

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.

Pakistani power workers strike

Thousands of contract workers for Karachi Electric Supply Company (KESC) walked out on strike on April 9, cutting electricity supplies to most parts of Karachi and surrounding districts for several hours. Six workers were arrested during sit-down protests in Karachi and during a road blockade in Saddar.

While the Peoples Worker Union (PWU), which covers about 8,000 KSEC contract workers, was promised that their members would be given regular work when the utility company was privatised in 2005, this has not happened. PWU general secretary Abdul Latif Mughal said he approached KSEC about the issue six months ago but “no action had been taken so far”.

Mughal also told the local media that staff shortages were increasing workloads. “As per international standards, electricity supply companies hire one employee for 60 consumers but in KESC only 1 employee is available to handle almost 200 consumers,” he said.

India: Dunlop workers protest over sackings

Displaced workers from Dunlop India’s Sahaganj tyre factory in West Bengal took to the streets on April 10 over the dismissal of 13 employees just prior to a major reopening of the plant. Workers blocked the Katwa-Bandel railway line for more than an hour and barricaded the Grand Trunk Road.

Management claims the workers were sacked because of their “irregular presence and undisciplined attitude” but Save Dunlop Committee spokesman Bidyut Rauth said the dismissals were illegal and that workers were planning more demonstrations.

Dunlop closed the factory last November, threatening the future of its 1,202 employees. The plant was reopened in March but management only

called in 200 workers, claiming that the factory needed refurbishing before it went into full production.

Korean broadcast workers strike over sacking

Over 130 news reporters and camera crews at South Korea’s national news broadcaster MBC vowed to continue strike action on April 13 following the sacking of News Desk anchor Shin Kyung-min. MBC staff walked out four days earlier, after the company announced that Shin would be replaced.

Reporters allege Shin is being targeted because he criticised Korean President Lee Myung-bak at the end of his show. Shin has also been critical of other broadcasters that have failed to report street protests against the Lee administration.

Since Lee came to power a year ago, news reporters have accused him of trying to influence news content by replacing key media personnel. Critics also claim these are steps toward privatisation of state-run television channels.

Taxi drivers in central China return to work

Over 3,000 striking taxi drivers in Yueyang City, Hunan Province began returning to work on April 13, ending a three-day strike. The strike began when dozens of drivers parked their cabs outside the Yueyang municipal office building, demanding that the local government cut the high monthly fees that drivers have to pay taxi companies.

The city government has agreed to allow taxi drivers to suspend paying their monthly fees and directed pricing authorities to “thoroughly investigate the issue, hear the drivers’ grievances and readjust the monthly fees”.

Yueyang has 11 taxi firms, which control about 1,600 taxis. Drivers must pay about 6,400 yuan (\$US941) per month to their employing taxi company.

Beijing construction workers occupy flats

Around 20 construction workers occupied a 17-floor block of flats in Beijing on April 10 to demand payment of outstanding wages. While building is near completion, the workers have not been paid any salaries during the construction project. The occupation ended after the construction company agreed to enter talks over the issue.

Taiwan civil servants protest over job security

Dozens of contract civil servants demonstrated outside the Council of Labor Affairs in Taipei on April 14 to protest the council's failure to protect their rights. The workers claim to speak for 26,000 colleagues throughout the country.

Labor Rights Association president Wang Chuan-ping, one of the protest leaders, urged the council to include them under the Labor Standards Act this year. "We don't want unstable work. We live with the fear of being the first to be laid off," she said. "We work for 10, 20 years, but receive no pension."

The Department of Labor Standards responded to the demonstration by agreeing to discuss workers' concerns with the Ministry of Civil Service, which has jurisdiction over the issue.

Indonesian workers demonstrate over layoffs

About 400 employees of paint producer PT Avia Aviant in Sidoarjo, East Java struck on April 15 over the dismissal of 59 co-workers. The workers blocked the company gate and stopped trucks from entering the plant.

Strike coordinator Yudhi Setiawan said the dismissed workers were given one month's salary, instead of two times the monthly salary required by law. "We want the company to reemploy the workers," he said.

On the same day, about 100 workers from UD Terang Suara, PT Inkatama and CV Harita Surabaya rallied outside the Surabaya legislative building to demand the companies provide severance payments according to the Manpower Law. Workers called on the Surabaya Manpower Office to mediate the severance disputes. Workers Alliance Congress chairman Syahril Romadhon accused employers of paying reduced severance packages that violated the Manpower Law.

The Workers Alliance Congress claims that, as of March, over 14,000 workers from 90 companies in 17 cities across East Java have been laid off this year. Most worked in the garment, furniture, footwear and electronic utility sectors. Media reports in February also claimed that thousands of dismissed workers in the East Java industrial areas of

Rungkut, Surabaya and Sidoarjo who have not received their legal severance payouts occupied their workplaces to secure their entitlements.

On April 16, 200 dismissed shipping company workers from PT Inkosindo Sukses rallied outside the Singapore Embassy in Kuningan, South Jakarta, demanding the Singapore government help them get "reasonable" severance pay. Workers then marched to the United Nations representative office in Central Jakarta. PT Inkosindo Sukses has port facilities in Singapore and Seattle, in the US.

Philippine workers protest layoffs

About 80 employees of Finnish sauna manufacturer Sauna World (SAWO) rallied inside the Mactan Export Processing Zone (MEPZ) 2 in Cebu, Philippines on April 13 against alleged illegal layoffs. They marched from their factory to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) office to protest the sackings.

Workers said 52 regular employees and 32 contractual employees were locked out when they tried to clarify why they were given retrenchment notices. DOLE claimed it had no power in the dispute other than to ensure the termination pay offered by SAWO was paid.

Sacked construction workers in mediation talks

Construction giant John Holland and building unions have agreed to mediation talks with Victorian County Court judge and former Australian Industrial Relations Commission vice-president Iain Ross over a long-running pay dispute at Melbourne's West Gate Bridge. The company is involved in strengthening work and the erection of anti-suicide barriers at the bridge.

Workers have been picketing the project for six weeks over the issue—a move John Holland is claiming is unlawful in proceedings before the Federal Court. Mass pickets stopped police escorts of non-union contractors into the site on April 14 but increased police numbers broke the picket lines on April 16.

The picket was established after the sudden sacking on March 2 of 39 workers employed in December by Civil Pacific Services. AMWU organiser Tony Mavromatis said Civil Pacific Services had agreed to pay the industry standard but the builder, John Holland, refused to honour the deal.

Western Australian carers protest for pay

More than a hundred professional carers, employees of the Disabilities Services Commission, rallied at parliament house in Perth on April 9 to demand a pay rise that was negotiated nearly six months ago. The Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) claims the agreement has been languishing in the state government's approvals queue, causing the workers to miss out on two outstanding pay rises. They have not had a pay increase since March 2007.

Disability Services Minister Simon O'Brien has claimed that he will authorise an immediate admin payment and reclassify pay increases, but only after approval by state cabinet.



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New Zealand call centre workers locked out

Twenty four Unite Union members employed by Synovate were locked out of its Auckland call centre on April 10 after refusing to resign from the union and accept a 20-cent per hour pay rise.

Workers responded by putting their own lock on the premise's main entry and parked a truck against a side entrance, temporally locking in managers and preventing other staff entering. The "lock-in" was removed after two hours when managers agreed to enter talks with the union.

The union claims that Synovate workers in New Zealand are paid the minimum wage of \$12.50 (\$US6.98) an hour to call Australia and do research for major banks and insurance companies such as MediBank Private and BankWest. Synovate call centre workers in Australia, however, receive much higher pay rates for the same work.

Papuan mine workers reject layoffs

PT Freeport Indonesia, a local unit of US giant gold and copper producer Freeport-McMoRan Copper & Gold Inc, is taking legal action against five Papuan workers who have refused to accept their retrenchment from the company. The first court hearing into the case began at South Jakarta's industrial relations court on April 14.

Freeport retrenched 67 workers early this year as part of the company's cost-cutting measures. Leader of the Papua Workers Union, Yohanis Samual Nussy, condemned the firings, telling the local media that the sackings were unnecessary and that Freeport and its contracting companies could economise in many other areas.

Halim Sandere, one of the five Freeport workers opposing the retrenchments, told the media: "Freeport treated us unfairly. We did no wrong but the company fired us without prior notification. The company also has no permit (for the layoffs) from the Manpower and Transmigration Ministry."

The court is due to rule on the case within 50 days.