

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

1 May 2010

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

## Bangladesh: Dhaka garment workers strike

Over 37,000 workers from Dhaka garment factories walked off the job this week to demand improved wages and benefits. At least 50 were injured when Kachpur Highway Police officers and members of the Rapid Action Battalion attempted to disperse workers blocking the Dhaka-Sylhet Highway, Mirpur Road and other streets. Traffic movements came to a standstill for about five hours during the protest.

The striking workers are employed by the Sinha Group, which has 60,000 employees in various factories in and around Dhaka. Workers want a 300-400 taka attendance bonus, casual leave, midday snacks and 5,000-taka minimum monthly wage. The official minimum wage is currently 4,100 taka, but in the readymade garment sector, where Bangladesh workers are the lowest paid in the world, the monthly wage is just 1,662 taka or less than \$US1.00 a day.

Earlier this month, over 70 people were injured when over 700 protesting Navana Textiles and Nasa Basic workers in Dhaka were attacked by police officers and members of the Rapid Response Battalion using water cannon, batons and live ammunition. The workers were demanding wage and transport allowance increases, and an end to employee harassment and factory relocations.

Responding to demands by the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association, the government held an emergency meeting this week at the home ministry attended by the inspector general of police, director general of the Rapid Action Battalion and armed forces high officials. The home minister told reporters after the meeting: "No one will be spared if found involved in creating unrest in the garment sector."

## Indian police attack workers protesting an industrial death

On April 24, police used tear gas and baton charged 500 workers from the Monnet Ispat and Energy plant in Chhattisgarh's Raigarh district

during a factory gate protest over the death of a work colleague. Twenty-eight year old Ajay Rathia was killed in a steel plant accident on April 23. The protesting workers accused management of hushing up the death and demanded a meeting with plant officials. When management refused to meet with workers they began throwing stones at the administration building and were then attacked by the police.

## Sri Lankan midwives picket health ministry

On April 21, around 3,800 midwives picketed the Ministry of Health in central Colombo demanding continuity of training. The Union of Family Planning Service, which represents 10,000 Sri Lankan midwives, is concerned that the government is trying to end their one-and-half year training and replace the midwife service with nurses.

A spokesperson for the group claimed that the death rate of mothers was significantly reduced by midwife services. Midwives are particularly important in Sri Lanka's rural areas where health services are limited.

## Sri Lankan railway technicians on work-to-rule

Government Railway Department technicians are maintaining a work-to-rule campaign that began on April 21. The technicians want implementation of government circulars authorising salary increases and job recruitment. The salary and recruitment directives have been pending since early 2006 and 2007 respectively.

Long-distance train services to Vaunia, Matale and Kandy were affected by the industrial action. The technicians have vowed to continue their campaign until they win their demands.

## Hong Kong workers protest for minimum wage

More than 400 workers from various labour groups marched to the

Special Administration Region (SAR) government headquarters on April 25 to demand the minimum hourly wage be increased to \$HK35 (\$US4.60) and the establishment of a standardised eight-hour working day. The Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions said the proposed hourly minimum wage of between \$20 and \$24 was unacceptable and not enough to support an average worker's family.

The confederation also wants the overtime rate set at 1.5 times the hourly rate, a mechanism set up for collective bargaining, and the government to expand the transport support scheme from the current four districts to the whole city. More protests are planned for this weekend.

### **Taiwan social workers demonstrate**

On April 23, more than 100 social workers protested outside the interior ministry in Taipei to demand more staff. The protest was sparked after the ministry accused social workers of "not being alert enough", following the suicide death of a single mother and her school-aged daughter.

Cheng Tien-jui of the Social Workers' Union said: "There are too few of us [social workers], we have too little power, we have too many cases to look after, and each of us has too large a geographic area to take care of." Cheng also said that, on average, each social worker had around 30 cases and those dealing with domestic abuse had about 80 cases.

### **Philippine government intervenes in airline dispute**

The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has intervened into the labour dispute at Philippine Airlines Limited (PAL), ordering the airline to postpone a cost-cutting plan to lay off 3,000 of the company's 7,500 employees. DOLE has also ordered the PAL Employees Association (PALEA) to drop plans for industrial action and to begin tripartite talks on April 30.

PALEA members began protests last week against the lay-offs, which were planned for May 31 and will impact on workers in airport services (ground, cargo and ramp handling), in-flight catering services and call centre reservations. The jobs will be outsourced to a contract company. PALEA claims that workers would be rehired by contractors on reduced wages and conditions and barred from joining a union.

### **Queensland health workers protest ongoing pay bungle**

About 200 Queensland Health (QH) workers, including doctors, nurses, maintenance workers and administration staff, rallied outside the Royal Brisbane and Women's Hospital (RBWH) on April 29 to protest ongoing payroll errors. Over the past six weeks, thousands of staff have been

underpaid or not paid at all because of major problems with QH's new payroll system.

Townsville Hospital nurses also held a rally and last week, around 100 maintenance workers at the RBWH and the Princess Alexandra hospital walked off the job over the issue, declaring that they would only attend emergency duty while problems with QH's pay system remain unresolved. Last week, the charity group Lifeline said it had begun handing out food vouchers to financially stretched health workers hit by the pay errors.

### **Western Australia: Health workers vote for industrial action**

Health workers, including enrolled nurses, patient care assistants, orderlies and cleaners from the Peel Health Campus in Mandurah, south of Perth, the Western Australian capital, have voted to begin industrial action next week for a wage rise. The Liquor, Hospitality and Miscellaneous Workers Union (LHMU) members rejected a 1.7 percent pay increase annually for three years by management and want a 12.5 percent rise over three years.

The LHMU leadership have limited the industrial action initially to wearing T-shirts stickers and wrist bands stating that the Peel Health Campus workers are the "worst paid hospital workers in Western Australia" and "privatisation stinks". There is also a proposal for one-hour stop work meetings to inform public and patients of the dispute.

The Peel Health Campus was the Mandurah District Hospital, which placed out to private tender in 1997 by the Western Australian state Liberal

government and by 1999 was run by Health Solutions WA Ltd. The company is a subsidiary of Health Solutions International, a Malaysian-based transnational with hospital and health projects across Asia and the Middle East. It has a 20-year lease to run the Peel Health Campus on behalf of the Health Department.

### **New Zealand bus drivers stop work**

On April 28, bus drivers at GO Wellington, Valley Flyer and Mana Coach Services walked off the job to attend stop-work meetings for a regional collective contract. Bargaining between the three employers and the Tramways Union and the Manufacturing and Construction Union began in March. Tramways Union negotiators cited "delaying tactics", such as union delegates not being released to attend negotiations, as the reason for the strike.

GO Wellington drivers stopped work for several hours in March to discuss the new contract and to complain about the run-down state of GO Wellington's depot facilities and the fleet's chronically faulty pay-in machines. GO Wellington and Valley Flyer are subsidiaries of NZ Bus.

Last year NZ Bus was involved in a bitter wages dispute with 900 drivers and cleaners in Auckland, which included strikes and a lockout.

### **New Zealand government workers begin industrial action**

Members of the Public Service Association (PSA) at the state-run Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) began work-to-rule action on April 26 to oppose the NZ government's wage freeze on public servants. ACC workers are seeking improved pay and conditions in a new collective agreement. The PSA has complained that some of its members have been "unlawfully threatened" for taking part in the action.

### **New Zealand port workers protest use of hazardous chemical**

Port workers and local residents have joined in protests at Wellington's CentrePort, the Port of Tauranga and Port Marlborough in Picton against the use of methyl bromide. The chemical, which is banned in Europe, is used in New Zealand ports and aboard ships to fumigate timber for pests. Methyl bromide is known to cause ozone depletion and the Maritime Union of New Zealand (MUNZ) says research is underway into whether the fumigant is linked to motor neuron disease, which has killed six workers at Port Nelson.

The government's Environmental Risk Management Authority is currently reviewing use of the chemical. The protests were organised by the Coalition Against the Use of Methyl Bromide.

### **Papua New Guinea firefighters threaten to close down regional station**

Nineteen officers from the Mount Hagen City Fire Services in PNG's Western Highlands province are threatening to close their station after basic utilities were shut off due to unpaid bills. The local service has been without power, fuel, water and telephones for seven weeks. The firefighters told media that they also lacked essential safety clothing and equipment and that their living quarters at the station were severely run-down.

Problems at the Mount Hagen fire station have been ongoing for several years. In October 2008, the firefighters called for their management to be sacked and refused to attend emergencies. Their actions followed a fire that destroyed Kapal Haus, the three-storey provincial headquarters. The then 16 fire officers at the service said that their lives were at risk and they did not have adequate equipment to deal with a fire of that size. They demanded increased manpower, new fire trucks to replace their 20-year-old vehicle, new hoses and essential safety equipment.

Firefighters this week accused the provincial government of withholding 10,000 kina in quarterly funding allocated to their station and that the fire service's national headquarters needed to resolve 17,200 kina (US\$6,342) in unpaid utility bills.



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