

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.

Korean journalists end strike

Seoul cable news channel YTN journalists suspended their 10-day strike and returned to work on April 2, after reaching a nine-point deal with management.

Full details have not been reported by the media but the agreement, which includes reinstatement of six dismissed union officials, ends an eight-month conflict. A district court in Seoul has also approved bail for a YTN union official who was arrested last month on charges of interfering with the YTN director general's official duties.

The dispute began after Koo Bon-hong, a close associate of Korean President Myung-bak Lee, was appointed YTN director-general. Journalists feared Koo would compromise the channel's political neutrality.

After taking office a year ago, President Lee has been at odds with local television stations, which have accused him of appointing pro-government figures to top media positions. Critics claim the replacement of broadcaster heads is an initial step in the president's ultimate plan to privatise state-run television channels.

Chinese textile workers protest

More than 1,000 workers from a textile factory 140 kilometres north of Beijing began marching on the capital on April 4 over job losses and poor severance pay. The Baoding city factory in Hebei province, which employs around 4,000 people, had been closed for a week before the protest.

The marchers were forced to abandon their protest on April 5, after local authorities intervened and forced them into buses and sent them back to Baoding. The workers wanted to present a petition to central government authorities about the factory closure.

Indian bank officers to strike

The Associate Banks Officers Association (ABOA) has called strike action in five of the State Bank of India (SBI) associate banks for April 11

and 13 over bank merger plans. Management plans to merge the SBI with the associate banks. Bank employees also want allowance and loan parity with parent bank workers and are demanding management not establish SBI branches near the associate branches.

Around 22,000 employees are expected to participate in the walkout. ABOA members at associate banks in Patiala, Hyderabad, Bikaner/Jaipur, Mysore and Travancore have already imposed work-to-rule bans.

Indian passport workers strike

Staff at the Regional Passport Office (RPO) in Chennai, Tamil Nadu walked off the job on April 2 in solidarity with 100 RPO co-workers in Secunderabad, who struck that day to demand removal of closed-circuit television (CCTV) from their office. The passport office employees alleged that the RPO was showing the CCTV footage to outsiders.

Sacked Bangladesh port workers call off strike

Four thousand sacked dockers from Mongla Port in Bangladesh called off strike action planned for April 7 after port authority management agreed to discuss their claims. The workers want payment of all wage arrears, cancellation of proposed new labour law amendments and immediate action against corruption officials at Mongla Port Authority (MPA).

Mongla Sramik Sangha general secretary Shahabuddin Ahmed told the media that the union had been assured that its demands would be resolved following a meeting with a new MPA chairman who is expected to take up his post next week.

Deported Bangladesh workers protest

Some 30 deported workers from Malaysia staged a sit-in at Zia International Airport, Dhaka, on April 5 to demand government compensation.

Workers claimed that they paid a recruiting agency to work in Malaysia but were sacked after a month because they did not have legal work permits. "We sought assistance from Bangladesh High Commission for returning home but they did not help. We came back home with the help of [Malaysian human rights organisation] Tenaganita," one worker said.

“We will not leave until we get any compensation from the government,” he said. “We sold our land properties and other valuables and now we have nothing to spend for living. The recruiting agent in Bangladesh and the Malaysian agent took a lot of money from us.”

Sri Lankan public transport workers strike

Public transport bus drivers and office staff at 11 bus depots in southern Sri Lanka struck on April 7 to demand immediate payment of a 3,000-rupee (\$US26) advance for the Sinhala and Hindu new year festival holidays. The workers also want payment of arrears and amalgamation of a 3,500-rupee living allowance with basic pay.

The bus employees claim that salary allowances and arrears have not been paid and that other government institution workers are paid early on April 6, before the forthcoming new year festivals.

Thailand tyre workers locked out

Over 380 workers at French-owned tyre manufacturer Michelin were locked out of the Laem Chabang factory in Chonburi Province on March 25 after they refused to withdraw their names from a petition opposing a 13 percent wage cut. The petition also called on managers to stop forcing employees to sign wage-cut acceptance forms and to quit victimising those who refused.

Before the mass lockout, Michelin suspended eight worker representatives and imposed a 35 percent pay cut on all employees who refused to disavow the petition. They also slashed holidays to only six days a year. The plant employs 1,500 and produces auto and light truck tyres. Michelin has two other tyre manufacturing plants in Thailand, employing another 2,700 workers.

The Laem Chabang workers are not unionised but are currently being represented by the International Federation of Chemical, Energy, Mine and General Workers’ Unions, which is seeking assistance from Michelin’s European Works Council to negotiate a resolution.

Filipino construction workers strike

Around 250 employees of civil works contractor McConnell Dowell Company at the Ambuklao power plant in Baguio, Philippines walked off the job on April 4 and protested outside the company’s site office. The construction workers were demanding free meals but also have various complaints against some company officers and the hiring policies of SN Aboitiz Power, the overseeing contractor.

The Department of Labor and Employment had already mediated on the issues and directed McConnell Dowell to negotiate a resolution, which the company had failed to do.

Rockhampton council workers march

About 70 council workers stopped work and marched on Rockhampton

city hall, Queensland on April 2 while colleagues downed tools in Yeppoon and Mt Morgan to protest against possible privatisation of the region’s water supply.

The Rockhampton Regional Council will decide in three months whether to accept an independent consultant’s recommendation to appoint a board of directors for Fitzroy River Water, which would run it as a corporation. Workers fear this is the first step toward privatisation.

An Australian Workers Union official told the protest if the region’s water and sewerage services were corporatised, charges would soar and jobs would be axed. “When water was taken out of public hands in South Australia,” he said, “there was an immediate 59 percent price hike.”

Rockhampton residents currently pay less for their water services than any other ratepayers in Queensland. The average bill in the region is \$300, compared with a state average of about \$480.

Victorian train drivers trade safety for pay rise

The Rail, Tram and Bus Union (RTBU) announced this week that it was close to settling a long-running dispute with Melbourne’s metro rail operator Connex for a new collective agreement.

In return for a 15 percent pay increase over three years, train drivers are expected to give train controllers sole responsibility for logging faults while downgrading the seriousness of up to 1,500 of the network’s 5,000-odd faults.

Connex claims that under the deal, expected to be signed by the end of the month, a new definition of what is a serious fault will reduce train cancellations by 35 percent.

RTBU state secretary Trevor Dobbyn confirmed the deal was close but refused to elaborate on the relaxation of fault reporting.

Bankwest employees demonstrate over job losses

Around 120 Bankwest workers marched in Perth this week over the bank’s plan to shed 400 jobs across Australia, including 250 in Western Australia.

Protesters rallied at The Esplanade and marched to the Bankwest Tower in Perth’s CBD. Finance Sector Union (FSU) national secretary Leon Carter addressed the rally calling on Bankwest management to, “Keep their word and commit to doing what it takes to keep people working”.

Bankwest was taken over by the Commonwealth Bank of Australia (CBA) last year but still trades under the same name. At that time Bankwest managing director Jon Sutton claimed there would be no job losses or branch closures.

FSU national secretary Carter told the protesting employees that they were “not alone” but failed to offer any perspective to save jobs. Instead, he proposed to hold talks with the bank and appeal to the Rudd Labor government to pressure the bank to reverse its decision.

Union withdraws Air New Zealand strike notice

A planned four-day strike by Air New Zealand flight attendants was called off this week by the Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) after legal advice that their strike notice would not survive

an injunction filed by Air NZ in the Employment Court on technical grounds. EPMU secretary Andrew Little said current industrial action, involving non-compliance with the company's "uniform policy" and non-availability of staff for stand-by rosters, would continue indefinitely.

The cabin crews, employed by an Air NZ subsidiary Zeal 320, have rejected a 4.5 percent pay increase for 15 months and are demanding pay parity with other Air NZ employees doing the same work. The union claimed Zeal 320 crew are paid "poverty wages" while cabin crew members directly employed by Air NZ received thousands of dollars a year more.

The strike would have affected 20,000 passengers booked on trans-Tasman and Pacific flights over the Easter holiday period. Last week an Air New Zealand flight to Australia was grounded after two Zeal 320 employees were suspended for donning pink wigs. Nine were suspended the day before for wearing feather boas, wigs and stickers.

The company and the EPMU are continuing in negotiations. The union said it is considering re-issuing the strike notice.

Deal ends New Zealand call centre lockout

The lockout of 59 Unite union members at Oceania Customer Interaction Service (OCIS), an Auckland call centre, ended on March 24 after both parties reached an agreement on a collective agreement. The workers, mostly teenagers, had been taking action for three weeks to raise wages from the legal minimum of \$12.50 to \$15 an hour. They were told they had to accept a contract at this rate or remain locked out.

The settlement involves withdrawal of the lockout notice, payment for members who lost shifts during the two-day lockout, and withdrawal of pending legal action against the union for alleged bad-faith bargaining.

The pay rise agreed to by Unite, however, is less than what workers wanted. It will deliver only a 50 cents an hour increase in the base rate and the "opportunity" to earn up to another \$1 an hour depending on achievement of "quality and performance standards".

The company does market research for New Zealand Post, Wellington City Council and the Ministry of Tourism.

Solomon Islands miners' strike cancelled

A strike notice issued by workers at the Australian-owned Gold Ridge Mine in the Solomon Islands was cancelled this week following a meeting between Australian Solomons Gold chairman Stephen Everett and Solomon Islands Union of Workers head Tony Kagovai.

Workers at the Central Guadalcanal mine issued a 14-day strike notice late last month, demanding removal of the company's general manager Keith Nielson. Nielson was accused of implementing dangerous work practices by not providing safety equipment for handling and disposing of cyanide. Workers also claim that Nielson had continuously and unlawfully dismissed workers without good reasons.

The long-running issue has now been referred to the Solomon Islands' trade disputes panel.





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