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.

Bangladeshi police attack striking garment workers

About 50 workers from the Nasa Basic garment factory at Nishintapur Ashulia, Dhaka were injured when police and the Rapid Response Battalion used water cannon and batons to support security guards and management in a clash with striking workers on April 15.

Several hundred workers had downed tools over a 10-point charter of demands that included wage and transport allowance increases, an end to employee harassment, and the removal of some factory officials for a week. Workers clashed with management after a colleague was beaten by a supervisor. Police intervened when the clash spilled out of the factory and security guards stationed in the manufacturing zone became involved.

In a similar dispute in Savar on April 12, police and the Rapid Action Battalion baton-charged striking Navana Textiles employees and fired live ammunition in an attempt to disperse them. A witness told the media that police fired 25 rounds and "beat up the protesters indiscriminately" leaving 20 people injured. Workers from five other factories became involved in the 40-minute clash with police.

The confrontation erupted after Navana Textiles employees, who were striking over the relocation of factory equipment, became concerned when security guards allowed workers to enter the factory and then locked them in. Fearing for their safety, the demonstrating workers forced their way into the plant where they clashed with security guards, and management called in police.

On the same day several hundred Pearl Fashion employees in Palashbari protested over the assault of a sacked fellow worker. Management dismissed Mohammad Saddam last Sunday and when he came to collect his dues on Monday he was severely beaten by security guards. Protesting workers held the security guards captive until police arrived.

Bangladesh's three million garment factory workers are estimated to be the lowest paid in the world with most earning just 1,662 taka a month, which is less than $US1.00 a day.

Nagaland teachers on strike

Over 600 teachers began an indefinite hunger strike outside Nagaland Civil Secretariat in Kohima, India on April 9 to demand payment of salaries and restoration of their work positions. Teachers held placards stating, "Give us our daily bread" and "Just not react, act fast."

The strike was called after the government failed to honour an April 1 deadline to implement the teachers' demands. Aggrieved Teachers Association of Nagaland convenor Vikato Swu told the media that the hunger strike would continue until the government responded to their demands.

Indian steel workers protest against privatisation

Visakha Steel Workers Union members demonstrated outside the Visakhapatnam Steel Plant administrative building on April 13 to protest a government decision to disinvest 20 percent of its equity in the state-owned Steel Authority of India Ltd (SAIL). The 6,600-strong union threatened that if the government did not withdraw its privatisation plans members would implement further action.

Virgin Blue aviation engineers to implement bans

Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) members at budget airline Virgin Blue have announced that they would impose overtime and travel bans from April 16 after negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. ALAEA national secretary Steve Purvinas said the bans would not immediately impact on the airline's services but insisted that because 10–15 percent of the engineers' work involved overtime the industrial action would have a cumulative effect.

The union wants 4 percent annual pay increases and an extra week's leave as part of a new collective agreement. Purvinas claimed Virgin Blue is offering only 3 percent annual pay increases and has only agreed to one of the 14 demands by the union. ALAEA members also want retention of

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existing job functions, such as early-morning plane checks by licensed engineers, per diem allowances when travelling away, doubling payments to engineers on permanent night-shifts and improved pay rates for senior engineers and supervisors.

ALAEA members are concerned that Virgin Blue management could use baggage handlers in roles previously carried out by engineers, such as waving in planes and talking to pilots about defects. Virgin Blue is currently in talks with the Transport Workers Union and the Australian Services Union on a new agreement covering ground crew. The engineers union and management are not due to meet again until April 19.

Victorian ceramic workers on strike

Striking Morgan Technical Ceramics workers in Notting Hill, Victoria are maintaining a picket line outside the factory after the company refused to increase wages and demanded that workers sacrifice conditions in a new enterprise agreement. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) members want a 4.5 percent annual pay increase and the maintenance of existing conditions. Workers voted to take industrial action just before Easter, after nine months of negotiations with the company.

The company has since offered to increase wages but threatened not to follow the usual practice of backdating workers' pay rises to the expiry of the previous agreement. It also wants workers to give up long-standing rights and conditions. These include cuts in rostered days off, a reduction in existing redundancy entitlements from a maximum of 80 weeks to 50 weeks and an end to the automatic appointment of casual workers to permanent status after six months. Casual workers would also be paid according to the award, rather than the union collective agreement, which would reduce their hourly rate by $8.

AMWU delegate Scott Wilkinson said: "We were shocked that the offer was zero percent and that they wanted to take away conditions. All through the financial crisis we were making money, and last year was their biggest profit ever. Management were given bonuses of 10 percent so we think our claim is fair."

Frank Vojnic, a long-time employee of the company, said: "I started here in '84. And today I've ended up out here on the line. I feel betrayed, very much so. They're trying to take away conditions that we've had for 30 years."

Fair Work Australia demands food processing workers end strike

About 180 employees in the potato fry facility at the McCain Foods factory in Ballarat were forced to end a strike after 24 hours following a Fair Work Australia return-to-work order. The strike began on April 12, after the company failed to reach agreement about when workers could take their rostered days off (RDOs).

Australian Manufacturing Workers Union regional secretary Tom Hale said McCain employees were entitled to one RDO a month but the company wanted RDOs used during low production periods. Workers oppose these moves, saying they have had a regular monthly RDO for 25 years.

Meanwhile, local potato growers for the Ballarat McCain Growers Group have voted unanimously to reject McCain's request for a second 15 percent price cut for next season's harvest. Last November McCain announced that it would close its frozen vegetable processing plant in Tasmania and switch supply and production to New Zealand where vegetable prices are much lower.

McCain's factory in Ballarat employs 480 people and receives produce from 52 local growers.

New Zealand: Intellectual disability support workers suspend industrial action

The Employment Relations Authority (ERA) announced this week that it will intervene in a pay dispute at IHC, the government-funded intellectual disability service provider. ERA's intervention was requested by the Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) and means that IHC workers will be tied to an outcome more acceptable to the government and employer.

The SFWU applauded the decision, which establishes the union as the chief negotiator, boasting that it will avoid the need for "any further strike action" by some 3,000 SFWU members at IHC group homes around the country.

SFWU members had implemented work-to-rule industrial action over the past five weeks, and held several overnight strikes to protest a wage freeze. The union, which has been in negotiations with the IHC since last October, wants the company to pass on a 2 percent government funding increase to workers, which IHC has refused to do.

Radiographers' union calls off industrial action

The Association of Professional and Executive Employees (Apex) has called off rolling strike action by 900 radiographers at hospitals across New Zealand, after agreeing to re-enter negotiations with 20 District Health Boards (DHBs) for a new collective agreement. Since late February, the radiographers have held work-to-rule industrial action and several strikes after rejecting a zero percent pay rise. Apex wants a 3 percent increase. The DHBs have not announced any revised offer.

Papua New Guinea miners ignore return to work order

Over 1,600 workers at Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML), PNG's largest gold and copper mining company, are defying a National Court return-to-work order. Workers struck on April 1 shutting down the company's

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operations at Tabubil, Kiunga and Bige and stopping daily production of 80 tons of copper and 300 ounces of gold. OTML claims it is losing 6 million kina ($US2.2 million) a day as a result of the strike.

PNG Trade Union Congress (PNGTUC) president Michael Malabag told a Port Moresby press conference this week that, “Failure to withdraw the injunction leaves workers with no choice but to exercise their right for mass resignation.” OTML has threatened to sack the workers.

Ok Tedi Mining and Allied Workers Union members are protesting alleged disparities in OTML’s bonus payouts. In 2009 ordinary workers received annual bonuses of 17,856 kina, while senior management received 121,377 kina. The unions are demanding additional cash bonuses of 27,000 kina from the company’s Shares In Success Scheme be paid immediately into striking employees’ accounts. OTML recently boasted a profit of 4 billion kina ($US1.5 billion).

The government has sent Department of Mines and Mineral Resources Authority officials to convene negotiations that would also involve the Industrial Registrar and the PNG Trade Union Congress.

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