

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

28 March 2009

The World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Indian ship-wreckers strike over wage cut

Twenty thousand workers at the Alang ship-wrecking yard in Gujarat this week began an indefinite strike in protest against wage cuts. The walkout was sparked after company owners formed a cartel and simultaneously slashed wages from 300 rupees per day (\$US6.00) to 240 rupees and refused to pay overtime.

A sudden increase in the number of ships waiting to be scrapped in the previous two months led to a shortage of labour and a 50 percent wage rise as ship-wrecking companies competed for workers.

The Alang Social Recycling General Workers' Union and the ship-wrecking companies have begun talks under the supervision of the Gujarat Maritime Board and labour officials.

Indian municipal workers strike for pay

Around 5,000 employees of the Rajkot Municipal Corporation (RMC) struck for two days on March 24 demanding immediate implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Employees held noisy demonstrations inside the RMC central building complex during the strike.

The RMC standing committee passed a resolution in February to implement the Sixth Pay Commission but then claimed it could not be implemented because of shortfalls in the municipal budget. RMC Karmchhari Parishad vice-president Ramesh Cholera said: "Further action will be decided by the office bearers of Parishad and other unions."

Indian Honda workers march

Six hundred retrenched workers from the Hero Honda's Daruhera plant in Rewari, Haryana have been marching to demand their jobs back. Workers Union president Ganesh Jodha said 1,800 employees were retrenched by Hero Honda Motors, the world's largest motorcycle company, last October.

The workers began their protest on March 12 at the Daruhera plant and marched for several days before arriving in Chandigarh this week. The union wants a meeting with Haryana's Labour Commissioner to put their demands forward.

Sri Lankan oil workers threaten action over salary rise

Unionists at the Ceylon Petroleum Corporation have demanded that the Rajapakse government pay outstanding salary increments by March 31. Seven thousand workers at the state-owned company unanimously voted this week to take "stern action" if the government fails to pay the increases by next week's deadline.

The workers, who are represented by six unions, presented a letter to Sri Lanka's Minister of Petroleum and Petroleum Resource Development this week stating their demands.

Chinese steel workers demonstrate over pay

Nearly 1,000 workers from the Linzhou Iron and Steel Company blocked a major road in Henan Province's Linzhou City on March 21 to demand payment of outstanding salary and insurance premiums. The workers are also opposed to a proposed restructuring plan by the company and want compensation for laid-off employees. The protest ended the next day after a discussion with local officials.

Taiwan electronics workers protest

About 100 former employees of the Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company (TSMC) gathered outside the Council of Labor Affairs (CLA) building in Taipei City on March 24 to protest sackings and inappropriate labour practices.

TSMC Labor Association members carried signs stating, "Corporate gorilla cheats workers" and shouted slogans describing the company as "heartless".

Up to 1,000 employees have been laid off since January through a company program called "survival of the fittest". Many of those sacked said they received poor work performance reviews because they had taken maternity, personal or sick leave during the year.

A 46-year-old processing clerk said she had worked for the company for 16 years. "They called us into a small conference room one by one and told us [the news], so we didn't know that the company was laying off so many people until we talked to each other about it," she said.

TSMC management have responded to CLA enquiries by stating the company would "assist ex-employees in obtaining unemployment benefits".

Western Australian construction workers strike after fatal accident

Hundreds of workers on John Holland construction sites in Western Australia walked off the job for 24 hours on March 19 following the death of a 45-year-old employee at a BHP-Billiton construction site at Newman in the Pilbara region. It is the fifth death at a BHP-Billiton mine site in the region during the past eight months and the ninth in five years.

Construction work has been suspended at the Newman Hub project site while the Western Australian Department of Mines and Petroleum investigates the incident. The company has assured its shareholders, however, that mine, rail and shipping activities were continuing.

All BHP-Billiton operations in Western Australia were temporarily suspended in September after two deaths at the company's Yandi mine in a two-week period.

NSW hospital staff strike over security

Dozens of medical staff at Wagga Wagga Base Hospital in New South Wales stopped work on March 23 in protest against security staff doing general ward duties and the hospital's manager overseeing after-hours security.

Health Services Union (HSU) member and paramedic Brett Campbell said that removing security officers from doing their regular walk-through of other departments and wards would put patient and staff safety at risk. "We must not forget that it was not that many years ago that a ward

orderly was stabbed in the emergency department of this facility and that's why security was escalated," he said.

While Greater Southern Health management says it will meet HSU members this week to address their concerns, it claims that patient and staff safety is assured.

Victorian firefighters call for industrial action

Over 100 Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) firefighters met in the Victorian rural towns of Epsom, Benalla and Bendigo this week. The firefighters rejected a new workplace agreement offer and authorised the Australian Workers Union (AWU) to begin an industrial campaign for pay parity with their Country Fire Authority counterparts. A series of rallies and meetings will be held in coming months.

AWU branch secretary Cesar Melhem said that DSE firefighters were the lowest paid in the state, earning a basic annual pay of \$32,000 (\$US20,500)—\$6.33 an hour less than other fire-fighters in the state. The union also wants DSE full-time staff doubled to 800 employees and a joint safety review following 56 reported safety incidents during the bushfire season.

Unions call off brewery jobs campaign

A three-week protest by 80 retrenched workers from Foster's Carlton and United Brewery at Abbotsford in Melbourne was called off by the Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) and the Electrical Trades Union (ETU) this week.

Workers began picketing the factory on March 4 demanding that the company reverse its decision to outsource 115 jobs to maintenance contractor ABB Australia. The brewery workers rejected an offer from ABB to employ them on a lower rate of pay.

The unions claimed victory after Foster's—anxious to restore production—pressured ABB to employ some of the workers on pay and conditions similar to those when employed directly by Foster's. The sacked workers still need to apply to ABB for their jobs.

Air New Zealand cabin crew to strike over Easter

Nearly 250 Air New Zealand cabin crew on short-haul international routes have announced a four-day strike from April 8. The strike would affect 20,000 passengers booked to fly over the Easter Holiday weekend.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) members, employed by an airline subsidiary Zeal 320, this week rejected a 4.5 percent pay increase for 15 months and decided to strike for pay parity with other Air NZ cabin crew doing the same work.

The union said that Zeal 320 staff were being paid "poverty wages" of \$25,625 (\$US13,486) per year while cabin crew members directly employed by Air NZ received thousands of dollars more. One crew member, Kirsty Hamilton, said she and her colleagues were sick of "being treated as second-class citizens". "We've got crew who go on trips away with work and can't afford to eat when they're at the hotel, so they don't, they wait until they get on board," she said.

The crew will begin low-level action this weekend by not wearing uniforms and refusing to do paperwork. They will step this up next week by refusing to fill in for sick colleagues.

New Caledonia airline workers end strike

A month-long strike at New Caledonia's national carrier, Aircalin, ended last week after workers reached an agreement with management over a sacked steward. The company has agreed to employ the steward in a ground staff position after a six-month suspension period.

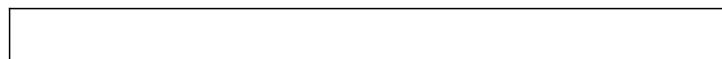
The steward was fired in February for allegedly insulting and pushing a colleague. The union immediately called a solidarity strike, demanding that the worker be re-employed. The strike had disrupted access to the airline's commercial premises, delaying the delivery of cargo to some New Caledonian businesses.

Solomon Islands mine workers to strike

Members of the Solomon Islands National Union of Workers (NUW) at the Australian-owned Gold Ridge Mining Company on Central Guadalcanal have issued a 14-day strike notice. The workers want the mine company's general manager Keith Nielson removed. Their demand relates to the handling and disposal of cyanide by local employees without safety equipment.

Workers also claim that Nielson has continuously and unlawfully dismissed workers without good reasons and that his management displayed racial discrimination, intimidation, threats, physical assault and disrespect to local employees and landowners.

The 14-day strike notice lapses on April 2. The NUW has also advised Gold Ridge Mining that a two-week extension of the same notice is also in force, which covers employees performing jobs legally classified as essential services.





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