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.

India: Jammu and Kashmir government employees resume strike action

More than 450,000 Jammu and Kashmir government employees held a four-day strike on April 3, the second in four weeks, to demand arrears payments recommended by the Sixth Pay Commission. Workers also want the retirement age increased from 58 to 60 years, regularisation of ad-hoc, daily and temporary employees, conversion of the cost of living allowance to a Dearness Allowance, and House Rent Allowance increases.

The strike paralysed work in almost all government offices across the state, except essential services like hospitals, public health, engineering and power. The state government, which claims it has no money to pay the arrears, has implemented the Essential Services (Maintenance) Ordinance, declared the strike illegal and threatened strikers with "punishment under the relevant law".

Manipur government employees escalate strike

On April 4, state government drivers and technicians joined strike action by thousands of other Manipur government workers demanding full implementation of the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations. Power and water supply department employees joined the strike earlier but returned to work after they were threatened with prosecution under the Essential Services Maintenance Act.

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 struck for 20 days in 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 telecommunications workers set strike date

This week unions covering 300,000 Bharat Sanchar Nigam Ltd (BSNL) employees called for a national stoppage on April 19 in protest against a government report calling for job cuts and partial privatisation of the state-owned telecommunications company. According to the Joint Forum of BSNL Associations and Unions of Executives and Non-Executives, the report proposes 30 percent disinvestment of BSNL and retrenchment of 100,000 employees.

The strike, which is supported by the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), is part of a joint campaign to oppose the government's plan to privatise 158 profit-making public sector enterprises. The BSNL strike would be the first in the campaign.

According to the CITU, the targeted public enterprises contribute 1.7 trillion rupees ($US38 billion) in taxes and dividends annually towards government revenue. BSNL has a 350 billion rupee annual turnover and assets worth 880 billion rupees.

Talks between the peak unions and the Congress Party-led Indian government were terminated this week with AITUC secretary G. L. Dhar telling the media: "We could not agree to anything at the meeting and the strike will be indefinite".

Delhi rickshaw drivers strike

An estimated 55,000 Delhi auto-rickshaw drivers struck for 24 hours on April 1 to demand a fare increase and shelters at terminal stands. The walkout had a major impact on commuter travel in the city. The Tipahiya Chalak Sangh union said its members also want the government to drop plans to phase out auto-rickshaws.

Haryana bus workers walk out

Haryana Roadways Employees Union members struck for 24 hours on

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March 31, putting 3,100 buses off the road and paralysing the state's commuter transport. One million passengers were affected by the strike. The bus workers want over 3,600 permits issued to private operators cancelled and 3,100 jobs at Haryana Roadways regularised. The company employs 16,400 workers.

Bangladesh: Dahka transport workers protest police bashing

On April 7, bus and mini-bus drivers on the Dhaka-Narayanganj link road staged a spontaneous demonstration after one of their colleagues was bashed by Rapid Action Battalion personnel during an argument over a traffic offence. Protesting drivers parked their vehicles across the highway, blocking traffic for three hours, and then rallied in the town of Narayanganj calling for punishment of the RAB personnel involved in the violent attack.

The drivers returned to work after an RAB official offered to arrange medical treatment for the injured driver and promised to hold an investigation into the incident.

The Rapid Action Battalion is an "anti-crime and anti-terrorism" elite force of Bangladesh Police. It regularly intervenes in workers' protests and strikes. According to media reports, the RAB has been responsible for the death of 622 Bangladeshi civilians since its formation in 1979.

Journalists strike at South Korean public broadcaster

Unionised journalists and presenters at MBC, South Korea's second-largest television and radio network, stopped work from 6 a.m. on April 6 to demand that the broadcaster's newly appointed president, Kim Jae-chul, step down. Union members allege that Kim was a "political parachute appointment" and want the public broadcaster kept free of political influence.

When Kim tried to enter the station headquarters in Yeouido on March 2, MBC union members physically blocked him from entering his office. South Korea's ministry of labor says the strike was illegal and that union members could face legal consequences.

Last July MBC workers joined a national four-day stoppage called by the National Union of Media Workers (NUMW) to oppose legislation aimed at deregulating broadcasting ownership and competition laws. In December 2008, around 2,000 NUMW members from 120 South Korean television and radio stations walked off the job and protested in Seoul against the bills.

Virgin Blue engineers vote for industrial action

Australian Licensed Aircraft Engineers Association (ALAEA) members at budget airline Virgin Blue this week voted for industrial action after negotiations for a new work agreement reached deadlock. Over 90 percent of engineers participating in the ballot endorsed industrial action, which could begin next week and include overtime bans, stop-work meetings or strikes. ALAEA members at Qantas have work bans in place over the same issue.

ALAEA federal secretary Steve Purvinas told the media that any industrial action by Virgin Blue engineers would have a major effect on the airline. "At the moment our members are asked to and expected to work copious amounts of overtime to keep that airline flying," he said.

The union wants 4 percent annual pay increases and an extra week's leave as part of a new collective agreement. Virgin Blue is offering 3 percent annual pay increases. Engineers are also concerned that management want to use baggage handlers in roles previously carried out by engineers, such as waving in planes and talking to pilots about defects. The union and management remain in negotiations.

Virgin Blue is also in talks with the Transport Workers Union and the Australian Services Union on a new agreement covering ground crew.

Australian dock workers union limits national stoppage

Waterside workers at ports around Australia walked off the job on April 7 while the funeral of fellow worker, Nick Fanos, was being held in Sydney. Fanos, 49, was crushed to death while loading containers at the Patrick container terminal, Port Botany on March 28. Fanos is the sixth worker killed on Australian docks since 2003 but the Maritime Union of Australia (MUA) limited the stoppage to just one hour.

In an attempt to appease members' concerns over deteriorating port safety, the MUA held members' meetings in all states during the stoppage and passed a resolution calling on the Rudd Labor government to establish a National Stevedoring Safety Taskforce and introduce "a regulated National Stevedoring Safety Code of Practice".

Telstra technicians strike

Technicians at Telstra, Australia's largest telco, held a 24-hour national stoppage on April 6 over a long-running dispute for a new union-negotiated Enterprise Agreement (EA). The technicians want a 12.5 percent pay rise over three years which will give them pay parity with Telstra workers on employee collective agreements (ECAs).

Telstra is offering 10 percent over three years with annual performance bonuses of up to 2.5 percent, which technicians claim are almost impossible to achieve. Telstra also wants to "simplify processes" for redundancy, which workers complain will make it easier for managers to pick and choose who they want to terminate.

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Neither Telstra nor the Communications Electrical and Plumbing Union (CEPU) have made a statement on the effectiveness of the strike. One striking technician told the World Socialist Web Site that Telstra was well prepared and had rescheduled work. It was able to cover urgent faults using technicians employed on ECAs, who are barred from taking industrial action under the Rudd Labor government's Fair Work Australia laws.

Telstra has distributed its latest offer to technicians employed under the expired EA but has not set a date for a ballot on its acceptance.

New Zealand electronics retail workers reject pay freeze

On April 9, JB Hi-Fi employees in Wellington held a one-hour strike and protested outside the retail store 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 wants a referendum to call on the New Zealand government to raise the minimum wage to $15 an hour. The union says the Australian-owned company is expected to make a profit of around $157 million this year.

Intellectual disability support workers continue action

Hundreds of intellectual disability support workers across New Zealand walked off the job and picketed the offices of IHC, the government-funded intellectual disability service provider, on April 6. Some 3,000 Service and Food Workers Union (SFWU) members at IHC group homes are continuing work-to-rule industrial action begun four weeks ago and have held two overnight strikes this week to protest the wage freeze.

The union wants the company to pass on a 2 percent government funding increase to workers. The SFWU has been in negotiations with IHC since October and is calling on the Employment Relations Authority to mediate pay talks. Currently IHC is refusing to talk to the union.

Auckland bakery workers protest poverty wages

Hollywood Bakery employees in Auckland protested outside the bakery on April 1 and planned another protest for April 9. The Unite union members claim they are only paid $8.00 an hour, $4.75 below the legal minimum, and are being denied holiday and sick leave pay. One female worker claims she was unfairly dismissed by the company and not paid her entitlements. Unite organiser Joe Carolan told the April 1 rally that the workers would take further action if Hollywood Bakery did not increase wages.

Hollywood Bakery is an international franchiser based in the United States with seven outlets in Auckland.

Papua New Guinea mine workers on strike

Over 1,600 workers at Ok Tedi Mining Limited (OTML), PNG's largest gold and copper mining company, have been on strike since April 1. The strike has shut down the company's operations at Tabubil, Kiunga and Bige. The mine's major share holder, Canadian based Inmet, claims the strike is affecting daily production of 80 tons of copper and 300 ounces of gold.

Ok Tedi Mining and Amalgamated Workers Union (OTMAWU) members are protesting alleged disparities in OTML's bonus payouts. They claim that expatriate workers and management are paid more than local workers. According to the PNG Trade Union Congress, Ok Tedi workers are also protesting against a 35 percent government tax on retirement benefits.

Inmet claims the strike is illegal because the "employee retention bonus", which workers also want, is not included in their employment agreement. OTML recently boasted a profit of 4 billion kina ($US1.5 billion).

Negotiations are currently being held between the union, OTML management and the government.

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