

Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

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World Socialist Web Site invites workers and other readers to contribute to this regular feature.

Bangladesh: Dhaka police attack striking garment workers

At least 40 people were injured, including reporters, when police fired gunshots, rubber bullets and teargas into a demonstration of striking Esquire Knit Composite employees in Narayanganj on April 19. Police filed charges against 5,000 workers and arrested 16 after they held a procession from the factory gate through the city streets affecting traffic on the Dhaka-Sylhet Highway.

The strike erupted after factory management failed to fulfil promises workers would be paid increased attendance bonuses and additional holidays.

Bangladeshi teachers on hunger strike

Trainers, officials and employees of Sylhet Women's Technical Training Centre (SWTTC) walked off the job to begin a 72-hour hunger strike on April 19. Employees are demanding payment of nine months' outstanding wages and continuity of service. After 48 hours, seven hunger strikers fell ill and had to be hospitalised.

The training centre, which has over 280 staff, was established in 2006 under a development project which expired in June 2009. The staff remained unpaid since then even though the labour and establishment ministry asked them to continue their service.

The strike began after the government offered to resume paying salaries, with arrear payments, but only if employees agreed to reapply for their jobs in June. Workers are refusing to sign the agreement, fearing they will be hired on temporary contracts or lose their jobs.

Bangladeshi dock workers union announces strike date

The League Dock Workers Union Council held a protest rally at the Chittagong docks this week and announced that there would be a mass walkout on April 27 to demand reinstatement of thousands of retrenched dock workers. Around 4,200 workers have been retrenched since 2007 when the dock management board was dissolved by the then caretaker government.

After strike action last August, the Chittagong Port Authority agreed to set up a multi-representative committee and reinstated 1,800 workers. Another 2,500 reinstatements have been approved by the committee but the union alleges that the port authority is delaying the reinstatements in line with plans to privatise the facility.

India: More workers join in the Manipur government employees' strike

On April 16, employees of the Manipur Secretariats joined strike action by thousands of other Manipur government workers demanding full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. For the first time since strike action began in January the offices of the state secretariat remain empty. The Manipur Secretariat Services Association said its members would remain on strike until their demands were met.

The state government began paying commission rises but now claims that it does not have enough money to pay the arrears, which date back to 2006. Manipur government workers have been striking since January over the issue. The Joint Administrative Council of All Manipur Trade Unions' Council and the All Manipur Government Employees' Organisation are organising the strike.

Indian power workers oppose privatisation

On April 19, members of the Employees Federation ATUC, TSU Bhangal Group, JE Council and Joint Forum staged a protest at the Punjab Chief Minister's office to oppose the restructuring of the Punjab State Electricity Board (PSEB) into two corporations. The unions claim formation of the Punjab e Power Corporation Limited (Powercom) and Punjab State Transmission Corporation (TRANSCO) is the first step in

the privatisation of generation, distribution and transmission of electricity in the state.

PSEB workers have already taken industrial action over privatisation this year. In February, technical engineers stopped work for 24 hours to protest against the restructure and in March nearly 60,000 PSEB employees stopped work for two days over the issue. The Employees Federation ATUC said its members would continue protesting until the government reverses its decision on the restructure.

India: Magadh University staff end strike

The 50-day-old strike by Magadh University non-teaching employees was called off on April 16 after the newly-appointed Vice Chancellor Arvind Kumar agreed to withdraw all charges and suspension notices against striking employees and pay withheld salaries. The university also agreed to take up the issue of salary increases with the Bihar state government.

The non-teaching employees of the university began strike action on February 25 to demand pay parity with their counterparts in other government departments. After failed negotiations in March the university declared the strike illegal on a technical point and suspended 12 employees, including union leaders, without pay.

South Korea: Kumho tyre union does deal

The Kumho Tyre union, for the third year in a row, has accepted demands from the cash-strapped Kumho Tyre Company for cuts to pay and conditions to satisfy creditors' demands. In return the company agreed to reinstate 189 fired workers and to retract a plan to sack an additional 1,006 employees that was underway as part of a cost cutting restructure.

The move came two days before the April 20 deadline set by Kumho's creditors for the union to submit an agreement on workout plans; a condition required for the resumption of a debt rescheduling program. Around 4,000 employees struck on April 1 at the company's Gwangi plant to oppose the restructure, which included job cuts of 25 percent, a 15 percent basic salary cut and no restoration of bonuses.

Over the past two years the union has worked with Kumho to convince employees to accept wage freezes and the elimination of bonuses to "save the company". Last September the union accepted Kumho's demands for a 2008 wage freeze to be extended throughout 2009, scheduled 2008 bonuses not be paid, and for talks on 2009 bonus schemes to be put off until the first quarter of 2010.

Kumho workers are yet to vote on the union's latest deal.

Philippine Airline workers protest job cuts

On April 19, Philippine Airlines Employees Association (PALEA) members held a motorcade parade of around 40 vehicles at the Pasay City airport to oppose the retrenchment of over 3,000 Philippine Airlines Limited (PAL) employees. More than half of PAL's workforce, including in-flight catering services, airport services (which includes ground, cargo and ramp handling) and call centre reservations, will be laid off by May 31 and their jobs outsourced to a contract company.

PAL claimed the move was needed to reduce costs and remain competitive in the global market. PALEA president Gerry Rivera told the media the move is a cost-cutting exercise to increase profits and that workers would be rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union.

Although PALEA filed a notice of strike with the Department of Labor and Employment in February, no action has been called. Frustrated union members at the Cebu airport told the media they are waiting for the Manila union leaders to organise nationwide action.

Queensland hospital workers walk out

About 100 maintenance workers at the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital and the Princess Alexandra hospital walked off the job on April 22 over pay anomalies. Australian Manufacturing Workers Union (AMWU) spokesman Scott Stanford said the members will stand by for emergency duty but will not resume work until ongoing problems with Queensland Health's (QH) pay system are resolved.

Tens of thousands of QH staff have been underpaid, overpaid, or not paid since the introduction of a new payroll system last month. The Australian Medical Association Queensland has warned doctors could take industrial action and refuse to work overtime if the problem was not resolved this week. Over 70 percent of doctors are still owed salaries since the new pay system was implemented.

Hundreds of staff around the state reported they did not receive their pay or were underpaid on Wednesday, QH's pay-day. The charity group Lifeline said it has started handing out food vouchers to financially stretched health workers hit by the pay bungle.

Health unions told the media they are considering work bans and will organise state-wide rallies.

ACT public servants vote for strike ballot

More than 350 public servants from 10 different unions have voted unanimously to apply to Fair Work Australia (FWA) for a ballot to strike

after rejecting the latest pay offer from the Australian Capital Territory government.

Unions ACT secretary Kim Sattler said the offer of just 4.75 percent over two years, which involved removing certain entitlements from the new work agreement, “was poor and unreasonable”. The unions have convinced members to also seek a hearing with FWA to break the deadlock.

Northern Territory public servants threaten strike action

Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU) members in the Northern Territory (NT) are threatening to walk off the job if the government does not lift its 2.5 percent cap on annual pay increases and agree to their demand for a 5 percent annual pay increase in a new work agreement. The NT government has capped all government employees’ pay increases at 2.5 percent per year.

CPSU claims 90 percent of members surveyed said a 2.5 percent increase would not compensate for cost of living increases and 79 percent said they would not accept an agreement with a 2.5 percent annual pay increase.

New Zealand retail workers strike

JB Hi-Fi employees held a half-day strike and protested outside the Wellington retail store on April 16 to protest against the company’s zero percent pay rise. Unite union members are paid just 75 cents above the minimum wage of \$12.75 (\$US9.00) an hour. Unite organiser Omar Hamed said workers would take “rolling, sporadic industrial action” across the country until the company offers to raise wages.

JB Hi Fi has nine retail outlets throughout New Zealand. Unite claims the Australian-owned company is expected to make a profit of around \$157 million this year.

Papua New Guinea: Miners’ union calls off strike

Over 1,600 workers at Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML), PNG’s largest gold and copper mine, have ended a 16-day strike after the Mining and Allied Mine Workers Union (MAWU) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the company. However, the agreement reached during negotiations, which also involved the PNG Trade Union Congress and government officials, gives no guarantee that workers’ grievances will be resolved.

Workers walked off the job to protest low bonus payments, which are up

to 103,500 kina (\$US38,300) below the Shares In Success Scheme (SIS) bonuses paid to supervisors and executive staff. The unions have dropped their initial demand that additional cash bonuses of 27,000 kina be paid into striking employees’ accounts. OTML is only committed to reaching an agreement over grievances before August 1, after which unresolved issues will be referred to a so-called independent arbitrator, whose decisions will be binding.

OTML claims it lost \$US2.2 million a day as a result of the strike which stopped production of 80 tons of copper and 300 ounces of gold from mines at Tabubil, Kiunga and Bige.

French Polynesian hotel workers on hunger strike

Sixty five laid-off employees from the Tahiti Hilton Hotel began a week-long hunger strike on April 21. Workers have held several protests outside the hotel, since the hotel closed last month, and at the French territory’s parliament to demand redundancy payments. The hotel is part of the Louis Wane Group, which owns four of Polynesia’s most luxurious hotels, 10 hypermarkets and a food importing business. The company employs more than 1,600 people in the territory.

The O Oe to oe Rima union said it will take the Tahiti Hilton to court for improper dismissal.



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