

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.

Bangladesh airline workers strike

Over 650 employees of GMG Airlines, Bangladesh's largest private carrier, struck on April 25 demanding payment of two months' salary arrears. The strikers included pilots, cabin crews and ground staff and affected international and domestic flights for several hours. Employees returned to work when the company agreed to pay all overdue salaries within 15 days.

Bangladesh rickshaw drivers continue strike

Strike action by hundreds of auto-rickshaw drivers in Chittagong entered its second day on April 29. The spontaneous walkout was not organised by the unions but triggered when police clashed with drivers during a demonstration two days earlier leaving at least 50 people injured.

The drivers want an end to police harassment and the standardisations of rent fees, installation of quality meters and improved protection against "snatchers and muggers". Muggers frequently hijack rickshaws and rob passengers. Several passengers and drivers have been killed recently.

Pakistan pilots end industrial action

Pakistan International Airlines pilots ended their six-day go-slow protest over pay on April 23. The industrial action had forced the flag carrier to cancel dozens of flights at Lahore and Islamabad airports. The airline has agreed to enter into negotiations in an "agreed time frame".

The Pakistan Airlines Pilots Association (PALPA) wants a new work

agreement that includes a pay rise of at least 35 percent for its members.

Pakistan: Punjab sanitary workers strike

Thousands of sanitary workers at Punjab's Solid Waste Management (SWM) launched strike action and rallied at the Punjab Assembly in Lahore on April 27 in protest against the government's moves to privatise SWM. The workers were also demanding that the government regularise 8,000 employees, most of whom have been employed on a contract basis for the past 15 years, and are also concerned about the number of workplace deaths.

According to SWM Union General Secretary Pervaiz Akhtar Naz, 75 employees have died on the job. The workers had no protective equipment and there is no financial compensation for the families of the deceased. There are over 10,000 SWM workers covering nine Punjab cities with the vast majority of employees paid between 7,000 and 8,000 rupees (\$US88 and \$100) per month.

The strike was called off later that day after an adviser to Chief Minister Khawaja Ahmed Hassan visited the rally and told workers that the government would not privatise the department and would meet employees' demands. Indian airport workers call off planned strike action

Plans by Airports Authority of India (AAI) employees for indefinite national strike action beginning on May 1 were called off on Thursday. The 15,000 workers are opposing the forced transfer of 3,000 colleagues who refuse to accept employment with the private consortium nominated to run the Mumbai and Delhi international airports. AAI is insisting that they take up positions at domestic airports around the country.

The airport workers want job security, a pension scheme and other issues resolved before they accept the transfers. An Airports Authority of India Employees official said that the strike had been deferred following a "favourable" order from the Delhi High Court on their demands.

Nestlé India workers begin campaign

Around 1,500 Nestlé India workers launched a six-week campaign of weekly protests on April 23 at each of the company's four factories. The employees are opposing the company's below-inflation pay rises and are demanding the right to negotiate wage rates.

The Federation of All India Nestlé Employees also wants the lifting of an injunction banning union action within 200 metres of Nestlé factories, claiming it is a denial of workers' fundamental rights. The union has planned a mass demonstration at the company's headquarters in Gurgaon, Haryana on May 25.

Singapore construction workers protest over unpaid wages

More than 100 Chinese construction workers gathered outside Singapore's manpower ministry on April 27 over unpaid wages and the sudden cancellation of their work permits. The workers said their Chinese employer had absconded with their money and that they had no funds for food or accommodation. "We just want our compensation so we can go back to China," one worker said.

The protesters sat on the ministry's steps shouting their grievances at ministry staff. After two hours police moved in and dispersed the protest, threatening to charge the workers with trespassing. The manpower ministry has made no comment.

Korean auto workers strike

Ssangyong Motor Corporation employees struck for four hours on April 24 in protest against management restructure plans to slash over 2,600 jobs, or 37 percent of its 7,100-strong workforce.

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 union has called on the company's Chinese owners, the Shanghai Automotive Industry Corp (SAIC), to inject additional capital into the Korean automaker. SAIC has responded by declaring that unless the union accepts the job cuts, it will allow Ssangyong to collapse.

Construction workers protest over workplace deaths

On April 28, thousands of construction workers across Australia downed tools to attend rallies in state capitals to highlight the high number of workplace deaths in the industry. While memorial services were part of an International Day of Mourning to draw attention to workplace deaths, construction workers also demanded the rollout of uniform national health and safety laws and abolition of the repressive Australian Building and Construction Commission (ABCC).

An estimated 10,000 Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) members rallied at the Trades Hall in Melbourne where they observed a minute's silence to commemorate workers killed while at work. Around 2,000 union members attended a service in Perth while another 2,000 rallied in Brisbane to remember the death of 20 colleagues in the last 12 months. Demonstrations were also held in Hobart, Adelaide, Sydney and Darwin.

University of Tasmania academics to vote on industrial action

National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) members at the University of Tasmania this week agreed to hold a ballot for future industrial action after talks with management over a new work agreement broke down. NTEU state president Kelvin Michael said progress had been made but the university had not addressed many concerns raised by his members, including a bid by the university to cut pay for casual staff by 20 percent.

Other issues include job security, fixed-term contracts, limits on casualisation, fair-review mechanisms and appropriate workloads. Michael said university management were not addressing these issues.

New Zealand polytechnic lecturers strike over workload

Lecturers at the Manukau Institute of Technology (MIT) in Auckland held the first in a series of strikes on April 28 over what they say is increasing and unrealistic workloads caused by administrative staff redundancies and burgeoning student numbers.

Tertiary Education Union (TEU) members are also opposed to management proposals that could see staff having to work more variable hours and at more "unsociable" times. A TEU spokesperson claimed that lecturing staff at MIT have one of the highest workloads in the polytechnic sector.

About 150 staff picketed during the two-hour action, which is likely to continue periodically for the next fortnight.

Victorian paramedics endorse industrial action

The first ambulance strike in Victoria in 36 years moved a step closer this week after paramedics at meetings in Melbourne, Shepparton, Seymour and Ballarat unanimously voted to take industrial action over a new workplace agreement. Year-long pay talks with the government have broken down with a major sticking point being Ambulance Victoria's refusal to support minimum 10-hour rest breaks between shifts.

Ambulance Employees Australia state secretary Steve McGhie said

many union members work more than 15 hours straight, often without meal breaks, and have to resume work eight hours later. He claimed a survey last year found many paramedics get just five hours sleep between shifts. Victoria and Western Australia paramedics have eight-hour rest breaks between shifts, while those in NSW, Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory and the ACT all get 10-hour breaks.

Paramedics in Warrnambool, Colac, Geelong, Mildura, Swan Hill, Echuca and Bendigo will meet next week and are expected to support future industrial action.

Construction workers picket West Gate Bridge

More than 500 CFMEU members on April 29 rallied at a construction site at Melbourne's West Gate Bridge as non-union contract staff wearing balaclavas and assisted by 100 police in riot gear removed barricades set up by picketing union members the day before.

The picket was part of industrial action over a pay dispute involving CFMEU and Australian Workers Union (AWU) members. The CFMEU is in dispute with a major builder at the site, John Holland, over legal action against the union that could see fines of up \$10 million. The builder is refusing to drop the case and reinstate workers sacked during the pay dispute.

CFMEU members formed a human barricade, ignoring police requests to leave the site, but later in the day agreed to a 48-moratorium so that negotiations between the union and the company could proceed.

Air New Zealand issues lockout notice

Zeal 320 has threatened to lock out flight attendants if they participate in a four-day strike organised by Engineering Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) and planned for May 7. The flight attendants, who are employed by Zeal to work on Air NZ's A320 aircraft on short-haul international routes, are paid thousands of dollars less than those directly employed by Air NZ and doing the same work.

Some 240 attendants had originally planned to strike over the Easter holiday period before the EPMU called off the action in order to resume talks with the company. Zeal flight attendants want pay parity with Air NZ crews. Zeal's latest offer proposes a pay increase of 4.05 percent, an allowance increase of 8 percent and a one-off payment of \$150 per person, which the union claims falls far short of parity with Air NZ crews.

Air New Zealand is reported to have recruited some 100 strike breakers to work as cabin crew on the A320 aircraft if the May 7 strike proceeds.

New Zealand rest home workers vote to strike

Caregivers and kitchen staff at Edale Rest Home in Marton voted on April 24 for industrial action after negotiations with their employer stalled. The Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) has been in negotiations with management and the Trust Board for a new collective agreement for eight months.

The union claims wages paid at Edale fall well short of the "accepted industry standard" and that the employer is actively trying to reduce pay and conditions. Start rates at Edale of just \$12.55 an hour are barely above the minimum wage (\$12.50) and it takes four years of service and experience before staff rise to the top rate of just \$13.04.



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