

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 strike after arrests

Journalists at YTN, a part public-owned cable news broadcast company in Seoul, struck indefinitely on March 23 over the arrest of four colleagues. Police arrested the union delegates at their homes on March 22, claiming that they were obstructing the station's operations and had not responded to a police summons.

Journalists have been in conflict with YTN management for over eight months since Koo Bon-hong, a close associate of Korean President Myung-bak Lee, was appointed the YTN director-general by the president. Journalists fear Koo will compromise the channel's political neutrality.

Last year, YTN management fired six unionists and disciplined 27 others for taking industrial action against Koo.

Jong-myun Roh, head of the journalists' union, said, "Our arrests were designed to crush the journalists' protests". Journalists have begun a sit-in protest at YTN in Seoul station. Members of the National Union of Media Workers and other civic organisations demonstrated at the Seoul District Court on March 25 demanding release of the unionists.

Indian jute workers' strike enters fourth month

An indefinite strike by 2,500 jute workers from the East India Commercial Company Limited (ECCIL) in Kothuru, Andhra Pradesh, entered its fourth month this week. The Indian Federation of Trade Unions and the Telugu Nadu Trade Union Council have presented a charter of demands that includes wage increases in line with rising consumer prices, an attendance incentive and advance payment of the dearness allowance.

ECCIL management called on the strikers to resume work following the

failure of a meeting this week by the Joint Commissioner of Labour, management and the unions. Up until now ECCIL management has refused to talk to the unions, claiming the strike is illegal because the current agreement does not expire until 2010.

Bangladesh jute workers begin hunger strike

Several thousand Akiz Jute Mill employees in the Nawapara Industrial Area, Jessore, began a hunger strike on March 28 in protest against closure of the mill and to demand payment of their dues. Management closed the plant indefinitely for "security reasons" on March 23, displacing 4,500 workers.

Workers temporarily blocked the Jessore-Khulna Highway, accusing the company of using the closure to force local residents to hand over land that included a road with access to the highway. They said mill management had already pressured some local people to sell their land to the company for nominal prices.

Bangladeshi cleaners protest over sackings

Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC) employees demonstrated at the Nagar Bhaban (local government building) on March 31 over the termination of 22 colleagues. A government official told the media: "RCC has no need of additional employees [and] the authorities have sacked them."

The protesting RCC workers chanted slogans condemning government officials and demanding reinstatement. The protestors dispersed after police intervened.

Sacked Pakistan bank employees demand jobs

Sacked Zarai Taraqati Bank employees demonstrated in Nawabshah on March 30 to demand reinstatement. The bank workers, along with many

other government workers, were sacked during the second tenure of the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP) government in 1996.

While the current government has reinstated some government employees, bank workers claim that Zarai Taraqiati Bank management is dragging its feet on the issue. The protestors threatened to intensify the campaign if they are not reinstated.

Pakistan water workers protest

National Programme for Improvement of Watercourses (NPIW) employees marched from the Shahbaz building to the Hyderabad Press Club on March 28 to demand regularisation of contract workers.

Workers claimed that "unclear" government policies meant that the future of 1,800 NPIW employees was uncertain. They said that a draft order on the regularisation of contractual employees has been pending for the last eight months.

Sri Lankan public sector workers demonstrate

Public sector workers demonstrated outside the Ministry of Public Administration in Colombo on April 1 as part of an all-island protest organised by the All Ceylon Trade Union Federation against newly imposed government regulations on public servants. The union said new regulations would affect promotions, wage increments, union activities and the job security of all public sector workers.

Demonstrating workers claimed that the government restrictions posted in the Extraordinary Gazette Notification were to satisfy International Monetary Fund conditions imposed on the government for a \$US1.9 billion loan.

Wildcat strike at Australian airports

Around 2,000 Qantas baggage handlers and other ground staff walked off the job for four hours at airports across Australia on March 30, causing major delays and grounding all international flights out of Sydney. The walkout left passengers queuing at check-in counters in Perth, Adelaide, Brisbane and Sydney. The protest was against the outsourcing of 100 baggage-handling jobs at Qantas subsidiary Jetstar to the Aero-care labour-hire company.

There was traffic chaos around Sydney airport when Transport Workers Union federal secretary Tony Sheldon led 250 workers onto the road outside the Sydney international terminal where they demonstrated for an

hour. Sheldon said Qantas had reneged on an agreement on job security six weeks earlier: "They [Qantas] broke it purely for greed, profit and executive bonuses."

A Qantas spokesman claimed that no jobs had been "targeted for outsourcing" but admitted that Aero-care has been contracted to provide baggage-handling services at Sydney airport mid-year.

The Australian Industrial Relations Commission ordered the baggage handlers back to work after a successful appeal from Qantas claiming the strike was illegal.

NSW prison officers strike

Several thousand New South Wales prison wardens and Correctional Centre educators marched from Sydney's Hyde Park to state parliament on April 2 during a 24-hour strike against the Labor government's plan to privatise Parklea and Cessnock jails and prison escort services.

The last major anti-privatisation rally outside parliament was led by former Unions NSW boss John Robertson who is now the minister in charge of privatising the two prisons. Protestors called on Robertson to front the rally. He failed to do so, but prior to the rally said the government was committed to privatising the jails.

Wardens are being offered employment at other prisons or early retirement. If they decide to remain at Cessnock or Parklea they will only be guaranteed employment for the first 12 months. About 100 of the state's 500 prison-escort staff would be retained for the transport of high-risk prisoners.

Public Service Association members imposed state-wide overtime bans on March 16 following the removal of 107 prisoners from Cessnock jail.

Victorian construction workers protest over safety

Six hundred construction workers rallied at the Melbourne Convention Centre on March 31 amid rising anger over injuries and fatalities on John Holland construction sites in the past 13 months. Their protest was directed at John Holland's chairperson Janet Holmes à Court, a keynote speaker at a "Safety in Action" conference being held at the venue.

Last week hundreds of workers on John Holland construction sites around Australia walked off the job for 24 hours following the death of a 45-year-old employee at a BHP-Billiton mine construction site in Western Australia. John Holland is currently facing four prosecutions for alleged breaches of safety legislation.

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Bank union delegates hold stop-work meeting

Around 70 Finance Sector Union delegates representing Bankwest employees in Western Australia held a stop-work meeting in Perth on April 2 to consider possible industrial action in response to the axing of 400 Bankwest jobs, including 250 in Western Australia.

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

The workers are angry that this pledge has not been honoured and the fact that the CBA has posted a \$2 billion (\$US1.3 billion) interim profit result since the takeover. The meeting passed a resolution calling on the company to consider voluntary redundancies and increased severance payments. This has been rejected by Bankwest management.

New Zealand hotel workers strike

Over 20 room attendants and other staff at Auckland's plush Crowne Plaza Hotel struck last weekend demanding a pay rise and better working conditions. Unite union delegate Tapa Jago said workers were "fed up with the low pay and heavy workloads".

The hotel industry is one of the lowest paid sectors, with a starting rate of \$13 an hour (\$US6.50)—just 50 cents above the minimum wage. While the hotel made a gross profit of \$8.5 million in 2008, management claims it cannot afford to lift wages.

New Zealand workers rally over job losses

More than 200 workers marched in Nelson, on New Zealand's South Island, on March 21 demanding an end to job losses. They carried banners saying "Put People First", and chanted: "What do we want? To keep our job." and "There's no need for corporate greed".

However, the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU), which organised the "Fairness at Work" rally, used it to divert workers into accepting forthcoming redundancies. An SFWU spokesman said the rally was "about offering support for workers who are already facing redundancy" and "information and support to others who are feeling vulnerable about their jobs".

Nelson is being hit hard with job losses. Sealord is axing 160 fish process workers and 20 salaried staff, Nelson Pine will lay off 60 workers this month and 100 night shift workers at Alliance Group's Stoke plant had their season finish two months earlier than last year.

The SFWU has nearly 4,000 signatures in a petition asking Sealord to

"reconsider" its redundancies, and mainly used the protest rally to collect more signatures. The rally was addressed by union officials and MPs from the Labor Party and Maori Party. None offered any perspective to defend jobs.

Air New Zealand recruits strike-breakers

Air New Zealand began recruiting strike-breakers this week in a bid to break a planned walkout by 250 flight attendants on its trans-Tasman and Pacific Islands flights over Easter. The cabin crews have given notice of a four-day strike from April 8, which is expected to affect over 20,000 passengers.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union secretary Andrew Little claimed Air NZ's action is illegal under the Employment Relations Act 2000 and has threatened legal action.

Meanwhile, nine employees have been suspended by the airline after they refused to wear required uniforms as part of their escalating industrial action. The cabin crews, employed by an Air NZ subsidiary Zeal 320, last week rejected a 4.5 percent pay increase for 15 months and decided to strike for pay parity with other Air NZ employees 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. The union and Air NZ continued mediation talks during the week.

New Caledonia airline workers strike

Domestic air flights in New Caledonia were severely disrupted last weekend after a strike by Air Caledonia ground workers demanding a better employment contract for a work colleague who has been accused of using confidential airline information for her personal use. Flights to the Loyalty Islands and the Isle of Pines were delayed or cancelled while some aircraft flew out of Noumea empty to pick up stranded travellers.

The company has instructed airline managers to abandon talks with the strikers. The action was led by the Kanak and Exploited Workers Union (USTKE).



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