

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

12 April 2008

Nike strike leaders arrested in Vietnam

Following a strike by 20,000 workers at the Taiwan-owned Chingluh shoe factory in Long An Province, Vietnam, at least 24 workers who played a prominent role have been dismissed. Four workers who distributed leaflets calling on their fellows to continue the strike were arrested and questioned by security police.

The sacked workers were forced to sign resignation forms, ensuring they will get no separation benefit. The entire workforce, mostly young women from rural areas, has been threatened by management to "toe the line" or also face dismissal.

The workers struck on March 31, demanding a 20 percent pay increase to compensate for sharp increases in consumer prices. They turned down a 10 percent offer from management on the same day and refused to end the strike but returned to work on April 7 under circumstances not publicised. The workers are paid a monthly salary of just 930,000 dong (\$US58, €36).

Chinese airline pilots suspended after strike

State-owned China Eastern Airlines (CEA) has suspended pilots who participated in strikes on March 31 and April 1. Over 20 domestic flights from Yunnan airport, affecting 1,000 passengers, were aborted when the pilots turned their aircraft around and returned to Yunnan shortly after take-off. CEA said the pilots would remain suspended while the matter was under investigation.

Domestic pilots in China's state-owned airlines began industrial action in March, protesting low pay and unfair contracts. Airlines also reported a sudden increase in pilots booking in sick or taking unscheduled leave.

Local media in Yunnan said CEA pilots were upset that they were limited to domestic routes, with shorter flying hours and received lower pay than their counterparts employed by the parent company. They also object to being taxed heavily on overtime pay.

Pilots in state-owned airlines have had to forgo better paying jobs because they have been forced to sign 99-year contracts binding them to the companies. If they quit they are required to pay compensation ranging from 700,000 to 2.1 million yuan (\$US98,600 to \$US295,000; €63,300 to €190,000).

Conflict between pilots and the airlines has intensified in recent years, including over staff shortages. China has 12,000 civilian pilots but official figures predict that the total number of flights will increase by 80 percent by 2010 and 6,500 more pilots will be required.

Indonesian port workers rally against privatisation

Over 12,000 workers at 112 state-owned ports across Indonesia are threatening to strike after parliament approved a bill on April 8 ending the monopoly of Indonesia's state-run port firm Pelindo and opening up the ports to the private sector. The law also separates Pelindo's assets from state control in preparation for privatisation.

Over 1,000 workers, fearing massive job losses, rallied outside parliament house in Jakarta this week to protest. Sudjarwo, chairman of the union covering port and dredging workers, declared at the rally: "We will hold a strike. We will do it soon."

Transport Minister Jusman Safii Djamal said the government was

preparing to counter a strike and confirmed that he had ordered port officials to take steps to keep the ports operating. President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono is expected to sign the bill into law.

Malaysian factory workers picket closed factory

Around 300 workers at a plastic manufacturing factory in Shal Alam, 30 kilometres south of Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur, picketed outside the plant on April 8 after turning up for work to find they were locked out, with a liquidation notice on the gates.

A factory supervisor, also locked out, said the in-house union had met one month earlier with the owners and was not told about the closure. The factory employs 200 Malaysians and about 100 foreign workers.

A Malaysian Trade Union Council (MTUC) spokesman said the foreign workers face real difficulties because their passports are held by company officials and they would lose an accommodation allowance. The MTUC said it would erect a tent in front of the factory for foreign workers and plans to file a complaint with the Industrial Relations and Labour Department.

Indian food products workers protest over conditions

Daily wage workers at the Puducherry Agro Products, Food and Civil Supplies Corporation (PAPSCO) protested on April 8 in Thattanchavady over a series of demands. These included the regularisation of conditions of daily-rated workers, the provision of benefits such as the Employees Provident Fund and the Employees State Insurance scheme and the immediate publication of a seniority list.

The workers are members of the Puducherry Agro Products Food and Civil Supplies Corporation Daily Rated Workers Union.

Tamilnadu conservatory workers demonstrate

Conservatory staff employed by the Udhamandalam municipality in the Indian state of Tamilnadu demonstrated on April 8 in front of the municipal office. They are demanding improved holiday arrangements, the immediate distribution of pay arrears, quality equipment and the provision of a paid insurance scheme.

They also want the payment of retirement benefits on the day that employees leave service and the prompt payment of relief assistance if an employee dies while employed. The workers plan to take further action, including demonstrations, until they achieve their demands.

Bank employees demand pension

Cooperative Bank employees in Tamilnadu, southern India, held a sit-down protest at Madurai on April 4 to highlight various demands. They are calling for an ex-gratia pension of 2,500 rupees a month for retirees and an alternative pension scheme for employees who retired from January 1, 2008.

Workers also demand that the bank upgrade its infrastructure to provide computerised and other technology-based services to clients. The Madurai-Ramanathapuram District Cooperative Bank Employees Unions Coordination Committee organised the protest campaign.

Bangladesh clothing employees demonstrate over workers' death

Several hundred garment workers demonstrated at Shyamoli in Dhaka on April 1, following a death of a co-worker who allegedly did not receive

treatment due to the negligence of the factory's authorities.

After 25-year-old Russell, a worker of RM Sweater Ltd, collapsed and died while working in the plant his co-workers took up the body and demonstrated in the streets. They demanded that those responsible for failing to provide assistance be punished and adequate compensation be paid to Russell's family.

According to the demonstrators, Russell fell unconscious while working in the washing section after security guards refused to allow him to leave for treatment.

The demonstration disrupted traffic on a main ring road and adjacent roads for around four hours before police dispersed the protestors.

Sri Lankan bus workers walk out

Bus workers, including drivers, conductors and technicians, at the state-owned Ceylon Transport Board bus depot in the western provincial coastal town of Kalutara went on strike on April 8. They were demanding the immediate payment of salaries due for the past two months and a festival allowance advance.

The workers said they received only half salary for the month of February and could not buy clothes and food for their children preparing to celebrate the New Year festival in mid-April. They also claimed the government was not providing enough funds for bus maintenance and said they would continue the strike until their demands were met.

In a separate dispute, workers at the Sigiriya Cultural Triangle Project walked out on April 8, demanding immediate payment of overdue wages and an advance for the New Year festival. They obstructed the entrance to the ticketing office and the site office at the ancient rock fortress of Sigiriya.

Sigiriya is a world heritage site widely publicised in government tourist promotional literature. The project management claims it is seeking funds from the government Treasury to pay the salaries.

Aircraft workers strike over sacking

More than 700 aircraft manufacturing workers went on strike on April 9 in Melbourne, Victoria following the sacking of a fellow employee. The Boeing Australia workers defied a directive from the Australian Industrial Relations Commission to return to work.

A spokesperson for the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union said there were other issues at the factory besides the sacking, including job security and redundancies. The union claims that despite a stated commitment to increase employment in Melbourne, and the provision of government subsidies, Boeing has relocated work interstate and overseas and has already called for a significant number of redundancies.

A company spokesman claimed that the worker was sacked for timekeeping irregularities. He said the union "is not a party to the strike and we will have to seek more court orders to ensure people return to work".

Qantas workers place bans on baggage handling

Baggage handlers at Qantas voted on April 9 to place bans on lifting baggage weighting over 20 kilograms (kg). Presently the airline allows baggage of up to 32 kg for economy class and 40 kg for first class passengers. The bans apply to all domestic and international flights.

A Qantas spokesman claimed that the company complied with all industry standards of baggage handling and would not reduce weight allowances. However, a spokesman for the 300 workers said that almost one third of the handlers had been hurt in the past year, and one in seven had to take time off work because of injury.

One handler told the media: "On a regular shift we could be lifting about 600 bags and most of those weigh well over 20kg. What Qantas management are asking baggage handlers to lift is crippling guys." Another worker said: "We could reduce about 95 per cent of the injuries if the baggage was limited to 20kg."

New Zealand doctors vote to strike

Junior doctors throughout New Zealand voted this week to take

industrial action after nearly a year of deadlocked negotiations. They will strike for 48 hours on April 22 and then for three days in the week following April 25.

The Resident Doctors Association (RDA) is seeking an annual 10 percent pay increase for three years but health boards are only offering 4 percent a year for two years. An RDA spokesman said its members, ranging from first-year doctors to those with more than 12 years' experience, could earn up to 80 percent more in Australia. There are 2,500 junior doctors in New Zealand.

Meanwhile, cleaners, food service workers and orderlies in public hospitals in NZ have voted to step up action against cleaning contractor Spotless. The Service and Food Workers Union members voted on April 2 to endorse a further round of strike action and a campaign to pressure Spotless to either pay a previously negotiated pay increase or get out of the public hospital system.

Spotless agreed to increase workers' pay rates to a minimum of \$14.25 an hour last year but is refusing to pay up unless it gets more funding from District Health Boards.

Industrial action escalates at chemical plant

Workers at the Hamilton, New Zealand, plant of chemical giant Ecolab went on strike for a second time this week over the US-based multinational's refusal to sign up to the Metals and Manufacturing multi-employer agreement (MECA). The 15 workers are members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union.

The MECA is an industry-standard agreement covering workers in more than a hundred general manufacturing firms across the country. Ecolab, with global revenues of more than \$5.5 billion a year, claims it has a "philosophical objection" to industry agreements and has refused to negotiate.

The MECA sets a benchmark for wages and conditions across the manufacturing industry and Ecolab would have to provide improved conditions, such as an extra week's leave, if it became party to the agreement.

Rotorua aluminium workers strike over pay

Workers at the aluminium fabrication company Bradnams Windows & Doors in Rotorua, New Zealand, went on strike for 24 hours last week after pay negotiations broke down. The 17 workers are trying to get the company to honour a commitment it made last year to bring pay rates into line with skills. Most of workers earn between \$12 and \$14 an hour.

According to the Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), the company promised last year to assess the skill level of the workers and ensure their pay was consistent with the going rate. The promise was not honoured, leaving wages far below comparable pay rates elsewhere in New Zealand.

The strikers voted to endorse an EPMU recommendation to return to work after the company agreed to urgent mediation with the Department of Labour.

Air Tahiti Nui pilots strike over cost-cutting

A group of Air Tahiti Nui (ATN) pilots went on strike last week, concerned about the future of the airline and its New York-Papeete-Sydney service. A third of the airline's pilots have so far been involved in the action. Another third are represented by a union that is not on strike, while the remainder do not belong to a union.

The striking union members are concerned about ATN's cost-cutting measures, which have seen a reduction in the number of flights and seating capacity on planes into French Polynesia. ATN operates flights between French Polynesia and Los Angeles, Paris, New York, Auckland, Sydney, Tokyo and Osaka.

The airline has gradually dismantled the Papeete "hub" that scheduled connecting flights through Tahiti resulting in 24.2 percent fewer passengers from New Zealand in 2007 compared with 2006, and 5.2 percent fewer from Sydney. ATN's seating capacity dropped 29.9 percent

on the New Zealand flights and 20.6 percent on the Sydney-Papeete flights.

The ATN dispute began the same week that US-based ATA Airlines filed for bankruptcy and stopped flying between Hawaii and the US mainland, becoming the second carrier in three days to cease operating in the Pacific. Aloha Airlines, Hawaii's 61-year-old carrier, declared bankruptcy on March 20. ATA Airlines carried more than a million airline seats between Hawaii and the mainland; a significant loss in jobs within the airline and support services to the airline.



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