

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.

West Bengal steel workers on indefinite strike

Around 2,000 contract workers at the Durgapur Steel Plant (DSP) in West Bengal began indefinite strike action on March 16 in protest against the victimisation of a senior union official. United Contractor Workers Union (UCWU) members are picketing the plant, which is a unit of the Steel Authority of India Ltd.

Several Hindustan Steel Employees' Union and Hindustan Steel Workers' Union members were disciplined following an altercation with some company executives during a demonstration on March 13. The current walkout was triggered when the company executives accused UCWU general secretary Laltu Sengupta of instigating the confrontation and withdrew his gate pass.

The unions are affiliated with the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), which is supporting the strike. There are about 5,000 contract workers at DSP and 12,500 permanent employees.

Japanese air crews walk out for pay

A 24-hour strike by pilots and cabin crew at All Nippon Airways (ANA) on March 18 forced Japan's second largest carrier to scrap or delay nearly 170 domestic flights or over 18 percent of its scheduled services. More than 9,400 passengers were affected by the walkout. The strike followed a breakdown in annual wage negotiations.

ANA crews want a pay rise and better training, but the company, which employs about 30,000, plans to cut non-managerial employees' salaries by about 3 percent, beginning in April. Managers have been told to accept 15 to 20 percent reductions. ANA hopes the pay cuts will save up to 20 billion yen (\$US212 million) this year.

Meanwhile, electronics companies have rejected wage rise demands from their employees. Sharp, Toshiba and NEC said they will not give

even periodic salary rises, the regular wage increases based on age and length of service.

Unions at Toyota Motor Corp. this week dropped their demand for a 4,000 yen-per-month increase and accepted a reduced annual bonus in return for a 7,100 yen monthly pay increase.

Filipino shipyard workers end occupation

Around 200 workers at the Keppel Shipyard in Barangay Looc, Lapu-Lapu City in the Philippines ended an occupation of the company's yard on March 12 after management deferred plans to retrench 400 employees.

The dispute began in February after the company attempted to impose forced leave on employees and then voluntary redundancies, citing "the heavy presence of contractual workers". This was rejected by the Keppel Shipyard-National Federation of Labor and workers began occupying the shipyard after management said it would begin issuing retrenchment notices.

The union disputes company claims that job destruction is a result of the economic downturn and has accused management of trying to destroy the union and replace full-time employees with contract labour.

Cebu jeepney drivers strike

Public Utility Jeepney (PUJ) drivers in Cebu City struck for 24 hours on March 16 over the removal of designated PUJ stops on some city routes and higher city government fines for traffic violations. Nagkahiusang Drayber sa Sugbu (Nadsu) members claim that the drivers now have to illegally pick up passengers in no-stopping zones and therefore face heavy fines.

Cebu City officials responded to the walkout by drawing up a list of PUJs involved in the strike and have threatened to recommend that transport authorities revoke the drivers' licences.

Metal coating workers end two-week strike

Striking Akzo Nobel workers in Sunshine, Victoria returned to work this week after accepting a new work agreement. The company has agreed to a 3.5 percent annual pay increase over two years plus a substantial increase in the maximum redundancy payout to 95 weeks' pay—up from 16 weeks.

The company previously rejected a Liquor Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) demand for a 5 percent pay rise and responded with an offer of 12 months' job security in return for no pay increase. Akzo Nobel claimed that the wage freeze was necessary to save jobs.

Management also threatened forced retrenchments if its 100 employees took industrial action over wage demands. It has not made any comment on job cuts since granting the pay rise.

NSW prison officers impose bans

New South Wales prison officers imposed state-wide overtime bans on March 16 following the removal of 107 prisoners from Cessnock jail. The state Labor government plans to privatise the facility.

The Public Service Association members are defying an Industrial Relations Commission order that the bans be lifted. More than 100 prison officers stopped work at Sydney's Long Bay Jail on February 4 demanding that the state government withdraw plans to privatise Cessnock and Parklea jails.

Cessnock prison officers have demanded an urgent meeting with John Robertson, the Minister for Corrective Services. Robertson claimed to oppose the privatisation of state electricity assets last year when he was Unions NSW secretary. Since entering government he has backed the sell-off of the state's three electricity retail outlets and the privatisation of Cessnock and Parklea jails.

University cleaners begin campaign to save jobs

Cleaners at New South Wales' University of Newcastle this week began protesting the administration's plan to slash \$1 million (25 percent) from its cleaning budget. Mel Gatfield, LHMU NSW Branch Assistant Secretary, said the cuts could mean that up to 40 cleaners would be out of a job.

Cleaners have begun distributing notices to students and the public calling on them to lobby the university's vice-chancellor to reverse the decision.

South Australian bus union calls off planned strike

The Transport Workers Union (TWU) in South Australia has called off a 24-hour strike planned for next week after Adelaide bus operator Torrens Transport revised a pay offer for bus drivers during an Industrial Relations Commission hearing on March 18. The offer includes a 12 percent pay rise over three years.

TWU state secretary Alex Gallagher said drivers would vote on the offer within the next fortnight. "We're not recommending the offer to our membership but we believe it's respectable," he said. The increase, however, falls far short of drivers' previous demand for a 12 percent rise over two years.

New Zealand aged care workers strike

Aged care workers at the Rosebank Home and Hospital in Ashburton, New Zealand struck for 24 hours on March 13 and picketed the premises in a long-running dispute over a new work agreement. The New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO) has been attempting to renegotiate a collective employment agreement at the rest home since August 2008, but the owner has repeatedly refused to agree to a 2.8 percent pay increase for which he has received funding from the District Health Board.

In November last year NZNO members protested outside the facility after rejecting a 1.2 percent pay rise in exchange for cuts in working hours, leaving them with hardly any increase at all. They picketed the hospital again in February after the owner made a revised offer with a zero pay increase. Rosebank management has refused to attend Department of Labour mediation as requested by the union.

The pay range for aged-care workers at Rosebank is between \$12.55 and \$13.05 an hour. New Zealand's minimum wage is set to rise to \$12.50 an hour in April.



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