

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

19 April 2008

## Bangladeshi apparel workers fired on by police

More than 50 apparel workers were injured in Bangladesh on April 15 when armed police attacked a demonstration of several thousand employees from Microfibre Garments in Fatullah, Narayanganj, demanding a wage rise. The workers had marched to see management to demand a pay increase despite a threat by the factory authorities that they would call the police.

Police wielding batons charged demonstrators and opened fire on the crowd; wounding four people who had to be rushed to hospital. Workers, angered by the attack, retaliated with sticks and bricks and set fire to tree trunks laid across a highway. They then staged a sit-down on the highway to protest the police violence.

## Police attack childcare workers in India

Three workers were injured when the police lathi-charged and used water cannons on demonstrating childcare (anganwadi) workers in Chandigar in Punjab state on April 10. The lathi is a 2 metre long bamboo cane routinely used by police to disperse protestors and is capable of inflicting severe injuries.

Among those injured in the April 10 police assault were Meena, from Ludhiana, and Surjit Kaur and Kamal from Ferozepur. Meena suffered a fractured hip. All three women were rushed to the Sector 16 Government Multi Speciality Hospital in a van because no ambulance was available. Seven other workers, including the president of the Punjab Anganwadi Mulazim Union Usha Rani, were arrested and charged.

The anganwadi workers came from districts across Chandigar to protest the government's failure to release salaries and other financial benefits. They were also seeking permanency and job security.

## Indian steel workers demand better conditions for casuals

Workers from the Salem Steel Plant in Tamilnadu demonstrated in Salem on April 13 to demand a pay rise for contract employees and those employed in the steel plant's co-operative society.

The demonstrators called for contract workers' wages to be on par with the minimum basic pay of regular public sector employees. Contract workers do not receive provident fund payments or a range of other benefits. There were also demands for the Indian government to speed up the wage revision process for all employees in public sector units. The demonstration was called by the Steel Plant Employees Union.

## Shoe workers in India oppose management abuse

On April 9 workers at the N.M. Zackaria Shoe Company in Ambur in Tamilnadu held a 10-hour sit-in protest against management's "anti-labour approach". Management abuses include demanding temporary employees take leave just after they have reported for duty.

The company has also outsourced work normally done by temporary workers to various small production units in Ambur in order to cut its wage bill.

## Indian railway workers protest pay recommendations

Southern Railway employees demonstrated outside the general manager's office in Chennai, Tamilnadu on April 11. They were protesting against recommendations contained in the central

government's Sixth Pay Commission.

The workers allege that the pay commission recommendations were unjust for employees in lower categories and the claim that these workers would receive a 40 percent salary increase was a myth. In reality Group-C and Group-D employees would get only a 20 percent increase. The demonstrators are members of the Southern Railway Mazdoor Union.

## State government workers protest

Tamilnadu state government workers from Coimbatore, Nilgris, Erode, Namakkal, Salem, Dharmapuri and Krishnagiri districts held a day-long sit-down protest outside the Government Hospital in Erode on April 10 to demand better working conditions.

They want the government to fill all vacant posts, drop moves to downsize departments and abandon so-called modernisation programs and restructuring. The workers, who are affiliated to the Tamilnadu Government Employees' Association, are also demanding pay parity and union recognition.

## Indonesian government employees protest for job security

More than 100 Finance Ministry honorarium (contract) workers rallied on April 9 outside ministry offices in Central Jakarta to demand 6,000 permanent positions.

A Legal Aid Institute (LBH) lawyer said: "They've worked for between three and 27 years at the ministry, but now the ministry has started to terminate their contracts." The contract workers are paid less than civil servants doing the same work.

LBH lawyers are appealing to President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono to implement a government regulation stating that all honorarium workers who have passed recruitment requirements to become civil servants must be hired by the government.

## Indonesian aviation workers demand termination pay

Employees of the dissolved airline operator PT Adam Air Sky Connection (Adam Air) demonstrated outside the Manpower and Transmigration Ministry in Jakarta on April 15. They want the ministry to ensure that the company provides fair separation compensation for its displaced workforce.

Indonesian aviation authorities grounded the airline and withdrew its operating license after a series of in-flight accidents. Safety standard violations, inadequate aircraft maintenance and poor personnel training were revealed during an investigation into the January 1, 2007 accident involving Adam Air Boeing 737 in which all 102 passengers and crew on board were killed.

## Victorian teachers continue strike action

More than 300 government teachers in several regional towns in South Gippsland, including Warragul, Leongatha and Korumburra, in the Australian state of Victoria went on strike for four hours on April 15 as part of their ongoing campaign for improved wages and conditions.

Australian Education Union (AEU) members have rejected an offer by the state Labor government of just 3.25 percent wage increase annually for three years. The teachers' original claim called for a 30 percent wage rise over three years, a maximum of 20 students per class, a reduction in

face to face teaching hours and an increase in fulltime teaching positions.

The AEU claims that teachers in Victoria earn \$10,000 less per year than their counterparts in New South Wales. A union spokesperson said further stoppages were planned from May 13 to 15 to coincide with national literacy and numeracy tests if the wage issue is not resolved. "These tests do not add value to the students' education," she said.

#### **Teachers in remote areas demand better accommodation**

About 500 teachers in North Queensland, Cape York and the Gulf of Carpentaria voted this week to hold stop-work meetings within the next fortnight to discuss taking further industrial action over poor accommodation.

The Queensland Teachers Union (QTU) has identified a \$50 million shortfall in annual government spending on teacher accommodation. It is demanding the shortfall be addressed in the June state budget.

An QTU spokesman claimed that accommodation provided to some teachers and their families living in the state's most remote regions had "water pouring through their roofs during the long wet season, often straight on to power points; doors that won't shut, let alone lock; and a myriad of other problems".

#### **Northern Territory teachers strike for pay rise**

Around 500 teachers went on strike and rallied at Civic Park in Darwin in the Northern Territory (NT) as part of a campaign for a 15 percent pay increase. The NT Labor government will not budge on an 11 percent offer but the commission for public employment dropped a requirement that teachers attend three school development days and offered a \$5,000 remote allowance.

A teachers' union spokesman said that the government would have to lift its offer, claiming that a 15 percent pay increase was needed to provide "a nationally competitive salary" to attract teachers to the NT and ensure "remote schools in particular can be supported by quality teachers".

#### **Aircraft production workers remain on strike against sacking**

About 700 striking production workers at Hawker de Havilland in Port Melbourne are defying an April 11 Federal Court directive ordering a return to work. The workers walked out on April 9 over the sacking of a fellow employee for alleged "time-keeping irregularities".

Hawker de Havilland, which is a Boeing subsidiary, is manufacturing parts for the construction of the new Boeing 787 aircraft in Seattle. Boeing is considering legal action for damages and the workers could face large fines. The strikers are maintaining a picket line at the plant and have condemned the company for "dragging them through the courts".

The Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU), which covers the workers, has not endorsed the strike. The company, however, is considering legal action against the AMWU and a union spokesman said payment could run to \$1 million for every day of the strike action.

#### **New Zealand food processing workers walk out**

Workers at Gourmet Mokai Ltd in New Zealand walked off the job for 48 hours on April 7 and set up a picket line protesting management's refusal to negotiate a collective agreement. The company, which grows tomatoes and capsicums for export, has repeatedly cancelled meetings with the Amalgamated Workers Union that has been attempting to arrange discussions since last November.

The company threatened to bus workers in from another company site at Woodhill near Auckland to replace the strikers. Woodhill workers, however, responded by offering the Mokai crew their full support. Management has now set a date for negotiations that has been agreed to by the union.

#### **Rolling strikes threatened in New Zealand hospitals**

The NZ Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) last week delivered strike notices to cleaning contractor Spotless Services. Rolling 55-minute strikes involving 800 public hospital cleaners, service workers and orderlies are due to begin one minute past midnight on April 22.

The stoppages will go ahead if company does not sign a collective

agreement and begin to pay the new wage rate of \$14.25 per hour that it agreed to over nine months ago. A SFWU spokesman said that all other cleaning contractors and District Health Boards are paying the agreed rates and have sorted out arrangements for back-pay.

In a separate dispute, district health boards are in talks with the Resident Doctors Association in a last-ditch attempt to resolve a pay dispute before junior doctors walk off the job for 48 hours on April 22.

#### **NZ manufacturing workers strike for first time**

Workers at window and door fastener company Assa Abloy are taking industrial action, the first time in the company's history, for a pay increase. The 111 workers, members of the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU), have begun by imposing an overtime ban.

An EPMU spokesman said: "These are very loyal and patient workers and they are looking for a decent pay increase and a fair recognition of their skills." The workers will meet again next week to discuss the next step in the pay campaign.

#### **New Caledonia union protests broken up by police**

Police in New Caledonia forcibly removed striking workers who blocked entry to more than two dozen businesses on April 9. Members of the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE) were protesting in support of the right to strike after several union members were punished for participating in previous work stoppages, which employers claimed were illegal.

At least 1,500 people were prevented from attending work by the union's action. In January, about 30 workers were injured in Noumea in clashes that erupted when police used tear gas and rubber bullets to break up an occupation by striking transport workers.

#### **PNG fish plant workers demand pay hike**

More than 300 workers at the Frescoma (PNG) Ltd fish processing plant in Lae, Papua New Guinea are staying away from work until management adequately addresses their demands. Plant employees and fishermen on the company's pump boats met on April 7 and raised concerns over pay and poor working conditions.

Plant workers had previously walked off the job in February over the same issue. They are demanding a rise in the 0.85 kina (32 US cents) hourly rate paid to employees in administration, receiving, production, maintenance and sanitation divisions. The workers claim that the 50 kina to 60 kina (\$US19 to \$US23) fortnightly salary is inadequate for the amount of work they are required to do.

"We work under extreme conditions, often outside normal working hours, however, we are not compensated for it," one worker said. "We are not paid overtime nor given time-off to compensate for the extra hours worked."

He also pointed out that the price of goods and services had increased and current wages were not enough to cater for the needs of a family. The workers also claim they are not provided with proper safety equipment.



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