

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.

Pakistan public servants demand wage rise

More than 2.2 million clerks observed a “pen down” strike and hoisted black flags at their offices across Pakistan on April 29 to demand a pay increase. All Pakistan Clerks Association (APCA) members rallied in cities throughout the country, the largest protest in Lahore where clerks marched through the city and rallied outside the Punjab Assembly.

APCA members are demanding a salary increase equal to the inflation rate for all lower subordinates. The clerks said they would no longer accept a “cold shoulder” response by authorities and have threatened to hold a protest blockade of the Governor’s House if they receive no response to their demands.

Pakistan building finance workers demonstrate against privatisation

House Building Finance Corporation (HBFC) employees from Khairpur, Shikarpur, Jacobabad and other districts rallied at the Sukkur Press Club on May 4 against the proposed privatisation of the corporation.

Workers said that privatisation could affect 15,000 HBFC employees and have vowed to continue their protests. The demonstration was organised by the Employees Action Committee.

Indian port workers’ strike enters second week

Indefinite strike action by marine and cargo-handling employees at Kerala’s Cochin port entered its second week on May 4. The walkout has forced the diversion of ships to other ports and seen the government deploy Navy personnel to help clear the work backlog and break the

strike.

The strikers allege that Cochin Port Trust management plans to implement manning scales recommended by the Award of National Industrial Tribunal and will lead to widespread job losses. Port workers claim that employment has already been cut by 75 percent in other parts of the port where the new manning levels have been introduced.

The All India Port and Dock Workers Federation (AIPDWF), which has nearly 35,000 members, has warned that jobs at other ports are also under threat. At Mumbai, the container manning scale has been reduced from 25 to 4. At Kandla port, Gujarat, India’s biggest state-owned port, the union said: “If the award is implemented, 60-70 percent of the cargo-handling workers at Kandla port will become idle.”

India’s major ports have cut jobs by nearly half, from 100,245 in 2000 to 59,000 in 2009. Cargo handling at these ports, however, has doubled from 271 million tonnes to 530 million in the same period.

India’s chief labour commissioner has convened a joint meeting of union officials, port management and the shipping ministry for May 11. AIPDWF general secretary Mohammed Haneef told the media that the union would extend the strike to India’s 12 major ports if the meeting “fails to solve the issue”.

Indian telecom workers strike

Hundreds of Bharat Sanchar Nigam Limited (BSNL) employees in Tirupur and Tuticorin, Tamil Nadu struck work for an hour on May 4 against the company’s meagre salary advance prior to a proposed wage rise.

The telecom workers said that BSNL management had allocated only four months’ basic pay as an interest-free salary advance to compensate for the revision of pay and allowances back-dated to January 1, 2007. The unions want a minimum advance of 60,000 (\$US1,204) rupees.

Bangladesh jute workers demonstrate

Hundreds of displaced Asia Jute Manufacturing Mill employees in Chandpur, Bangladesh held a noisy demonstration outside the factory on April 30. They later marched to the residences of company officials demanding the payment of all wage arrears and for the factory to reopen. The Asia Jute mill closed suddenly on April 23, owing wages to its 1,500 employees. Ten demonstrators were hurt during clashes with company officials.

Chinese electronics workers protest

Around 300 ex-employees, including former soldiers drafted to work at Henan Ancai Hi-Tech Company in Anyang city, blocked National Highway No.107 outside the factory on April 27 demanding unpaid wages and benefits. Traffic was severely affected for nearly 12 hours as workers ignored demands from police and government authorities to return to the factory and meet with management.

One protesting worker said the laid-off employees decided to block the highway because the company had ignored them. "There was no response whatsoever from the factory," he said. "Yesterday we tried to get a meeting with senior management, but no one would pay any attention to us."

The workers dispersed later that evening, declaring they would take their protest to Beijing.

Supermarket workers protest in Jakarta

Hundreds of Hero supermarket workers rallied at the State Palace, Central Jakarta on April 30 to demand a wage increase. The demonstrators, representing 10,000 Hero employees, said most workers received between 300,000 rupiah (\$US28.20) and 800,000 rupiah—well below Jakarta's monthly minimum wage 1,069,865 rupiah.

Calling on the government to back their campaign, the workers threatened to boycott Indonesia's forthcoming presidential elections if state authorities ignored their demands.

May Day rallies in Asia

Tens of thousands of people attended May Day rallies throughout Asia on May 1, protesting the global economic crisis and calling for an end to the massive job losses it has caused.

Thousands joined rallies in Manila and other Philippine cities to demand better jobs and higher wages. Over 7,000 troops were deployed in Manila where they barricaded streets around the presidential palace and the US

Embassy. Some 1,400 demonstrators rallied in Bacolad City displaying photographs of a militant worker they alleged was killed by the military.

In Indonesia, over 8,000 workers took to the streets in 19 separate rallies in Jakarta calling for an end to mass layoffs and for the government to remove temporary employment. In East Java, demonstrating workers called for legislation to protect workers' jobs and living standards and stricter action against companies violating the minimum wage.

Around 36,000 people rallied in Tokyo to demand improved welfare benefits and in opposition to military spending. In South Korea, about 8,000 workers and students demonstrated in a Seoul park calling for an end to lay-offs and wage cuts caused by the financial crisis.

Sydney ferry workers accept new work agreement

Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) members on Sydney ferries have voted to accept a new Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) that includes wage restraint and a flexible roster designed to cut overtime. The MUA urged its members to accept the EBA at a stop-work meeting on May 8. The new single agreement replaces three separate EBAs covering workers on the Sydney Harbour, Manly and Parramatta services.

Sydney Ferries spokesman Scott Maclean hailed the deal, declaring that maritime staff would "work more days in the year than they currently do in return for a modest wage increase that is, on average, less than the government's 2.5 per cent wages policy". MUA branch secretary Warren Smith claimed the EBA would deliver major reforms and help keep the ferries in public hands.

Victorian paramedics apply for industrial action

The Ambulance Employees Australia union notified the state Industrial Relations Court on May 7 that it plans to take action for a new work agreement. Year-long pay talks with the government have broken down over Ambulance Victoria's refusal to support minimum 10-hour rest breaks between shifts. The union also wants a 6 percent pay rise and overtime bans.

The union has presented the court with 19 different forms of actions that its members want to implement, including stop-work meetings and taking 10-hour breaks between shifts. The first stop-work meeting, which will last four hours, will be held in the next two to three weeks.

Staff at Victorian universities voting on strike action

Around 10,000 employees at five Victorian universities—Melbourne, Monash, Deakin, La Trobe, RMIT and Swinburne—are being balloted this week for strike action. The state branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) wants a 20 percent pay rise, a reduction in the casualisation of the workforce and better conditions for contract researchers.

The NTEU wants the restoration of conditions lost under the Howard government. In 2005, individual agreements were imposed on all university employees, limits removed on the number of casual staff and union access to members restricted. The union claimed at that time that if these conditions were not accepted the Howard government would deny \$450 million funding to the universities.

Depending on the outcome of the ballot, NTEU members plan to strike on May 21.

Geelong textile workers protest

More than 50 employees of textile manufacturer Melba Industries protested outside Geelong's Centrelink offices on May 5 to demand that the Rudd government protect the \$9 million worth of entitlements for 170 employees about to lose their jobs. Many of the workers have been with the company, which went into liquidation at the end of last month, for more than 40 years.

Textile Clothing and Footwear Union state secretary Michele O'Neil said the Melba workers stood to receive less than half of the \$9 million owed to them and would have to fall back on the government's General Employee Entitlements and Redundancy Scheme.

NSW prison officers rally against privatisation

Over 200 prison officers and supporters demonstrated outside the Australian Labor Party's Sydney office on May 1 in protest against the state government's plan to privatise the Cessnock and Parklea prisons. Later that day the Labor government announced it had reversed its decision to privatise Cessnock but that the sell-off of Parklea would proceed, with five private sector tenderers short-listed to take over the prison's management and operations.

Other measures being introduced across NSW prison services will include employment of 300 casual officers, centralised rostering, a new absenteeism policy and revised workforce management plans. Corrective Services will be given six months to make \$5 million in savings in prisoner escorts and other areas, with plans to contract out the work if it fails.

The Public Services Union claims that it will continue protests to "Save Parklea from being privatised and make sure the transport and court proposals do not resurface."

Air New Zealand cabin crew strike

Over 240 flight attendants employed by Air New Zealand subsidiary Zeal 320 Ltd began four days of strike action on May 7 for pay equity with their counterparts employed directly by Air NZ. The action will affect Trans-Tasman and Pacific flights serviced by the company's Airbus A320 fleet. Around 50 workers are picketing Air NZ headquarters in Auckland and the international airport terminal. Workers and supporters are also demonstrating in Wellington and Christchurch.

Air NZ responded by issuing a lockout notice for the duration of the industrial action and deployed strike-breakers and management staff to maintain scheduled flights.

Engineering, Printing and Manufacturing Union (EPMU) national secretary Andrew Little said that despite seven months of negotiations the company is still offering annual salaries up to \$30,000 less than crew employed directly by Air NZ. Zeal 320 exists solely to exclude its employees from the terms and conditions won by other crew.

The EPMU has already indicated it is willing to settle below members' expectations. Last week the union issued the company with a much reduced "revised offer", saying it was "trying to meet Air NZ halfway". The company rejected the settlement offer. Little insisted at the time, "To claim our members are demanding parity with international crew is a blatant lie."



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