

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

14 April 2007

West Bengal police attack striking auto workers

Police wielding lathis (long bamboo rods) attacked striking workers picketing the gate of Hindustan Motors' Uttarpara plant in West Bengal's Hooghly district on April 10. The picketers were attempting to prevent scab labour from entering the plant. At least ten workers were injured.

Thousands of workers at the plant have been on strike since March 13, demanding the withdrawal of a freeze on the payment of the Dearness Allowance (DA). They are also calling for permanency for 242 casual employees and the unconditional withdrawal of the suspension of several workers.

On April 6, the workers refused to call off the strike after management promised some minor concessions on DA arrears. As one striker pointed out: "Our DA arrears haven't been paid since 2001".

Around 5,000 workers are employed at the plant, the country's oldest automobile factory, making the Ambassador model car. The strikers are members of the Sangrami Shramik Karmachari Union (SSKU).

Tamilnadu school meal workers demand permanency

On April 10, workers employed under the noon-meal program in schools in the southern Indian state of Tamilnadu held sit-down protests in several cities, including Tuticorin, Nagercoil and Palayamkottai.

They are campaigning for a slate of demands including permanency for all meal program workers, the introduction of a time-scale pay system and retirement pensions. The workers are members of the Tamil Nadu Nutritious Noon Meal Employees Association (TNNNMEA).

Indian Beedi workers demonstrate for conditions

Workers who manufacture Beedi, cheap locally produced cigarettes, demonstrated in Shimoga in the southern state of Karnataka on April 9. They are demanding a uniform national wage policy, the granting of home loans, a provident fund, gratuity payments and pensions.

The workers marched to the Deputy Commissioner's office where they presented a memorandum urging the government to act on their demands. The demonstration was organised by the Shimoga District General and Industrial Workers Union, which is affiliated to the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC).

Sri Lankan apparel workers strike

Around 800 apparel workers at the Crystal Martin Lanka garment factory in the Wathupitiwala Export Processing Zone began an indefinite strike on April 4. The strikers have been

demonstrating almost daily at the export zone entrance and in front of the Board of Investment regional office.

They are demanding the immediate reinstatement of 12 fellow workers. One was suspended on disciplinary charges while the remainder were dismissed after being accused of instigating a strike.

Transport workers demand pay arrears

Transport employees, including drivers, conductors and maintenance workers, at the Sri Lanka Transport Board depot in Anuradhapura, North Central Province, have been on strike since April 9, demanding the payment of salaries for March. Eleven workers began a protest on the depot roof the same day.

The strike brought bus services to a standstill on the eve of the Sinhala and Hindu New Year, meaning that many people have been unable to return to their villages for the holidays. Workers say they will continue to strike until all arrears are paid.

Pakistan railway workers protest for pay increase

On April 6, dozens of employees from the technical, signal and mechanical departments of Pakistan Railways (PR) protested outside the company's headquarters in Lahore, demanding promotions and a salary increase. The protest was timed to coincide with the visit of Railways Minister Sheikh Rashid Ahmed to the headquarters to address a press conference.

Signal department employees demanded that management regularise their positions, increase allowances by 55 percent and reduce duty hours "in line with international labor law". They also want increased salaries for all grades and a 2,000-rupee "modern signal allowance".

Employees of the PR carriage and wagon branch have sent a letter to President Pervez Musharraf and Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz calling for the demand for improvements for all PR workers be met.

Port workers return to work in China

More than 300 striking crane operators at Yantian International Container Terminals, near the southern Chinese city of Shenzhen, ended a 25-hour strike on April 8 after securing a 3 percent pay rise. Earlier, on March 24, container packers at the port had also struck for higher wages.

The port, the fourth largest in the world, is a joint venture by Shenzhen Yantian Port Group and Hutchison Holdings, a subsidiary of the Hong Kong conglomerate Hutchison Whampoo Ltd.

After the crane operators' strike, port management proceeded to organise a union to cover port workers. One worker told the

media: “(T)he management will set up the union, not the workers themselves. We don’t even have the right to elect the union head.”

Plantation workers strike over low wages in Malaysia

About 200 newly-recruited Chinese immigrant workers at several palm oil plantations in the Kalatan Province in northern Malaysia stopped work on April 7. They are protesting being misled by a Chinese labour recruiting agent about pay levels. The workers were told they would be paid 3,000 to 4,000 renminbi (\$US384 to \$512) a month, but receive as little as 600 renminbi.

The plantations’ management and police are putting pressure on the agent to look for ways to send the workers home.

Taiwan communication workers protest sackings

Employees at the partly-state owned Chunghwa Telecom protested in front of the Legislative Yuan in Taipei City on April 11 over the company’s plan to layoff 1,600 workers. The protesters are members of the Chunghwa Telecom Workers Union (CTWU).

They called for the Ministry of Transportation and Communications to replace the company chairman, claiming he had failed to abide by a collective agreement. The agreement bars Chunghwa Telecom from firing employees within five years of the privatisation of the company, which took place in April 2005.

A union spokesman claimed that since the sackings were announced, department heads have begun demanding unrealistic performance benchmarks and implementing arbitrary relocations to force employees to quit. The union also claims that since privatisation, four employees have committed suicide as a result of work-related stress.

Geelong car component workers occupy factory

Component workers at Coghlan and Russell Engineering in the Australian regional city of Geelong occupied the factory this week after being stood down without pay when the company was placed in administration. The 49 workers, members of the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), are owed more than \$1.5 million in entitlements.

Coghlan and Russell Engineering supplies around 40 different parts to car manufacturers such as Ford and Holden. The company is the latest in a string of auto-component manufacturers to lay off workers or close down operations after losing contracts with car producers. In November, Holden cut 200 jobs at its Port Melbourne plant and Ford axed 640 jobs at its Broadmeadows and Geelong operations. Both companies have cut back production.

New Zealand laboratory workers strike over pay

Medical laboratory workers throughout New Zealand went on strike for two days on April 11. Talks between the Medical Laboratory Workers Union and 15 district health boards (DHBs) broke down following a lack of progress in the 14-month dispute over pay and working conditions.

The 1,200 union members employed by the DHBs, the Blood Service, Southern Community Laboratories and Medlab South are seeking a 20 percent pay increase but have been offered only 8.3 per over 39 months, an average of 2.5 percent a year.

Employers are also seeking to reduce the existing terms and conditions of employment for contracted laboratory scientists and other staff providing hospital laboratory services. The union has given notice it will call 24-hour strikes on April 24 and April 26.

In a separate dispute, radiographers at seven DHBs, Canterbury, Southland, Otago, Hutt Valley, Lakes (Rotorua), Tairāwhiti (Gisborne) and Bay of Plenty, have given notice they will strike for two weeks from April 16 over pay. The 250 radiographers went on strike last year seeking pay parity with colleagues at other DHBs.

Auckland casino workers protest price rises

Workers at SkyCity Casino in Auckland began a campaign on April 7 against what they describe as the “company profiteering at workers’ expense”. The SkyCity carpark, which is owned freehold, raised its prices from \$2 to \$3 last year and again this year to \$4.

Food prices at the staff canteen have increased by 38.9 percent. SkyCity is the only casino that charges staff for meals. Most staff use the canteen and parking facilities five days a week. They are now calling for a boycott of the canteen.

Members of the SEA-Unite union held a protest near the Sky Tower this week and began petitioning. A Unite spokesman said casino workers were being cheated out of pay rises won in a protracted struggle last year. While they gained a 5 percent pay rise, about half has gone to meet the increased cost of parking and food.

Fijian unions suppress strike action over pay cuts

Fijian public sector unions are continuing to suppress nationwide strike action against the military regime’s plans to cut civil servants’ pay by 5 percent and reduce the retirement age from 60 to 55. On April 11, union representatives met at a secret location with Labour Minister Bernadette Rounds Ganilau in a bid to avert looming strikes.

The unions have deliberately drawn out the strike ballot process over the past month. Public Service Association members voted 92 percent in favour of striking, while Air Traffic Management Association members and Fiji Teachers Union voted 98 percent in support. The results of other secret ballots will not be made public until the end of this month.

Last week, Fiji Teachers Union general secretary Agni Deo Singh said the union would like to “avoid” strike action. “Ultimately, if we cannot get a resolution from government and we do not have any other ways of resolving it, then the members will have to show a bit of protest for their dissatisfaction.” The question of whether teachers can be deemed as providing essential services and therefore need to give 28 days notice of a strike has been referred to the union’s AGM, due to be held in May.

Meanwhile, the military government has directed public service heads to slash manpower and costs by a further 10 percent. Agni Deo Singh said that while the cost cutting measures would “compromise the quality of service ... to the public” there were “other means” of achieving savings. The Nursing Association said it would need to see a copy of the directive before making a comment.



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