

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.

Indian unorganised sector workers march

Thousands of unorganised workers in Tamil Nadu marched in Chepauk on April 20 in protest against the state government's failure to provide social security benefits, union rights and a fair minimum wage for domestic workers.

Protesters said that their demands, including for legal recognition of women employees in the unorganised sector, had been submitted to the chief minister but there had been no response. The demonstration was organised by the Tamil Manila Kattida Thozhilalar Sangam.

Indian metal workers protest conditions

Indian Metals and Ferro Alloys (IMFA) employees and their families in Therubali, Orissa boycotted the Indian general elections this week in protest over their poor living conditions and to demand health facilities, which are presently not available at the company.

Workers also alleged that they were encouraged to take credit from the company's Co-operative Society to make up for non-payment of the Dearness Allowance since 1992 while a court case over the allowance payment was being heard. The company recently responded to the long-running case by deducting dues from workers' salaries.

Karnataka power contractors demand outstanding wages

Twenty contract workers from the Gulbarga Electricity Supply Company (GESCOM) in Karnataka, India rallied outside the company's

office on April 16 to demand outstanding wages. GESCOM Contract Workers' Federation Shoukat spokesman Ali Alur told the media that 70 contractors had been with the company for more than six years but only 50 had their contracts renewed. The remaining 20 were asked by company officials to remain working but had not been paid any salaries for the past four months.

Tamil Nadu tea factory workers demonstrate

On April 20, hundreds of workers from various industrial cooperative tea factories or INDCOs marched in Udhamandalam and rallied at the regional collectorate to demand a wage increase.

A memorandum submitted to the collectorate by the Nilgiris District INDCO Workers' Association stated that the wages of more than 1,200 tea workers had not been revised for 14 years and called for a daily minimum wage of 150 rupees (\$US3).

Pakistan public servants strike

All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) members in 114 districts held a "pen-down" strike on April 22 over the government's refusal to grant union calls for a salary increase, permanent jobs for contract clerks and other demands.

The protesting clerks from over 40 departments disrupted traffic in several Lahore locations. APCA officials said that President Asif Ali Zardari had failed to honour a written work agreement signed between the late former Premier Benazir Bhutto and the union.

Pakistan teachers rally

Hundreds of Punjabi district college teachers rallied in Lahore on April 21 to demand the government grant a number of longstanding demands

for improved wages and conditions.

Members of the Punjab Professors and Lecturers Association (PPLA) marched from the Government MAO College to the Punjab Assembly where they staged a protest sit-in and were addressed by PPLA president Nazim Hussain Shah. The PPLA members the upgrade of college teachers, regularisation of contract lecturers, increases in salaries, earned leave during higher education and access to leave for foreign travel.

The rally dispersed after government officials failed to meet the protesters. PPLA members have vowed to hold further demonstrations until their demands are granted.

Korean auto workers vote to strike

More than 85 percent of Ssangyong Motor union members voted on April 15 to take strike action against the company's restructuring program. Ssangyong, which is Korea's smallest auto manufacturer, is 51-percent owned by the Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp. (SAIC), China's largest automaker.

Ssangyong sales nosedived by 76 percent in the first three months of this year and the company is facing a bankruptcy court hearing in May. The company, which has a production capacity of 220,000 vehicles a year, plans to slash over 2,600 jobs or 37 percent of its 7,100-strong workforce.

The union has called on SAIC to inject additional capital into the Korean automaker but SAIC has said it will allow Ssangyong to collapse unless the union accepts the job cuts.

Indonesian hotel workers protest sackings

Hundreds of Soechi International Hotel employees gathered at the North Sumatra Manpower and Transmigration Office on April 15 after a second round of mediation talks over the dismissal of fellow workers failed.

One worker was dismissed without severance pay and six others face the same fate for taking sick leave. The protesting employees have said they will remain in the manpower office compound until their demands are met. The international hotel chain is owned by the Soechi shipping company, which also has interests in the energy sector.

Telstra workers resume industrial action

Communications, Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) members at Australia's largest telecommunications company, Telstra, have resumed

industrial action for a new enterprise agreement. Staff covering Telstra's Next Generation Network, transmission/call switching network, Bendigo Call Centre, Service Delivery and the Global Operations Centre have been implementing rolling strikes and overtime bans since April 13. Telstra employees have not had a pay rise in 18 months.

The CEPU and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members have organised work bans and rolling stoppages since December but Telstra has refused to meet with the unions. Employee Collective Agreements (ECAs) offered by the company have been overwhelmingly rejected by union members who insist that the two-part agreements are designed to split the workforce and cut conditions.

Telstra has made no statement about the impact of the recent industrial action.

Queensland teachers vote for strike action

Australian Education Union (AEU) members in Queensland overwhelmingly voted this week for a 24-hour strike to force the state Labor government into work agreement negotiations. Union spokesperson Julianne Gilbert said teachers had not had a pay rise in more than two years. While the current enterprise agreement expires next week the Queensland government has not yet made any offer.

Meanwhile, Queensland Public Sector Union secretary Alex Scott warned that there would be widespread industrial action by his members if the state government proceeded with reported plans to cap future wage increases to about 2 percent for all 191,000 public servants, including teachers, nurses and police. Other options being discussed by the government include wage freezes, superannuation contribution cuts from 12 percent to 9 percent and the suspension of the 17.5 percent holiday leave loading.

A hastily organised meeting between Treasurer Andrew Fraser and the unions ended in a deadlock, with the government refusing to reveal its plans and the unions threatening six months of rolling strikes.

Sydney university staff threaten to walk-out

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the University of Sydney are planning to walk off the job on April 30 over plans to introduce teaching-only positions at the institution. The union has warned that the jobs will lack the prestige of traditional academic jobs and could be a "dead end" for employees.

Staff voted this week for strike action after university management revealed it plans to create teaching positions for casual staff which would have little or no research component. Union president Michael Thomson said members were concerned the new positions would lead to a two-tiered staffing system. Unresolved issues relating to salaries and the institution's disciplinary policy were also cited as reasons for the

threatened strike.

Victorian paramedics prepare for industrial action

Ambulance Employees Australia, which is affiliated to the Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU), announced on April 23 that Victorian paramedics are preparing for industrial action after a year-long negotiation for a new work agreement reached a stalemate.

Ambulance Employees Australia state secretary Steve McGhie said Ambulance Victoria's refusal to support minimum 10-hour rest breaks between shifts was a major sticking point in the negotiations. McGhie said that a union survey of 350 ambulance paramedics found that many were "falling asleep driving and making clinical errors because of their relentless workload and lack of sleep between shifts".

Victoria and Western Australia paramedics still have eight-hour rest breaks between shifts, while those in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and the ACT all get 10-hour breaks.

Air New Zealand cabin crew to strike

Some 240 Air New Zealand flight attendants employed by subsidiary Zeal 320 Ltd gave notice this week that from May 7 they will take four days of strike action to demand pay parity with other Air New Zealand cabin crews. All Trans-Tasman and Pacific flights serviced by Air New Zealand's Airbus A320 fleet will be affected.

Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union national secretary Andrew Little said, "They have been negotiating for seven months and the company is still offering them terms and conditions that are tens of thousands of dollars less than crew employed directly by Air New Zealand." He said that the Zeal 320 company "exists solely to exclude them [the flight attendants] from the terms and conditions other crew enjoy".

So far nine flight attendants have been suspended following the implementation of industrial bans on April 1 that involved non-compliance with the company's "uniform policy" and non-availability of staff for stand-by rosters.

The union resumed talks this week with Air NZ.

Lockout lifted in Synovate call centre dispute

The five-day lockout of 24 Unite Union members at the Synovate market research call centre in Auckland was lifted on April 15 with the

company agreeing to pay rises and improvements in conditions. The increase amounts to \$1 per hour on top of current rates that start at \$12.50. Shifts cancelled by the company will be paid if the employer does not give employees at least 12 hours' notice.

Papua New Guinea mine workers continue strike

Over 100 construction workers at the Hidden Valley gold project in Lae, Morobe remain on strike after walking out on April 10 over work contracts. The workers have accused their employers of racism and using a security company and police to try and "coerce" them into signing the contracts, which they claim violates a Memorandum of Understanding signed between employers and the national government at the beginning of the project.

The construction workers are installing conveyor belts and other vital mineral processing equipment. Morobe Governor Luther Wenge has called on the employers to quickly settle the dispute, fearing that the mine will not be ready for the developer Morobe Mining JV to begin production on schedule in two months' time.



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