatisation "were investigated by a committee" and punished. Maingarm said his salary had been cut by 10 percent for a three-month period because he had used a microphone to address workers during a lunch break.

The union is preparing a legal challenge in the Administrative Court against company allegations that the bans are an abuse of the employees' freedom of expression. Last year, Egat and other public sector workers held a 50,000-strong protest against the government's privatisation plans.

### **Mining company prepares legal action over strikes**

Wesfarmers Premier Coal in Collie, Western Australia (WA) announced on April 12 that it was preparing a multi-million dollar legal damages case against the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union and the Construction Forestry Mining and Energy Union.

The announcement follows a threat by the company's managing director, Michael Chaney, to sack 160 coal miners on strike for nine days over safety issues. The miners have defied return-to-work orders issued by the Coal Industrial Tribunal and the Supreme Court.

The company claims that the miners' strike is not over safety but in sympathy with 62 maintenance workers who walked off the job in early March when negotiations for a new enterprise work agreement stalled. The maintenance workers are opposing roster changes and the increased use of contract labour.

Wesfarmers, which supplies four major WA enterprises, claims that the disputes are costing it between \$400,000 and \$500,000 per day. Kalgoorlie-based Loongana Lime says it has already run out of coal, while Iluka Resources and Cable Sands report that supplies are extremely low. The state-owned Western Power claims to have enough coal for several months.

While WA mining union representatives are due to meet to discuss the dispute, a union spokesman has warned that the company's threats could spark wider industrial action.

### **Refinery workers strike over safety issues**

Thirty employees at the Caltex oil refinery in Brisbane, Queensland, walked off the job on April 12 over safety issues. The strike came after a recent accident involving an acid leak, which affected 40 workers.

The refinery workers claim that emergency evacuation procedures on site are not adequate and have demanded a safety plan to cover all possible contingencies.

### **New Zealand bank workers walk out over pay**

ANZ and National Bank staff in New Zealand held stop-work meetings on April 8 to consider a pay offer from the recently merged banks. Those involved included tellers, call centre staff and processors. They voted overwhelmingly to reject the banks' offer.

The stop-work followed negotiations last month for the first collective employment agreement since the company merger. A key issue is management attempts to remove compensation for working weekends and evenings. This would apply to National Bank workers and new staff at both banks. Currently, New Zealand ANZ employees receive only time-and-a-half for working weekends compared with their colleagues in Australia who are paid double or triple time.

A spokesman for the union Finsec said the vast majority of its 3,700

members voted to support the work stoppage. National Bank management emailed staff warning that those attending the stop-work meetings would lose their lunch break that day. The union hopes to resume negotiations soon.

### **New Zealand health board staff reject pay offer**

Clerical and administrative staff employed by the Waikato District Health Board (DHB) began two days of strike action on April 12. The workers—members of the Public Service Association (PSA)—want a 3 percent pay rise in line with increases already granted to other DHB staff.

The DHB has offered clerical and administrative staff a 3 percent increase to December 31, 2005, but it will only be backdated to October 2004, rather than an earlier date when the agreement expired. This means the rise would only equate to 1.75 percent, which is less than inflation. The union has lodged notice of three days strike action in a fortnight.

### **Auckland bus drivers strikes cancelled**

Unions representing 1,000 Auckland-based Stagecoach bus drivers have called off rolling strikes scheduled this week. The drivers had planned four days of depot-by-depot strikes following a region-wide one-day strike on April 4 to push for an immediate lift in pay rates to \$16 an hour, rising to \$16.50 next year.

Management and drivers' union officials agreed to return to negotiations and to seek Employment Relations Authority mediation. The combined unions have set a deadline of April 21 for an agreement, after which further industrial action could occur.

### **Auckland University staff strike over negotiations impasse**

Some lectures and tutorials at Auckland University were cancelled this week when about half of the academic staff went on strike. Unionised academics at the university voted to strike because of management's refusal to negotiate alongside other New Zealand universities.

Association of University Staff (AUS) national president Nigel Haworth said Auckland union members, including 50 to 60 percent of core academic staff, would withdraw teaching services for two-hour blocks for three days a week over the next fortnight. The vote to strike was 466 to 13.

Auckland University offered a single-employer collective agreement with a 4.5 percent salary increase to all staff, union and non-union. The vice chancellor claimed that the offer was "the highest the university can afford". The AUS has lodged a case in the Employment Court asserting that Auckland University is legally obliged to participate in multi-university negotiations.

### **Unions concessions settle port dispute**

On the recommendation of the combined waterfront unions, Christchurch port workers voted to accept a three-year pay deal with the Lyttelton Port Company (LPC). About 85 percent of members of the three unions involved endorsed the company's latest offer at a stop-work meeting on April 11, ending 13 months of negotiations.

A union spokesman said the dispute would have escalated had an agreement not been reached. The company had earlier threatened lockouts and suspensions in response to a seven-week overtime ban. The deal provides for an immediate 5 percent pay increase for two years and 3.75 percent for the final year of the agreement.

While few other details of the new collective agreement have been released, the deal included union concessions. A high ranking LPC executive said the port had gained "added flexibility" by settling on a fixed number of permanent part-time staff to make it more competitive. He said the ratification indicated a "new level of trust" between management and unions.

### **Another Fiji miner killed underground**

The death of 41-year-old underground timber man, Rakesh Prakash, on April 6 at the Emperor Gold Mine in Vatukoula brings the total number of recorded deaths at the Fiji mine since it opened in 1930 to 16. Prakash was crushed to death when a large rock fell on him in the mine's Caysar Shaft.

Over 500 employees work underground at the mine.

The union did not call for mine operations to cease until Prakash's death was investigated and a safety inspection held. Mine Workers Union General Secretary Satish Chandra simply pleaded with the government to investigate working conditions. The union, however, is fully aware that the mining industry is exempt from Fiji health and safety legislation.

In February 1991, 436 workers were sacked after 700 employees walked off the job over wages and dangerous working conditions. Damning safety reports by various organisations have been presented to the government since then, but none have been acted upon. The company is offering Prakash's family \$1,000 (\$US611) compensation and said it will build a shed for the funeral service.

#### **PNG loggers on strike over entitlements**

More than 100 loggers at the remote Gulf Province timber operation in Papua New Guinea walked off the job on April 7 to oppose a new work contract offered by the company. The striking workers sent a petition to their employer in Port Moresby, Frontier Holdings Ltd, explaining their grievances. They want the company to withdraw the proposed contract, nullify all agreements already signed, and draw up new deal. They are also demanding a pay rise after six months and a 10 percent reduction in prices at the company canteen.

It appears that the men were tricked into returning to work a few days later when someone claiming to be from the Port Moresby Labour and Employment Department office addressed them and claimed that the proposed contract was consistent with the Employment Act and that some of their requests were not applicable in rural areas. The daily *Post Courier* reported, however, that when it contacted the Labour and Employment Department it could not confirm if one of its officers had been sent to the logging camp.

#### **Solomon Islands nursing aides highlight low pay issue**

Solomon Islands nursing aides in the province of Isabel complained on April 7 to the *Solomon Star* daily newspaper that most of them have not had an increment pay increase for years. A spokesman for the workers said some of his colleagues had 10 years' service but were still paid only \$S180 (\$US60) a fortnight. He also claimed that National Provident Fund entitlements were not being paid into the fund.

Isabel Province Premier James Habu has washed his hands of the issue, claiming that the Health Ministry, through the Isabel Health Department, paid nursing aides' wages and that they should take the pay issue to the ministry. The nursing aides' spokesman, however, said they were employees of the province and therefore should be able to negotiate directly with the Isabel Health Department.



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