

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

15 April 2006

Asia

Indian Honda workers on strike

About 4,000 workers at Hero Honda—India’s largest motorcycle manufacturer with production sites at Gurgaon and Dharuhera—began an indefinite strike on April 11. They are demanding an end to contractual employment, a wage increase and a range of other benefits such as the provision of medical facilities.

A strike leader told the media: “We want all the 4,000 contract workers to be absorbed in the company as regular employees, so that we do not have to deal with contractors any longer.”

A few months earlier, Honda Motorcycle and Scooter India (HMSI) closed its plant in Gurgaon near New Delhi when workers took action to protect conditions. Hero Honda is a sister company of major Japanese automaker Honda.

Medical college workers demand unpaid salaries

On April 4, non-teaching staff at the Mahatma Gandhi Memorial Medical College (MGM) demonstrated outside the principal’s office in Jamshedpur, in the southeastern Indian state of Jharkhand.

They demanded the immediate payment of wage arrears amounting to 150 million rupees (\$US3.3million). The administration claims they have been unable to get treasury to clear the payment.

Domestic workers demand improved working conditions

Domestic workers in the southern Indian state of Andhra Pradesh protested outside government offices in Akkayapalem on April 10. Their demands include a minimum wage and the provision of housing. Hundreds of domestic workers in Tamil Nadu held a protest on March 28 over the same demands.

Poverty, deteriorating income and lack of employment in rural areas are forcing large numbers of women and children to migrate to the cities to find work. Many of those who take jobs as domestic workers face poor conditions or sexual harassment by their employers.

The protests were called by Sneha Inti Panivarala Sankshema Sangham, which was formed in August 2001 to

organise and represent domestic workers.

Angry workers burn management effigy

Workers at the Agricultural Produce Marketing Committee (APMC) in Bellary, in the Indian state of Karnataka, demonstrated on April 4 for a number of demands, including company-assisted housing loans and the provision of uniforms. Angry at the lack of response by the management, the workers protested again on April 6 and burnt an effigy of APMC’s secretary.

Pakistani power workers protest privatisation

Hydro Electric Supply Company (Hesco) employees in Sindh province, Pakistan, protested on April 5 against the proposed privatisation of the Faisalabad Electric Supply Company, the Jamshoro Power House and other units of the Water and Power Development Authority. In Hyderabad, Hesco employees marched to the Press Club where speakers warned that privatisation would have “disastrous consequences”. In other districts across the province, such as Dadu and Khairpur, workers held demonstrations and marches.

Workers in South Korea protest irregular workers bill

Around 160,000 workers went on strike across South Korea on April 10 as part of a campaign to force the government to drop the non-regular workers (casual workers) bill, which is currently being discussed in a plenary session of the national parliament.

While the bill requires companies to hire casuals on regular conditions after two years of continuous employment, it also gives employers the power to dismiss employees without explanation during the first two years.

An official for the Korean Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU) claimed that rather than protecting irregular workers, the bill could result in an increase in the number of temporary workers and increased employment instability. The KCTU and its affiliates—including public employee unions such as the Korean Government Employees’ Union and the Korean Teachers and Workers’ Union—are demanding that the government draw up new legislation that guaranteeing workers job security regardless of their period of employment.

Indonesian plywood workers protest layoffs

About 3,000 workers employed by plywood maker PT Artika Optima Inti in Seram regency in the Maluku rallied for a second day on April 6 to protest the company's decision to layoff 2,589 of its 3,320-strong workforce. Three workers and four police officers were injured in clashes during protests the day before.

Most of the workers have not been paid their wages for the past five months. The protestors demanded the immediate payment of all outstanding wages, severance pay as stipulated by Indonesia's labour laws, social insurance payments and other entitlements. The company claims it is bankrupt and has offered to pay outstanding amounts in installments over the next 15 months. Workers rejected offer and vowed to continue their protests.

Indonesian government suspends labour law changes

Following two weeks of mass protests by workers across Indonesia, President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono promised on April 7 that a bill amending the country's labour laws will not go before parliament. Instead, the pro-business bill will be discussed in a forum involving employers, unions, the government and government-appointed experts from five universities.

The labour law changes would have allowed companies to hire workers for up to five years without a work contract, outsource jobs and deny severance pay. While the unions are claiming a victory, the government has made clear that any new proposal from the forum must "encourage business growth and economic expansion"—i.e., reduce workers' conditions and rights in order to attract investment.

Australia and the Pacific

Social workers escalate protests in Western Australia

On April 10, around 200 Department for Community Development social workers and support staff in Perth, Fremantle and Bunbury voted to close down services for one day each week in protest against serious staff and resource shortages. Employees at the department's Midland office walked off the job two weeks ago over the same issue.

The workers, members of the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) want the Western Australian state Labor government to fund staff increases in the May state budget. Extra personnel are needed to clear a backlog of child neglect cases. A CPSU official told the media that the Midland office alone required 47 new staff.

The workers are considering extending the campaign to other offices across the state if the government does not provide the resources required.

Striking transport workers ordered back

About 250 freight delivery drivers at TNT Express in NSW went on strike on April 7 but were ordered back to work the same day by the Australian Industrial Relations

Commission. The drivers struck when the company refused to guarantee that it would not use WorkChoices, the government's new industrial relations laws, to slash wages and conditions.

Workers accuse the company of stalling negotiations for a new work agreement until WorkChoices became operative on March 27. Under the new laws, longstanding work conditions such as penalty and shift rates and holiday loading are no longer "protected" items.

Individual workers and the Transport Workers Union could face financial penalties for the strike. Strikes and other forms of industrial action are only legal during work agreement negotiations and even then can be ruled out of order by the federal workplace relations minister if he deems the industry to be "essential".

New Zealand hospital workers issue strike notice

Maintenance and laundry staff at Whangarei, Bay of Islands and Kaitia hospitals notified the Northland District Health Board they will strike indefinitely from April 13 after pay negotiations stalled. About 35 workers, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), are involved.

The health board offered a 6 percent increase in three 2 percent installments up to 2007, with the first backdated to October last year. The workers described the offer as "an insult". The last pay increase they received was 2 percent in October 2004.

PNG teachers begin campaign for housing allowance

Schools in Lae, Papua New Guinea, closed on April 11 when teachers refused to report for work. They want an increase in their housing allowance, which is currently just 7 kina (\$US2.30) a fortnight. The action follows a rally by 500 teachers outside the Teachers Association national office in Port Moresby on April 5.

Teachers' representatives presented a petition to Morobe governor Luther Wenge and threatened to strike on April 14 if their demand is not met. A PNG Teachers Association spokesman said that the Lae teachers had the support of 12,000 colleagues throughout the district.



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